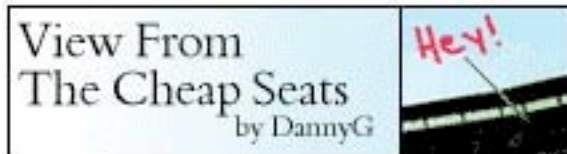


VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



1.27.2004

A Super Lesson

Football, the ad biz, and no talk of commercials

There will be plenty of discussion about Super Bowl commercials. But not here, not now.

I'd like to talk about John Fox and Bill Belichick. They're the two coaches whose teams, Carolina and New England, are playing in the Super Bowl this year.

In football, each team has the same goal: to make it to the Super Bowl. Thus, Fox and Belichick have led their teams to the pinnacle of success this year. And they've achieved their success through motivation, hard work, discipline, and knowledge.

Yet, neither of them ever played a day of professional football. But both of them are widely assumed to be great at their jobs.

Fox and Belichick both graduated from college and went straight into coaching careers. Both men have dedicated their entire professional lives to bringing out the best in other people. The success they've achieved has come solely through the performance and output of their players.

So basically speaking, a coach who never played pro football may have the skills to coach in the Super Bowl, but a Super Bowl MVP may never have the skills to coach a team to the big game.

If success comes under those terms in football, why does the advertising business assume that talented performers would make successful managers?

Why do we think that prolific or award-winning copywriters and art directors would automatically make great creative directors?

I'll bet you know the kind of people I'm talking about. Smart, yes. Talented, sure. But many great creatives can't manage their way out of a paper bag. Or serve as a mentor to anyone. There's no correlation whatsoever between concepting skills and people skills.

The archives of ADWEEK and Ad Age are filled with stories of folks who got promoted into positions they weren't suited for—yet they had nowhere else to go but be "kicked upstairs." That's how you get more money, fame, and boost your ego—you go into management, whether you're skilled at it or not.

Then there's the opposite scenario: Some CD's are great motivators, delegators, judges, yet completely unworthy as writers or art directors. And they're either phased out because they're not contributing to profitability, or they're derided as hacks and get no respect.

If you know someone who is both a great creative and a great manager, then get him/her cloned. Now. Those people are rare.

If you manage people, you're no doubt pretty busy. Too busy to have read this far, I'm sure. But are you getting the best work from your people? I bet you don't know. Odds are, you won't ask those people you manage, and they won't tell you. Many managers and workers simply don't possess the ability to be so straightforward.

And issues that are unspoken stay unresolved. It's a shame that the ad business throws money at all sorts of consultants—new business consultants, pitch consultants, marketing consultants, yet few managers take the time to consult with the very people they're working with.

For an industry whose main objective is to communicate with people, we do a lousy job of it internally.

So enjoy the Super Bowl, but this year, pay attention to the game in between the commercial breaks. Watch John Fox and Bill Belichick wear their emotions on their sleeves. While they're not the ones throwing, running or blocking, they'll be basking in victory or wallowing in defeat alongside their players.

But on Monday, when you're sitting around your shop complaining about how lame this year's spots were, see if you can start a team rebuilding effort. No matter what position you play in your agency, you too can be a better coach. And maybe you too can go all the way.