

Surely, you must be jogging?

Are your staff racers, random joggers or pack animals?

How do you tell and does it really matter? Yes, says

Dr Leandro Herrero

Imagine a big, round jogging track like the ones you see in parks and cities, where people go to run early in the morning. You've seen these people many times. Perhaps you are one of them – big sweat shirt, perspiring heavily, trainers and earphones. I must confess I have never done it. I am as sporty as an arthritic elephant, but very much admire those of you who want to die healthy.

I'd like you to picture three scenarios. One is 'The Random Joggers'. Let's say there are 20 people running round a track at any point in time and that they follow a normal distribution of age, ability, physical strength and experience in jogging. They don't know each other (at least, not all of them) and they run in silence, perhaps just listening to their Walkmans. In this situation people will run more or less at random. A snap picture of the track would tell us that some of them run close together for a while, some are dispersed, some overtake others, some run slowly and some fast. There is no obvious pattern or sense of any synchronicity among them. They are driven by their own interests: having a good time, burning as many calories as possible or doing a pre-specified number of miles.

The second scenario is 'The Pack'. Here, people know each other because they run together every day and chat a bit while running. A similar distribution applies regarding abilities, strengths, speed and capacity. But because they run as a pack, some of them will slow down a bit and others will make a bit of an effort to catch up. Some may shout, "Hey, slow down guys, this is killing me." Perhaps the core of the pack is engaged in a conversation about a TV show last night. The snap shot here is very different: you'll see a group of people relatively close to each other, perhaps two close sub-groups. Even if some people join in at slightly different times, the pack will synchronise progressively and adopt a speed norm or pattern, the average – more or less – of what they can do collectively. If this is still too much for somebody, he or she will abandon the group. The Pack may also, consciously or not, reject the ones who want to go more slowly or who can't catch up with the core. Pack members achieve synchronicity by their common interest, by people talking to each other

or asking the others to slow down or go faster. Even if all the pack members don't arrive at the track at the same time, they will synchronise at some point.

The third scenario is 'The Race'. The variables have changed. Maybe it's not the friendly park track but a proper racing track in a stadium. Let's say that the race is about 20 laps. What do you see? From the initial laps, some may fall behind from the start but the rest don't look random at all. On the contrary, they resemble the pattern of the The Pack, but with the silence of The Random Jogger! No friendly conversations here. What do they do? The front runner is not letting himself burn out, so he runs fast, but not as fast as he can. The others are watching him and following closely, waiting to speed up when he or somebody else starts sprinting and overtaking others. They all keep up the pace and, for a while, run below their average speed. But someone will start to speed up and the group will disintegrate with some leading, others catching up, others following closely as a sub-group and others lagging behind. People in the race achieve synchronicity by a delicate system of watching each other, avoiding burn out and so on. Here, somehow, everybody depends on everybody else from beginning to end.

Now imagine your organisation as a jogging track where people are participating and giving their mental – and physical – energy and investing their own human capital when 'running'. Ask yourself: is yours a Random Jogging, Pack or Race track? Your managerial instinct will tell you that you are in, or you want to be in, the race model – after all, we have timelines, objectives, milestones and targets. Some of you, however, may like the Pack model, if only because there seems to be a lot of collaboration involved. Isn't that what your teams are supposed to do? To work as a pack? The Random Joggers model may seem too individualistic and chaotic and, were everyone like that, it would be impossible to run an organisation. All very well, but suspend your judgement because the three models have their own merits, and their own problems.

Boy racers

The Race model is appealing because it triggers in us what we have been taught in business schools and business life experience: competition; get there first; watch out what's happening; trick the competitors, not only external but internal; pace yourself, then speed up, run, go, fire, targets, done! However, taking a detached, clinical – and cynical – view, one could say that, for a high proportion of the race (the time cycle of

Imagine your organisation as a jogging track where people are giving their mental energy



the project or the life time of the organisation), people don't make the most of themselves; certainly, most of the runners are not using their full capabilities. I know, this is the whole idea of a good race, but you are seeing the world through your management glasses. Take a mathematical approach, not a sports or management one. In this model, for perhaps 90% of the time, the energy is spent watching and tricking each other.

The Pack

The Pack model is appealing in managerial terms because it triggers words, such as collaboration and cooperation. It looks like the equivalent of a team. But there is another side. From a clinical and mathematical viewpoint The Pack people are synchronising by benchmarking themselves against the average or matching a norm created by that synchronicity. Strictly speaking, in a true Pack, people with greater ability will be doing less than they can – this being the only way to get into that conversation about last night's TV. Obviously, if they get tired of this, they will either leave the pack and work with a more challenging team, run alone and so become loose cannons in pursuit of their own agenda, or leave the track altogether by resigning.

The Random Jogger

The Random Joggers model, which perhaps is intuitively the least appealing, does have the advantage that, theoretically, everyone is making the most of their abilities. They are not wasting time and energy accommodating anyone else or watching what others do. But there is no team effort or collaboration, a disadvantage if this is what you want from your staff.

And this is the crucial point: it all depends on what you want. The scenarios illustrate that you have to accept trade-offs and that the most appealing organisational model has its own liabilities. Many business leaders still want everything: working as a team, cooperation, making the most of yourself, great individual

contributions, achieving a consensus, collaborating and giving your best. Many leaders run places where race, pack and individual joggers are blurred and they don't see the trade-offs between models.

We see this all the time in the way people recruit. Places with heavy 'teamocracy' are not suited to individual joggers. Yet many recruiting briefings emphasise the individuality – personal background, experience, achievements and recognised egos in the market place – over the ability to fit into a company culture. The exercise soon turns into a fiasco when the individual jogger, who thought he had been hired for his ability to run very fast, is confronted with a Pack that has norms and consensus below (or even above) his capacity. He had a great CV of sprints and races, but little experience in packs. The cost of getting human capital wrong is very high. We also see the same disconnection in the reward system. We praise and promote teamwork, but reward people for their individual contributions.

The jogging-racing analogy is a useful basis for discussion, such as the one above. But it has behind it a deeper insight that is associated with the topic of synchronicity. Synchronicity is an emerging bridge-science bringing together biologists, engineers, mathematicians, human and social scientists and doctors. That is, almost anybody who wants to join in. In the great tradition of cybernetics and General Systems Theory, it can give mathematical explanations for biological observations that are difficult to interpret and biological sources that inspire solutions to physics and mathematical problems.

Since my own company unashamedly watches for and steals good third party scientific conversations and applies them to management and leadership, particularly if nobody else has done it before, this area seems like fruitful territory and we are working on several projects around these topics. In the next two or three articles we will explore some fascinating applications. Let me float the idea that organisations sometimes suffer from an over-synchronicity syndrome. So much effort is put on everybody's alignment – to use a common managerial term – that to talk about the benefits of less synchronicity and less alignment may be managerially incorrect. We'll see. In the meantime, think again about your corporate jogging model. Look for the positives in the ones you don't like and the negatives in the ones you love. It's a good way to jog your thinking about leadership.

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