Venturing Your Concept

Staff selections 8

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Imagine a hot-shot who is brilliant and innovative, does pioneering work, revises our thinking, and makes great public presentations with a stage presence that has no bounds. What more could anyone ask?

Well—what if he irritates, scares or antagonizes co-workers, finds it hard to accept ideas not his own, is uncooperative, fails to deliver on his new project as promised, is unreliable, petulant, and demanding?

This composite represents many situations I have observed—each ended unhappily. Impeccable skills were not enough, nor was lack of ability the main problem when the employment did not work out.

Each of us brings three aspects to our job: abilities (basic training and skill-sets), personality, and character (both inborn and modified by experience). In my own experience, and in organizations I have studied, it is not skill-sets that lead to employment problems; rather failures arise mostly from lack of fit of personality and character with the group and job requirement.

Staff selection is the most central issue in enterprise and the most difficult. There is a place for everyone, but mixing square pegs with round holes leads to inefficiency at best, disaster at worst. I will describe procedures I developed at The Alta Group over a period of some 13 years. These methods were quite successful, but not infallible.

Hiring procedures must be fair and consistent with the *Fair Employment Act* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act*. Questions regarding marital status, religious preference, age, ethnic origin, and the like are off limits unless required for the job. It is fair to test for abilities, aptitudes, temperaments, and performance, and to check prior work history and background.

Industry today typically employs oral interviews and background checks to validate the resumé of a candidate. This method works to a degree, of course. Multiple interviews improve the odds. But a hiring mistake can cost $100,000, and even 100 times more, not to mention the progress lost. Events like these are unaffordable when boot-strapping a venture.

Part of what I eventually came to follows:

- advertise the job opening(s); sort qualifying resumés relative to requirements;

- send an interview on paper, IOP, to each candidate; without talking to any;
- sort responses and phone interesting candidates to get a preliminary impression; select those most suitable for interviews;
- conduct preliminary interviews to follow up on any questions arising in the IOPs, and to get acquainted;
- select the most promising candidates fit for the job after further interviews by supervisor, prospective peers, and subordinates;
- invite the most promising candidate(s) to a social function with spouse(s) or partner(s), theirs and yours, included, and
- evaluate all information available objectively and make offer(s) or start over.

Since this process emerged from my own experience, it is anecdotal. It has not been proven to be universally applicable by others. But I hope you can find some nuggets—which you can alter to suit your situation if/as you like. Let me explain how this sequence works.

The Search. In your ad or request, explicitly define the job parameters, skills, and personality requirements. So also for any special test procedures. Candidates can then choose whether or not to proceed.

IOP. Using an essay format avoids forced choice answers that limit expression. There are a number of elements, including candidate expectations, skills, history, accomplishments, and philosophy. Phrase questions specific to each job element. Ask questions designed to sort out preferences in working habits, styles, and interactions with people where these are important. My latest IOP ran 17 pages including room for answers.

I find it effective to require essay answers and a self-appraisal of traits. Sample questions might include:

- What constitutes <u>effective</u> communication?
- How are people motivated?
- What motivates you?
- Are most people cooperative?
- What makes team-work work?
- What constitutes leadership?
- What weaknesses do you have as a leader?
- How do you handle conflicts between two subordinates?
- How do you handle conflicts with your peers?
- What personal achievement are you most proud of?
- How do you handle mistakes you make?
- Should form ever take priority over substance?
- When is criticism justified?

On the positive side, look primarily for two things: 1) wisdom (the sum of experience, ability to think, and insight) and, 2) openness (a key element in personality and character). Negatives to look for include: inconsistencies, extreme or judgmental responses, platitudes, excessive biases, poor English, inability to think or express, and the like. This essay technique requires the candidate to express his/her own thoughts on paper. The style in which the question is answered may indicate as much as the answer itself. Note responses to be followed up if an oral interview is warranted.

Initial Interview. In this interview, use the candidate's IOP as a basis for digging further into his/her answers. Note evasions, defensiveness, inconsistencies, and demeanor. Note oral responses as well as questions candidates ask in return. Be friendly and calm to elicit natural responses to your questions. Follow up on their answers until you fully understand and get an idea of the depth of their thinking.

