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Sizing Up Prospects

Sep 15, 2005 12:00 PM , BY JERRY BERNHART

Bill Gates, CEO of Apple Computer... Dan Rather, anchorman for Fox News... Michael Jackson, honorary president of Boys Town USA. All bad matches, wouldn't you agree?

The frustrations of "culture clash" are familiar to all of us: No chemistry, incompatible leadership styles, wrong values. It's the No. 1 reason why hiring decisions go bad. And as many of us know, the cost of making a wrong hire can be enormous. A poor fit results in poor morale, low productivity and costly employee turnover. A good fit won't always guarantee success, but a bad one makes failure a certainty.

One company that emphasizes cultural fit more than most is Taylor Corp., a North Mankato, MN direct marketing and graphic communications company. You won't find too many direct marketing firms that have on their executive team a vice president of leadership and culture, a position Taylor created about a year ago.

"We identified about half a dozen critical strategic objectives that we wanted to weave throughout the company," says Todd Alexander, who holds that post and is a former president of one of Taylor's biggest divisions. "One of those critical activities was developing leaders and ensuring we had the right culture to both inspire our employees and best serve our customers."

Alexander began collaborating with human resources and business unit officials throughout the firm, sharing knowledge and developing best practices to create consistency in selection. "We now have a selection process more closely aligned with our leadership initiative," he says.

While most DMers probably would agree that hiring for cultural fit is very important, few have taken it to Taylor's level. Many admit they often rely on a gut feeling when it comes to assessing how a person fits with their organization. Hiring managers who are under pressure to fill jobs quickly tend to focus more on results and less on cultural compatibility. But research clearly shows that individuals selected on the basis of cultural fit will contribute faster, perform better and stay longer.

As the market for DM talent becomes more candidate-driven, the human resources manager's ability to assess cultural fit will become even more critical to his success. Hiring candidates based largely on skills, education and other competencies is a recipe for failure. So how does one go beyond the resume and assess a candidate for cultural fit?

First we have to define what's meant by corporate culture. Simply stated, it's the answer to the question, "How do we do things around here?" Culture is a highly subjective term that can mean different things to different people, but every organization can be described by a pattern of basic assumptions in how it deals with external and internal challenges. The hiring manager's job during the interview process is to be a detective and learn as much as he can about a candidate's cultural preferences. Questions should be asked in four critical areas to uncover those preferences: successes, challenges, environment and offer.

- "Tell me about your greatest successes. Then tell me what caused those successes." Since most companies pride themselves on being best, employers want to hire only those they believe are the best at what they do. But most employers ask just the first part of this question. If a hiring manager doesn't ask what *caused* the candidate's successes, he won't learn much about the conditions under which the candidate excels.

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As an example, a candidate might credit his success at one of his past employers to a supportive corporate environment. It's not enough to know that. The HR manager needs to know what a supportive environment means to the candidate. To one person it might mean everyone was on board with a particular decision, but to another it might mean he had the ability to make his own decisions.

When a candidate is asked to describe his successes, a hiring manager should put on that detective's hat and start poking around. By asking probing questions, the HR manager will encourage the candidate to reveal his preferred way of working.

- "Tell me about your greatest challenges. What brought them about?" This question is the flip side of the first one. It's designed to bring out the cultural obstacles that have stood in the way of the candidate's progress at previous companies. Finding out what caused these challenges, rather than how the individual overcame them, will give a hiring manager insight into areas of his firm's culture that might become an impediment to a candidate's ability to perform well.

For example, the candidate might talk about a time when he was having difficulty with a particular project because of the way decisions were made. By asking *how* those decisions were made, his response can be compared with the way decisions are made at the HR manager's company to help determine fit.

- "What kind of environment do you need to be most successful?" This question touches on processes, tools and staffing issues. It will help uncover a candidate's assumptions about what it takes for him to be successful and the surroundings he believes will create obstacles for him. These assumptions often include key cultural factors such as work style, team and customer orientation, decision-making and risk-taking.
- "What's important for you to see in an offer?" Here the interviewer is looking for things *other* than money. This includes vacation time and perks such as laptops, cell phones and other electronic tools, additional training or the ability to buy other capital equipment. This will help the hiring manager pre-qualify those areas of noncash compensation and benefits that need to be included in a final offer in order to gain the candidate's acceptance.

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