

Being Average - Part 2

A red rectangular graphic with the text 'WEEKLY LEARNINGS 2023' in white. The word 'WEEKLY' is in a bold, sans-serif font, 'LEARNINGS' is in a larger, bold, sans-serif font, and '2023' is in a large, white, cursive script font. Several lightbulb icons are scattered around the text, some appearing to glow.

WEEKLY LEARNINGS 2023

Weekly Learnings 15 / 2023

There was a lot of discussion in last week's note. I thought I would sum up many of the issues and questions raised. Here goes.

1. Being average has two dimensions to it, one at an absolute level and the second at a relative level. This applies to individuals, teams, companies, and countries. At an individual level, one could think that he/she is fine because they don't know the effort or the pace that others are setting. That's the blind spot at an individual level.
2. In an organization, less than 5% of people aim for excellence. Most others are happy to coast along or be led. Most middle-class employees want to fulfill their social and economic deliverables to the family. That's why in days of the past, a public sector job in every country was seen as a very good option-not much job pressure, high job security, guaranteed time-bound promotion, etc. Public sector jobs have dried up in most countries.
3. A lot of the comments centered around trying to understand why someone was average. The fact is that the consumer or the customer does not accept average products or average services anymore. A more educated consumer is a more demanding consumer in every sector. Consumers tend to settle for the average when they have no choice. I have seen no correlation between educational background or socio-economic background and being average. I think people from lesser privileged backgrounds tend to try so much harder to make a mark.
4. Let's look at individual capability in some situations - if you are a great batsman/bowler but an average fielder, then the team will decide when they must bench you for being an average fielder. This has happened to many great Indian batsmen and bowlers. So, teams today look for or need more than one skill to make the overall team perform better.
5. Let's look at teachers. Teachers were above questioning at every level till student evaluation was introduced. Student evaluation caught teachers off guard but the overall teaching quality improved. If you are an average teacher then students don't sign up for your class. So, student evaluation as a metric has changed teaching and teacher's attitude significantly.

6. Look at commercial team sports - IPL, EPL, La Liga. Sport league tables tend to be relative and as a result, a line is drawn down the middle, anyone below the line is average. If a team is average, then the fans start deserting them, they don't get good players or they need to pay a lot to attract high talent players. The price in sports goes up when the team is average. The Rajasthan Royals team is a good example. They were average for many years and suddenly the last two years they look different. When they do well, they infuse energy into the team, the sponsors, and the fans.
7. At a company level, companies drank their own cool aid and tooted about being great. Enter Glassdoor and suddenly we have employees reaching out and posting on company policies and culture. Average cultures as defined by your employees put pressure on a company and CEO.
8. I think companies also need to rethink their approach. Most company training/learning and development programs are focused on high achievers. I think this has a fundamental flaw. Imagine talent in a company as a room with the ceiling being high achievers/high talent and the floor being average. If a company only invests in top talent, then the gap between top talent and average widens and creates a type of social strife and resentment. The trick is to invest in the average employee too to ensure that the gap shortens and not widens. We have done this through master classes, shadow programs, projects, etc. where I worked.
9. Average people are a challenge to a leader who wants to drive change, they become blockers. Junior people working for them then come up to the leader and air their grievances. When a leader acts on this feedback, then he will be labeled as playing favorites, and worse - the average guy will go around moaning and groaning. So, transparency and acting on feedback are both a challenge for average team leaders.
10. Finally, everyone asked - "how does one measure average and what are the metrics?". I would simply say that you can see and feel average when you see it or experience it. I once had a sales manager who had not visited key customers in Chennai for more than a year and his leader was unaware. I have seen a team leader not being available for team discussions at crucial moments. I submit to you that you don't need to look for measures, you can feel them. If you cannot see who is average, then you cannot recognize who is talented or excellent. They are the two opposite ends of the spectrum.

People who are not average are always showing energy, showing improvement and commitment, showing drive, and hunger. Measure it the way you want, but it's as broad as daylight. You need to keep your eyes open to this. Whether we like it or not, we will see measures that label average and talent in different boxes.

In my experience, a higher proportion of senior managers tend to be average compared to junior managers. This is because they don't see the return to effort in their mind and they are comfortable with where they have reached. Junior managers have longer runways ahead of them. It is not that junior managers have more courage, I would say they have less fear in learning and trying something new, and at junior levels, you hate to be labeled average.

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