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Finding the Right Person at the Right Time

Best practices that can guide you toward better hiring decisions.

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Running a business brings many challenges, but there's none quite as constant or crucial as hiring the right people. The smaller the business, the more impact --positive or negative -- the person you hire will have. You will not get it right every time, but here are some best practices that can guide you toward better hiring decisions.

Know Yourself

Self-awareness is a hallmark of all great leaders. And awareness of your personal preferences and management behaviors is invaluable as you begin to hire others to help you grow your business. Understanding your personal problem-solving and decision-making process is critical to knowing how any new employee will complement your strengths and cover your weaknesses.

One good way to get essential insight into your management style is with personality self-assessments, such as Myers Briggs Type Indicator and Change Style Indicator. You can also use 360-degree multi-rater leadership surveys that provide feedback from supervisors, peers and reports.

Two Types of Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs, like managers, often come in two sizes. One is the innovator risk-taker who identifies an emerging need and jumps in to provide it. These entrepreneurs tend to be more focused outside their organization, on the customer, technology and the marketplace.

A second entrepreneurial/managerial type is the expert who leverages his or her experience to meet existing needs in the marketplace. His or her focus is often more on internal systems, giving attention to the processes necessary to deliver their product.

Three Problem-Solving Styles

Not surprisingly, there are significant differences in the styles of these two types of managers. Based on research with managers, I have identified three distinct styles or preferences for problem solving and decision-making.

Conservers prefer to work within the existing policies and operating procedures to solve problems. They typically appear deliberate, disciplined and organized. They like facts and they want data. They tend to be convergent thinkers; they like to explore a few options and quickly make a decision.

Pragmatists deal in outcomes and seek practical, functional solutions to problems. They are more concerned with finding agreement and moving forward than with adhering to existing policies and operating procedures. When making decisions, pragmatists tend to be consensus builders and they are seen as team oriented.

Originators typically challenge the status quo. They see existing policies and operating procedures as part of the problem. To them, their intuition is as important as the facts. Originators are divergent thinkers; they want to explore lots of options and prefer not to make the final decision until necessary. Not surprisingly, many entrepreneurs, but not all, fall into this category.

It Takes All Kinds

Recognize yourself in any of these descriptions? Most of us value and like to be around people who are like we are. So when it comes to hiring people, you're probably going to be drawn to people who are similar. And what's wrong with that? After all, it's your business, why not hire people who understand the way you work and think?

Here are two good reasons. When you hire people who approach things just like you do, you run the risk of creating an unbalanced team. Plus, you miss out on the inevitable improvement that can result from collaborating with people who will question and challenge your methods and ideas.

For example, if you recognize that you are a risk-taker-type entrepreneur and you hire only risky types, like yourself, you run the risk of creating a culture of risk-taking that may actually put the company in danger. The same goes if you are the expert-type and you hire only internally focused people like yourself. A good example of the latter is the buggy whip manufacturer who made the mistake of responding to the growing popularity of the automobile by making fancier, better buggy whips -- right up until they went out of business.

Every organization benefits from the positive tension created by an equal focus on both the internal and the external. It's up to management to recognize which focus the organization needs more of at any given time, and hire accordingly.

Seek Out People Comfortable with the Unknown

In a young or rapidly growing business, change is the only constant. If you hire people who work well with ambiguity, both your employees and your organization will thrive. If you hire someone who needs consistency and continuity to produce during these

challenging times, you won't get what you need from them, no matter how qualified they are.

On the other hand, as your business grows, you'll need to establish systems and procedures that will enable your company to produce on a larger scale. At this point, you'll need to hire people who understand the need for and can create adherence to systems and procedures. You'll find these personalities when you hire for areas such as accounting, human resources and IT. While they may be less comfortable with ambiguity, they are necessary for the stabilizing role you need them to play within the organization.

Let Them Talk

Want to sort out people who can manage ambiguity from those who can't? Let them tell you in their own words. In the interview, describe a challenging scenario that recently occurred in your organization. Ask them to tell you how they would approach it. It needs to be a situation where you learned something very specific so that you can compare the outcome with their response. You'll be surprised at just how much you can learn about the person from this exercise, helping you to hire the person your organization needs most at that time.

Look for Team Players

In successful small companies, people must wear many hats and work closely across functions in order to make things happen. And in large companies, the ability to work across departments is critical to organizational agility. No matter what size company you have, it helps to know how to spot people who can work well in teams.

If you're an organization that works in teams and you hire someone who's used to operating independently, you won't get the level of collaboration that works in your culture and they won't get the autonomy they prefer.

To ferret out the team players from the lone wolves, ask them to describe an example of when they worked on something as part of a team. What did that look like? Did they enjoy it? What would have made it more enjoyable? What made it difficult? Ask about a successful project and what made it so successful. Do they talk about themselves or the contributions of other team members? As in the previous exercise, you'll quickly begin to get an idea of how well he or she works with others.

Don't Hire Friends and Family... Unless They Fit Your Needs

Caution should always be taken when considering hiring those we love, but being aware of your organization's needs will help temper your desire to hire someone for the wrong reasons. The needs of your business should always supersede your desire to bring friends and family on board.

If hiring a friend or family member ever seems like a good idea to you, be sure to check your motives. Are you hiring for the skill set or the relationship? If it's both, great, but ask yourself honestly: is this skill set really what my organization needs most right now? If the answer is no, then don't hire just because of the relationship. Both the business and

your relationship will suffer. It's a whole lot easier to say no with sound reasoning behind it than to face firing a friend down the road.

Listen to Your Intuition

When you've found that person with the right skill set at the right time, do one final gut check. Will this person fit in? What you're examining with this question is corporate culture.

Culture is defined as the values and beliefs that shape how things get done, and the patterns of how we think, feel and act. If the culture of your company is drastically different from the companies where the person has previously been successful, they will probably be unhappy; and worse, they may make other employees unhappy too.

For example, if your culture is one of high involvement, a person who likes and is used to working on their own simply isn't going to be happy or productive, no matter how well qualified they are. So if you like the person but are not 100% sure he or she will fit in, check your intuition with someone else in the organization who has a grasp on what is good, and not so good, about your culture. If you are trying to preserve the culture you have, you should hire people who will fit in.

Out with the Old, In with the New

On the other hand, if you are trying to change your culture, new hires are a great place to start and your new employee orientation is the perfect venue. What better time to create a learning opportunity to impart both the written and unwritten norms that will reinforce the behaviors you want to see in your organization? For example, if you feel that your culture is too polite and conflict gets swept under the carpet, then your next hire should be someone with a reputation for being upfront and direct while also respectful of the ideas and feelings of others.

Conclusion

You can't always predict how someone will work out, but interviewing with better awareness of your personal management style, the needs of your organization and the culture of your company, you'll have a much better chance of hiring the right person at the right time, every time.

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