

Your Firm's Unique Attitudes

Take your company's interview process to the next level and turn your people's potential into profit.

By *Jeremy Cepin*

You can't build a great company without great people—and as we all know—a great company filled with great people is an invaluable asset. Making the right people decisions promotes success, from the corner office right down to Cube Row. However, recruiting people is not the most important challenge that your company faces—recruiting the *right* people is. In fact, having the wrong people on your staff can be your firm's biggest liability.

The scarcest commodity in business today is not great customers—it's great people. More and more companies simply can't recruit good people fast enough. The talent shortage is the biggest obstacle facing firm growth and solving this dilemma should be a strategic priority for everyone. Hiring great people must be a strategic initiative in all companies, and every staff member must be involved in the process.

Of course, making the commitment to hire great people raises an even more basic question: How do you know them when you see them? Companies of all shapes and sizes and in every conceivable industry have asked themselves that question. They have analyzed what separates their winners from their losers, the good hires from the bad hires, and they have all arrived at the same conclusion. Who people are is more important than what people know. Successful hiring is not about finding people with the right *experience*. It is about finding people with the right *attitude*.

Every company has different criteria for what is considered a great attitude. The attitude that works for your organization is unique. Your organization's culture—and the attitudes required to succeed in that culture—are unique. This means that the attitude that defines a high performer will vary from culture to culture. If you can clearly identify the right attitudes for your culture, you can do a better job hiring stars who share those special attitudes.

Discovering your company's differential attitudes
So what are the unique attitudes that make your com-

pany different from all other firms? What are the attitudes that separate your high performers from your middle performers and your low performers from everybody else? These unique attitudes reveal the people you should and should not hire. The best way to select people who will thrive in your company is to identify the characteristics of people who are already thriving there and hire people who are just like them. Companies should work to understand their star performers, identify their target behaviors and attitudes, and then develop interview questions to find people with those attributes.

The attitudes that work in one culture may not work in another. Attitudes are culture specific. Therefore, you first need to discover your organization's unique attitudes. Start by making a list of the key attitudes that define your best people, along with the characteristics of the people who are not making it as well. If you look at all the poor fits currently in your company, you will typically find that only a few characteristics separate them from your middle and high performers. There are a limited number of characteristics that appear again and again among your poor fits. The same holds true when you think about the high performers who fit seamlessly in your culture. They are not better than your middle performers in every possible way. There are a few important characteristics that set them apart. They might be more charismatic, more team oriented, more willing to look at the bigger picture, or more practical. You do not want a giant list of every possible characteristic under the sun. You only want the critical predictors of employee success or failure for your organization. Beware: When everything is important, nothing is important.

Identifying these attitudes is not about making a "wish list" of all the characteristics that sound desirable. This is the time to be realistic, not idealistic. You need to know the characteristics that predict success so you can recruit and hire more individuals

who have those characteristics. Likewise, you need to know the characteristics that predict failure in your organization so you can avoid hiring anyone that shares those traits. In the end, your list should include three to seven positive characteristics that differentiate high performers from middle performers and three to seven negative characteristics that differentiate low performers from everyone else. This short list of key attitudes will direct how you create your interview questions and answer guidelines. But, you are not finished yet. Now, you need to complete the differential attitude discovery phase and find out exactly what those characteristics are for your firm.

Interview a few stand-out people, those that clearly live your firm's culture and especially those that regularly interact with both your high and low performers. It is best to start at the top—the managing partner if possible—and continue further into the organization. Ask simple questions, such as, “In your experience, what attitudes separate our great people from everyone else in the company?” Start with something specific, such as, “Think of someone in the organization who truly represents our culture. This would be our poster child for having the right attitude for our organization. Could you tell me about a time he or she did something that exemplifies having the right attitude? It could be something big or small, but it should be something that made an impression on you.” Ask this question multiple times followed up with the question, “Could you tell me about another example?” You are looking for specific detailed answers not generalities so push for details.

When you have exhausted that line of questioning, go in the other direction. For example, “Without giving specific names, think of someone who works or worked in the organization that did not represent the culture. Could you tell me about a time this person did something that demonstrates having the wrong attitude? It could be something big or small, but it should be something that made an impression on you.” This would be the poster child for having the wrong attitude for your organization. Again, you are looking for specific examples. Beware of fuzzy language. Not everybody subscribes to the same definition of every word. Remember that definitions for terms, such as “courtesy” and “professionalism” make sense to *us* because we know exactly what *we* mean. Do not assume that everyone else knows exactly what we mean. You should interview as many of your firm's people as possi-

ble (*i.e.*, at least two thirds should take part in the interview process). Also, make sure you interview across service lines.

Interviewing for attitudes

Interview questions that target the attitudes that matter most to your organization are the only interview questions that reveal whether or not a candidate is a match for your firm. As mentioned previously, you will need an answer key that will grade a candidate's attitude. What is the point of asking a question if you have no idea how to rate the answer? Create your interview questions by following this four-step process:

1. *Pick one of your attitudes.* Choose one of the attitudes defined during your discovery phase.
2. *Identify a differential situation to elicit this attitude.* Differential situations are the moments when the differences between high and low performers are most blatantly in contrast. This contrast is what you want to identify because situations in which high and low performers respond similarly are of no use in determining attitude.
3. *Start your interview question.* Begin by asking, “Could you tell me about a time when you...” and then insert the differential situation you just identified.
4. *Leave the question hanging.* One of the worst things you can do is finish a question with a leading phrase, such as, “... and how you overcame it.” Fight any tendency to grammatically resolve the question when posing it to the interviewee.

Be sure to begin your questions with, “Could you tell me...” instead of, “Tell me about a time...” The candidates will feel less like they are taking an exam and will treat the process like a conversation, which will loosen them up and lower their guard. This is when their true character is revealed.

Whether hiring a new graduate student or an experienced partner, the candidate's attitude will be the issue that determines success or failure. Simply because somebody was a superstar at one firm does not mean that they will be a star at your firm. A star at one company might be an uncomfortable fit somewhere else. There are no universal high performers, only the high performers that are right for your organization.

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