

When break was over and it was time for each team to present their findings, the contrast between the two teams was quite remarkable. The team destined for failure went first. The presentation went choppy and disjointed. Disagreements were made known and the first action item was “more study and evaluation of the problem.” Their actions weren’t concise and lacked full team commitment. In other words, the team wasn’t going to be held responsible for the results. Eventually they finished with even more coaching from the consultant and the team just sat there in silence with their arms crossed on their chest - still distancing themselves from the assignment and other members.

When the team destined for success started presenting it could not have been more opposite. They were excited. Their thoughts were organized and convincing. They had a unanimity to their tone. The presentation was smooth with the other members interjecting at just the right time providing clarification and support. Even the dysfunctional team was jumping in and affirming the other team's thoughts. It was something right out of a management storybook. It seemed staged and surreal.

Were the dysfunctional team bad employees? Definitely not. Was it a bad mix of employees? Definitely yes. So, what does a manager do? I’ve thought about this and have tried to apply this situation to every team I’ve managed since. In the above manager’s situation, every one of his employees went on to continue successful careers. Some in their current role and others with a different company or position.

Were some of these employee “mediocre” as in the Nick Saban quote? Maybe. . . at least in their current role. Or, maybe they were just mediocre employees that somehow landed in a role that became intolerable to the rest of the team. In the case of Coach Saban, the time span of a football season is short. He doesn’t have time to counsel the “employee” or switch their role within the “company”. In this country, we value sports more than real life. Sad, but true. If you don’t turn in a winning season in Alabama you don’t last long. Even a winning season without a national championship will be short lived. In Coach Saban’s viewpoint, you are there to produce 100% or you are out. Outside the Nick Saban world, this tends to not be so urgent, unfortunately. I have found in my experience that many organizations actually thrive with mediocrity and seem to unknowingly be proud of it. Some will be boast they aren’t like those “cut-throat” organizations that are always looking to cut their bottom performers. Instead they are of the illusion that they are grooming the bottom 10% and making their organization better.

Let’s think on that for a minute. As an organization, they are going to focus and invest time and money on the bottom performers. The flip side of that means to ignore the top performers and the 80% in the middle that are getting the job done day after day. Then they wonder why they can’t keep their top fliers and loose a good portion of their doers to other companies or by allowing them to slip back into low performers.