

Selecting Your Team



Ken Foster
Cindy Petitt
October 2009

Selecting Your Team

Ken: Hello and welcome. My name is Ken Foster and I'm your host today. Today we're going to interview Cindy Petitt and Cindy has been in the human resource business for over 20 years. She has been in all aspects of human resources and today she's going to talk to you about how to select your team to make excellent hiring decisions.

Cindy, welcome.

Cindy: Thank you, Ken.

Ken: Before we get started with the topic of today, I'd like to find out how you got into the human resource business.

Cindy: I got into the human resource business because I've always been interested in people. I have a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in human resource development, so it's always been a predisposition of mine.

In my role as Director of Human Resources, I often would see situations where people were disappointed because their careers weren't going in the direction that they wanted, or managers were demotivating employees. So, I started to mentor and coach managers and employees to help them learn about how to operate more effectively. I love to see people working up to potential – it's such a waste when they don't. So, I enjoyed helping them move in the direction of their full potential.

Ken: That's great. There are a lot of managers, executives and entrepreneurs out there that have made bad hiring decisions and it has really cost them a lot of money.

So, what's the key to making a good decision on who to bring into your organization or your team?

Cindy: First and foremost it is being clear on what you're looking for. In the recruitment process there is often too much focus on the duties and responsibilities of a position and not enough focus on what the newly hired person will be expected to accomplish.

For example, if I want to hire a business partner, I might say my new partner will be responsible for administration and business development. However, I might not be thinking about how I want him or her to double our business and streamline our administrative processes. Leading a significant change effort requires a different set of skills and interests versus maintaining status quo or leading business as usual.

Selecting Your Team

Second, remember that recruitment is not a passive process. To find good candidates, you need to use your networks. They can be a source for some of your best candidates because they typically have direct knowledge of the candidates they refer. So, it's getting out there, talking with people in your network to find out if they know of people who might be good for this position or if they know other sources you could explore.

Third, remain objective and focused throughout the process. Often we have a tendency to act on first impressions. You have a great interview with a candidate and conclude that this person is best for the job. In fact, you move forward as though this is the candidate you plan to select, and that can cause you to miss red flags. Then, what if you find that references tell a different story? An interview is just a snap shot, so it's best to withhold judgment until the process is completed and you have all the information you need on the short-listed candidates to make a good decision.

Losing focus also can be a trap. Sometimes you'll be interviewing a candidate and discover that they have these great skills in one narrow area. If your organization has a void in this area, you can easily get carried away with that and lose sight of the broader range of skills needed in the position you are filling.

Three more important areas to consider are:

- Use an evidence-based approach, which means focusing on what a candidate has achieved rather than just on what the candidate has done or the activities performed. If a candidate designed and implemented a new finance system, ask about the results of the new system – its impact on the business.
- Use the interview to market your company and the position.
- Remember that the recruitment process doesn't end with the job offer and acceptance. You have to continue to manage the relationship through the on-boarding process and, particularly, during the first few months on the job. A lot can happen between the time you offer a person a job and the time they actually safely land within your organization.

Ken: What are some common mistakes that people make? I've hired a lot of people over the years. Sometimes they look like really great candidates, but when you start to work with them all of a sudden you know you've really made a poor choice.

Cindy: I think the number one mistake that people make when they are hiring is to act on gut feelings or first impressions. It is the flip side of withholding judgment until all

Selecting Your Team

information is in. Candidates come in. They look good. They sound good. They are very articulate. They are smooth talkers. You all of the sudden think, “Wow. This person is going to be great for this position,” and yet the traits listed are all on the surface. These traits don’t give you a deep understanding of the candidate’s overall capabilities.

A second area where people make mistakes is to look for their clones, which can be done unconsciously. When looking at candidates, managers resonate best with people who are most like them and who think like them. However, what managers really should be looking for are people who complement them and their team because the candidate adds a new perspective or new skill sets.

Overcompensating is another mistake. When a manager or business owner has just come off of a very difficult situation of managing a problem employee, there is a tendency to look for someone who is the opposite of that problem employee. They look for somebody who has all the things that this person didn’t have, and they forget about what the person had that was actually quite good.

So, they end up going to the other end of the spectrum – they are trading one void for another. In the end, they’re no better off because they are not keeping a balanced perspective on the competencies that they need.

A fourth mistake results from insecurity. The persons doing the hiring screen out strong, ambitious candidates because they view those people as threats. Rather than looking for the best person they can find, they look for safe candidates who will not overshadow them.

Finally, it’s amazing even for senior level positions the number of times organizations don’t check references or when they do check references it is only cursory.

There are many, many other mistakes that people make in their hiring decisions, but those are the most common based on my experience in Human Resources.

Ken: You mentioned flaws in reference checking. How do you conduct a good reference check?

Cindy: Checking references can be a challenging situation because in many cases organizations are hesitant to say anything that’s disparaging about a person for fear of being sued.

Selecting Your Team

And, when you get a really good reference, you cannot always be sure whether it's good news or bad news. You hope it means that you're getting someone exceptionally qualified, but there is also the risk that you're getting someone that an organization is anxious to get rid of because of performance weaknesses.

I have heard of one technique that reportedly yields a good result. When calling for a reference check, leave this message: "If the candidate is absolutely outstanding, please call me back."

The premise is that the manager of an average or poor performer isn't likely to make much of an effort to call you back, but the manager of a truly outstanding performer will want to help that person get ahead so they will call you back. I wouldn't say this is a highly valid process, but it may be one way of dealing with people who are hesitant to be honest.

Ken: Some Companies use elaborate processes, but is there any way to really know if you're hiring a great candidate?