Multiple Interviews. For candidates who are interesting, each interviewer should develop his/her own set of questions pertinent to the job requirements. Remember, each interviewer must ask his/her same set of questions of each candidate for the same job in order to meet the test of fairness. Including both genders in the hiring team adds potential for insight. Each interviewer follows up responses with further questions. Socializing is helpful in that unanticipated traits may appear. Interviewers should complete their notes as soon and as completely as possible. In a day or two, it pays for each interviewer to summarize his/her notes, thinking about each response and what it means individually and to the whole. This summary becomes each interviewer's contribution to the hiring decision.

Have the job requirements in mind. A researcher should be creative, an accountant must be accurate and precise, and so on. Some characteristics to look for, depending on the job, follow:

Marginal	Acceptable	Superior
Bores easily	Genuinely interested	Highly curious
Listens passively	Receptive	Strongly interested
Plodding responses	Straightforward	Extends question
Makes a blind stab	Knows the answer	Asks insightful questions
Voices platitudes	Has obvious ideas	Thoughtfully extends idea
Bluffs	Comments	Elaborates subject
Misses the point	Gets point	Draws inferences
Maintains postion	Seeks compromise	Searches for truth

For personality assessment, consider which *behavior patterns* matter for the job. A few personality traits follow:

Pole	**Opposite pole**
Shy, reclusive	Socially interested
Restrained	Impulsive
Submissive	Dominant
Critical	Tolerant
Hostile	Friendly
Robotic	Reflective
Objective	Subjective, overly sensitive
Lethargic	Highly energetic

Care must be taken in selecting the behavior patterns most appropriate for the job. *A balance between poles is best in many situations.*

Background Check. This should always include immediate prior supervisors and others as indicated. Look for skill, personality, and character, and *always check backgrounds beyond references given.* Failing to do these cost me dearly more than once.

Social Event. This should truly have a social purpose as well as revealing the candidate's interactive skills that you will see in no other context. Your spouse or partner may have observations from a different perspective. In one instance I remember three of us met with a candidate along with everyone's spouse. We were stunned when our spouses all were negative about the candidate afterwards. A negative behavior they pointed out was not what we were focusing on. Moreover, that behavior fit a certain pattern in the IOP that we had not taken seriously. This candidate's response to our decision not to hire bore out our spouses' concerns.

In another case, we were desperately short of people. So we asked four finalists to dinner at once. We agreed on the top two candidates. But we needed three. We finally selected the least vocal. Again our spouses were decisive. Later, we read a news article about the one not hired, cycling through his fifth job in four years.

In yet another case my spouse tipped the scales away from a well-trained individual toward a people-oriented candidate who quickly earned a promotion. Here also, follow-up confirmed the wisdom of our collective decision.

In each of these cases, including both genders in the hiring process provided the key insightful observations.

Addenda. The biggest danger the interviewer faces is what I call the "enamor trap." It is easy to fall for a line or a pretty face and hire the wrong person. Being enamored blinds us to the negative qualities that people have. That may not matter, but it may. Using an IOP helps to avoid the enamor trap. It also fixes for

all time how the candidate replied, assisting you in employee development and promotion decisions.

In a similar vein, if we sense there is a hidden red flag, *we must trust our intuition.* What if we had hired the hot-shot in my introduction? This was just the situation our spouses sensed during the social events. We must be aware of our tendency to take people at face value. Make the process as objective as possible. Never hire a charmer if the objective material indicates otherwise. By the same token, never hire a person you do not like—trust your intuition; it is telling you something.

Written text is more revealing of a candidate than forced-choice answers to questions can ever be. We need people with the wisdom, personality, and character to fit the job and the group, not just good test-takers.

In the area of skills, the first oral interview tells a lot about each candidate's training and ability to grow, but remember, prior experience and education do not always translate into proficiency.

In deciding whom to hire, weigh all information for consistency and appropriateness for the job. In this regard, compare notes from the hiring committee. Expanded questions or further investigation can usually resolve a minor pink flag. A red flag must be taken most seriously. On one occasion we found, on follow-up questioning, that the red flag was due to cultural and ethnic differences. We almost lost a budding star.

All but one middle manager was hired this way. Of the 40 or so people Alta hired by this procedure, two did not meet expectations. None resigned. One advanced from foreman to Alta's top executive because of his superb leadership and management skills. We overrode or cut short the procedure three times—to our regret in each case. Time pressure to fill the job and the enamor trap were the problems—find an interim solution if you must, but do not rush the process.

To sum up, effective hiring methods assess the skill, character, and personality dimensions of the candidates in objective ways with respect to job requirements. Do not hire if it doesn't feel right or you do not like the person.

With our staff selections now in hand, I will deal next with employee development.