

It's not the quotes, it's how we use them

by Gianni Anchois

Context is more important then content.

I'm a big believer in using quotes, because they can carry very powerful values, imagery, and beliefs. Unfortunately, quotes are way too often used out of context. When we quote somebody famous, we try to do two things.

First, we try to find the right mix and sequence of words to express a certain concept. It's a shortcut we seek, because we are too lazy or unable to come up with the goods.

Second, we try to project the personality, beliefs and values of the person who did come up with the quote to the specific context, or topic, we use it in.

THIS IS WHERE IT ALL FAILS

It fails because very often, and especially in large corporations, the real meaning of the quote is not completely understood. In essence, it's not projected against the historical backdrop of the quote itself.

Who said it? Why was it said? What were the circumstances?

It fails because the meaning of the quote is tweaked or distorted to fit a purpose that has got nothing to do with the message the quote itself carries.

THE ONE AND ONLY MICHELANGELO

In my book *Leadership, an insider guide* I quote the great Michelangelo, who famously said:

The problem is not to set the bar too high and miss it. The problem is to set the bar too low and reach it too easily.

Does this quote make sense in a business context?

Well, before answering that question, one needs to consider that Michelangelo was a very complex man, torn between extreme sentiments of faith and heresy.

A solitary and melancholy person by nature, his genius did nothing to help him gain commissions or popularity, his perfectionism drove everybody around him crazy. He set the bar higher than anybody else, because that's what drove him to excel. He wasn't concerned with others, he was concerned with himself.

NO HARM DONE

So you see, quoting him in the right context does no harm.

We can use Michelangelo's quote to stimulate and possibly motivate people, colleagues, friends, sons and daughters to do their best, to always push for something better. To stay foolish and to stay hungry (there you go, another quote!).

So there was nothing wrong with Michelangelo, as there is nothing wrong with using relevant quotes in the right context. Just make sure you do your homework before you use them, or else you'll make a fool of yourself.

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