

Teams by Design: Hiring for Synergy

Does the following scenario sound in any way familiar? A manager has a vacancy in one of her work groups. She advertises the availability of the position. She assembles some colleagues from similar organizations and gathers them together to interview applicants. She prepares questions to help her understand the applicants' knowledge and aptitude. She brings in each of the applicants for a 45-minute interview. She ranks the applicants based on responses to the questions. She checks references and offers the job to the person believed to be best qualified.

The new person is brought in, introduced to the work group, and begins the first workday with zeal and excitement. Six or eight months later, however, the manager finds out that the person is not good with clients, promotes unrest in the work group, and is only marginally productive. The productivity of the whole group has fallen off, and the manager knows they are all in for a lengthy process of training and team building to regain the level of output and effectiveness they had before this new person was hired.

Readers to whom this scenario is not familiar already have quit reading. Readers who still are persevering probably are looking for a better way to make hiring decisions, and this article is for them.

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Improving the

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Work Group

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By Improving

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The Hiring

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Process

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Paul Ludwick

Filling a Vacancy

The process just described is one that most managers have used for years. Many people who make hiring deci-

sions still use it faithfully whenever they have vacancies to fill, and although the process is guaranteed not to fail in identifying the best candidate for the job, it is guaranteed to have unpredictable outcomes. Unpredictability in hiring choices is not considered an asset in any manager.

For a number of years, many organizations used assessment centers as an alternative to job interviews. The popularity of assessment centers dropped quickly, however, when managers discovered that people who did best in assessment centers were those who were best at role playing. Some people who are excellent at role playing can be sociopaths who have horrible impacts on work groups.

So, if the outcome of using a professional interview panel is unpredictable and if assessment centers only turn up the best actors, is there a way to hire people who know the work, are good with clients, and can help the group perform at a higher level? As it turns out, the amazingly simple and provable answer is: "Yes, there is a way."

The way to identify and hire the best candidate for any job is to ask the people who know the job best, who know the clients best, and who know the work group the best. *Ask the work group.*

For a work group to function as a hiring team still seems an innovative concept in 1995. After having used this method to hire employees and even a manager over a period of four years, the author is convinced that it is the best way to ensure that the synergy of an excellent work team can continue when team members leave and other people are hired. The process works. It takes more time than other hiring processes, but it is better to spend time up front and hire the best person for the job than to spend time trying to correct problems later.

Where to Start

A manager who has a vacancy in a work group and wants to hire the

best person for the job will find that this is the way to do it. Sit down with the work group before the recruitment process begins and identify the knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics that the team members feel are important or critical to continuing the work of the team successfully. Do not be surprised if the person described by the team could not possibly exist in real life.

After one or two meetings, the members of the team will sort out the critical characteristics and will recognize that Mother Teresa and Ghandi probably are not looking for employment at this time, and the group may have to settle for someone else. This review may identify certain skills that are needed, requiring changes to the job description or to the job announcement before the position is advertised.

The next step is to advertise extensively to get the largest group of applicants possible. In any hiring situation, it is critical to obtain an adequate group of qualified candidates. In this process, the objective is to find a well-qualified person who also is a good organizational fit. It is likely that this task will require a large pool of candidates.

In local governments or larger organizations, this recruitment activity usually is handled by the human resources department. This works fine as long as the department can ensure that the manager sees an adequate number of well-qualified candidates.

The next step is to screen resumes for related experience and education. When considering resumes, include applicants who appear to be marginally qualified. In many cases, the candidate who turns out to be the best individual for a job is not the one who looks the best on paper. It is not terribly important to the process whether the work team or the hiring authority does the resume screening, as long as the objective is to get the largest number of interviewees rather than the smallest.

At this point in the process, it is time to bring the work group back together. A few ground rules need to be established. The person who is going to be the hiring authority for the new position needs to be identified. That person will be a supervisor, manager, or superintendent. The work group should be made to understand that its input will be vital, that the needs of the group are instrumental in making the decision but that the hiring authority, after taking the group's comments into consideration, will make the final decision.

If a work group consists of less than a dozen people, everyone in the group should be involved in the hiring process, and several interview teams should be assembled. If clerical staff people are part of the group or are charged with supporting that group, these people need to make up an interview team as well.

Several tasks are important in preparing for the interviews. If writing skills are needed for the position, request a writing sample. Relevant tests should be developed to identify the particular technical experience or skills needed. Each of the teams will develop pertinent interview questions. These questions need to be reviewed in advance to ensure that equal employment opportunity requirements are met. If training is required to make certain that the interview process does not violate anyone's civil rights, this training should take place now.