Cindy: There certainly are a lot of good assessment processes that organizations can use. The Top Grading process is rigorous and has a very high success rate. Organizations can also develop and validate their own assessment process, but they can be very expensive to put in place and none of them are 100% accurate.

If you use the tips we have talked about today you can significantly increase your probability of hiring a good candidate. Be clear about what you are looking for in the job. Use the interview to ask probing questions to discern what is real and what is not – to go beyond the resume. Do a thorough job with your reference checks.

Ken: One of the mistakes you mentioned was when people look for clones of themselves. This can be a real challenge for entrepreneurs. Is there a process to help identify what you really want?

Cindy: Look at what you need from a business perspective, not from a job description perspective. For example, where does your business need to grow and what is missing in your organization that will affect future growth. What are areas that you are not so great at? It may be business development. It may be managing the administrative activities. It may be developing content. This is what you focus on when recruiting. You want to hire someone who can produce good results in the areas where you have the greatest business need; someone who brings skills or perspectives that you do not have.

Ken: That's great.

Selecting Your Team

Cindy: At the same time, compatibility is important. It helps if you and your new hire have some area of intersection where you can relate easily with each other like a common interest, skill, experience, or perspective. Starting with your voids will ensure that you are not looking for your clone, but selecting someone who is completely opposite of you may lead to communication problems.

Ken: That makes a lot of sense. How do you think recruiting has changed over the last 10 years?

Cindy: Recruitment traditionally was a very transaction-based process completely primarily by Human Resource, and now it's becoming much more of a strategic process with greater involvement of managers.

A transaction-based process focuses on the steps that need to be completed, such as, posting a job vacancy, rating & ranking candidates, issuing a short-list of the best candidates, conducting interviews, etc.

A strategic approach takes a broader, more systemic view of recruitment, such as how to cultivate candidate sources today that will have a pay off later. The criteria used to evaluate candidates is much broader and focuses on what a candidate brings to the table in terms of record of success, alignment with where your organization wants to go, and future potential to grow with your organization.

In addition, what represents a strong resume is changing. In the past, staying with one employer for a long time demonstrated stability and loyalty. Now a strong resume shows diversity of experience and employers. As a matter of fact, sometimes when you're in a position for too long or have only worked for one company, it can work to your disadvantage.

Finally, the importance of branding and marketing in recruitment is much more widespread.

Ken: Very good. What about technology? How is it affecting recruitment?

Cindy: It's had a huge impact in both good and bad ways. Information on both organizations and candidates is far more accessible because of the Internet. College students who are posting pictures on Facebook of wild parties and inappropriate behaviors are not thinking about how this will look to future employers. And an unhappy employee can use the social media to tarnish the employer's reputation.

There are a number of electronic forums where you can find out anything you want about a prospective employer, or even a prospective manager. Employees can

Selecting Your Team

anonymously share information that companies may prefer to keep confidential, such as hiring salaries and anticipated salary increases, and whether the organization is a good or bad place to work.

So, it works both ways. Organizations can find out a lot about the person and candidates can find out a lot about the organization. So, companies no longer solely control their brand, and individuals need to be more conscious of the personal brand they are creating.

The social networks have made recruitment a very organic process. For example, LinkedIn has become a major source of recruitment for organizations, professional recruiters, and for people looking for jobs. On Twitter there has been a group – I think it's called the Angel Job Group – that looks for people who are out of work and helps them network to try find jobs.

Ken: Very nice and what are some of the greatest myths around recruiting these days?

Cindy: Managers recognize that recruiting is an important part of their job because it is building capacity for the future. While the emphasis on talent management is helping, I suspect that even many of the managers who actively participate in the recruitment process see these activities as taking time away from their real job.

Another myth is that either party – the organization or new hire – will end up getting 100% of what they want or what they expect. People present their best face when they are applying for jobs, organizations sometimes tend to oversell, and recruitment processes often lack rigor. Therefore, if you end up with 80% of what you expect, you are doing good. Sometimes you'll get 150% of what you expect, but that's not as common.

Ken: Very good. So, does every hire have to be an A player?

Cindy: There are mixed views on that. I have the view that in some cases you can actually be overpaying if you hire A players for every position. It's important to know what are the key leverage positions in your organization, the positions that are really going to be critical to your success and to your growth. You want to make sure that you have A players in those positions.

Also it's important to be realistic about whether or not you're an A organization. If your organization is not growing and is content with status quo, then this would probably be a very frustrating environment for an A player.

Selecting Your Team

Ken: Makes a lot of sense. So, what advice would you give a candidate who's looking for a job right now?

Cindy: Be strategic. Look long-term. Look at jobs in the context of a career. Think ahead 15, 20 years into the future. What do you want to accomplish, where do you want to make a difference in the world, and to what extent are positions you are applying for going to take you along that path? If you do this, you will come across much better as a candidate and you are much more likely to find a position that's going to make you happy.

Have a good crisp results-oriented resume with no typos and formatting errors. Many years ago I was involved in a search for a CFO and we thought we had found the perfect candidate. He was highly credentialed in terms of achievements and was highly recommended. But, he had something like 30 typos in his resume and that was a deal breaker. Such carelessness communicated a lot about his interest in the job and his attentiveness to detail, which is important for a CFO.

Ken: Wow.

Cindy: And, of course, do your homework. Find out everything you can about a business before you go in for an interview.

Ken: Cindy, I want to thank you so much for taking the time today to put this out into the world. People I know are really going to benefit from this.

How do people get a hold of you to be able to work with you and find out more about what you do?

Cindy: I have a website and my website is www.CoachForPostiveAction.com and I'd love to hear from people if they need partners in the recruitment process building their workforce.

Ken: There you go. From both of us we wish you much success in your recruiting and also in finding your positions. Take care.

Cindy: Thank you so much.