The Interviews

Candidates who are invited to interviews should be asked to reserve two or three hours for the process. (If the hiring team cannot keep an applicant interested in the interview process for three hours, that person probably is not someone the team would want to hire for a 40-hour-a-week job anyway.)

On the day of the interviews, the clerical interview team should ask a few questions, as well as administer

the relevant tests. The other two teams should do separate interviews with each applicant. If the position that is being filled is that of a supervisor, one of the teams should include people from the department, as well as from other groups within the larger organization, and the supervisor for that position. The other team should be composed of people who will be working for the new supervisor.

What results at the end of this interview process is four different looks at each candidate. The hiring team has the test material, the input of the clerical team, and the outcomes of two different interviews. Each of these pieces of information will be an important contribution in the overall assessment of the candidates.

The technical test is an easy way to find out if the person can deal with relevant information and can communicate it to other people. The value of the input from the clerical review team is less obvious but it can be more important. It is almost universally true that people who are patronizing to clients or rude to coworkers also are patronizing and rude to clerical people. Clerical staff can provide valuable input toward identifying the "people skills" problems of some applicants.

Splitting the peers and supervisor from the employees provides other information. Any candidate who has a real chance at succeeding in an interview knows how to "read" the interview team, target the perceived heavy hitter on that team, and play to that person. "Snowing" a prospective boss for a half hour by saying what he or she wants to hear is not a terribly difficult thing to do. Successful interviewees do this well.

The peer group and the employee group, however, are going to be looking for different characteristics and different responses. A person whose only skills are reading interviewers and telling them what they want to hear will run into trouble later when the teams compare notes.

The Review Meeting

The most important part of this hiring process occurs after all of the interviews and tests have been completed. If there has been a large number of candidates, this review meeting may take several hours. In this meeting, all of the people who were involved in the interview pro-

cess convene and review the various candidates for strengths, weaknesses, inconsistencies, talents, and organizational fit.

Not uncommonly, a person who did well with one group will do poorly with another, and in the course of an extensive review of all candidates, two or three will begin to

rise to the top. Particular concerns of each member of the interview team must be addressed head-on. No one should be made to feel that his or her opinion does not count. It is imperative that the hiring authority be honest about his or her observations on first-, second-, and third-choice candidates.

Voting periodically during the process is okay as long as the team understands that the final choice still rests with the hiring authority. By the end of the meeting, the top two or three choices will be clear to everyone. If consensus cannot be reached, disagreement will be apparent. The areas where consensus does not exist are the ones in which the reference checks need to focus. If someone in the work group has a consistently bad feeling about the top candidate, the reference checks can help to identify whether or not that feeling has merit. In many cases, it does.

It may be a good idea to take notes regarding organizational fit. Although this is a critical issue in the hiring decision, it often is a difficult one to quantify if challenged. Notes regarding behaviors and indications of attitude and work ethics may have value later on.

At the close of this meeting, the hiring authority needs to thank all of the participants honestly and make a real commitment to consider all of their input, in addition to input from references, before making a decision.

The final step is to check references. This can be difficult because of prior employers' concerns about lawsuits, but managers who have identified specific behaviors they want to discuss may have great success in getting answers. Any remaining areas of concern should be discussed with the top candidate before a job offer is made.

In the author's experience, this process has succeeded in almost every case to identify people who were good employees and good con-


tributors to a work team. And the process has been as successful in identifying a manager for a group as it has in the hiring of peers within the group. Interestingly, this process has resulted in more diverse work groups rather than more homogeneous ones. Apparently employees in a work group really do want the best performer for their group. They will select people for nontraditional roles based on their abilities rather than on such arbitrary factors as gender, race, or disability.

An additional benefit only recently has begun to be understood. When a work group assists with the hiring process, its members have more of a vested interest in helping the chosen person to succeed than they do in seeing that person fail. When a manager uses the traditional approach to hiring and brings a new person into the work group, often

the new person makes a mistake within the first few months. The work group communicates either directly or indirectly to the manager that “this idiot you forced on us has screwed up and it’s your fault, so you fix it.” If the group has been involved in the hiring process, then when the new employee makes his or her first mistake, the group is more inclined to take the attitude that “we thought you were a good candidate for this job, and we need to help you succeed so we all look good.”

Does It Always Work?

This process can result in new employees becoming contributing members of highly synergistic teams in a short time. If it fails, it fails because a member of a team, usually the manager, decides too early in the process who is the best candidate for

the job and fails to let the process run its own course. It is the responsibility of the hiring authority to keep an open mind about final outcomes, all the way from the initial brainstorming session to the references checks. No system is perfect. This particular interview process, however, screens for a larger number of positive attributes and negative characteristics that are directly pertinent to the workplace than any other system this author has seen. 

Paul Ludwick is neighborhood resources director, Glendale, Arizona.