Avoiding the "Clone Army" Syndrome in Hiring

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Building a Better, Stronger Team…while avoiding the "Clone Syndrome"

Many large and complex organizations have hiring structures that tend to be rigid. One of the challenges to building a strong team with a diversity of skills is that the

GAME of CLONES

traditional process of hiring all too often preferentially selects for like-minded individuals who share the same strengths…and the same weaknesses…and the same blind spots. While this shared *modus operandi* can help people to feel at home in an organization of people just like them, it can have unanticipated, devastating impacts on innovation, creativity, thought diversity and entrepreneurialism.

Similarly, disasters can result from hiring a new team member primarily because of chemistry. This is when an individual is selected based on a "gut reaction", which is usually just a subconscious code for feeling familiar and friendly—another step toward hiring a clone army. When "chemistry" rules, people tend to choose others like them.

Leaders who want to lead a team of clones are well served by these tactics. However, those leaders intending to foster teams with flexible thinking who can embrace cultural diversity, respond well to change, and bring innovative ideas to the table, will be thwarted if they get trapped into hiring on board a culture of *groupthink*.

Groupthink is a crippling organizational phenomena that occurs when one or two people or personality styles dominate a group's culture so completely that there is no room for those with other styles, perspectives, needs, or beliefs to get into the organization—much less to get their ideas on the table. This can take the form of those

antiquated hiring practices. Once on the team, it also happens when the dominant thinkers badger others into accepting their ideas or critically downplay the value of others' ideas or roles.

There are important steps leaders can take to avoid the "Clone Army" syndrome. First, understand whether your legacy hiring systems fail to select for relevant skills and fit. Next, leaders need to grasp the implication of new hiring trends, mainly "Big Data", and how its use could influence your next hire. Then, you should know about the other options you have which can help you hire for thought diversity.

The Evolution of Hiring

Hiring has seen an evolution of revolution over the past 100 years. In 1912 William Stern invented the intelligence quotient concept (the ratio of mental age to physical age x 100). Psychological testing was the rage of the 1950s and 1960, with the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Instrument (MMPI), a clinical tool to identify depression and other psychological issues, serving as the most commonly used screening tool in hiring—a test administered at the time by HR personnel. Then in 1990 Psychologists Mayer and Salovey created the concept of measureable Emotional Intelligence, which they defined as a set of skills to judge and regulate emotion in self/others to achieve success. Now, the current wave, called "X.Q.", is based on big data analytics where employers test large numbers of employees and applicants for traits that predict role success, based on factor analysis. These questions have been revealed to be things like "do you prefer cats or dogs?"

Fans of "People Analytics" claim it is akin to behavioral DNA, calling it a cumulative personality test data to predict employee retention. They claim it provides insight

into "job seekers personalities" and can predict role success and job happiness. Proponents tout that using "People Analytics" or XQ in hiring increases job productivity, raises client satisfaction, and decreases employee turn-over. The core belief here is that combining lots of data with analytics can optimize anything, including "people". They also claim that this method avoids discrimination in hiring—however, most other written and computerized tests struggle with universal accessibility and linguistic challenges that insert unintentional yet implicit bias. Having been created in the private sector, XQ people analytics have not undergone such rigor and review in their development. Yet they are highly anticipated to become widely available—not the mechanics mind you, just the outcome. Not the analytic method, just the XQ score. But ask yourself, how is the job you have available related to whether the candidate prefers cats or dogs?

How does a preference for cats or dogs relate to job success in your organization?

The power of People Analytics and the promise of "Big Data"

There is another way:
The Behavioral Event Interview

The theory behind the Behavioral Event Interview (BEI) method is that past behavior predicts future behavior—and thus if you know what a candidate actually did in a previous job you can be pretty sure that they will do the same when they are a part of your team as well…for better or for ill. The BEI method has been heavily researched: the main reference for this work is *Competence at Work,* by Spencer and Spencer. BEI has been shown to be a valid and reliable method of selection which reduces turnover by helping organizations make the right hire for fit and skill on the first time they select a candidate. It also helps avoid making those painful hiring corrections that occur when poor selection choices are made.

In implementing the BEI, you want to choose the candidate who has proven herself on the tasks relevant to the currently open position. In using the BEI technique, you will carefully create questions that elicit performance at work in situations the candidate is likely to face if they join your team. Here are the steps to follow: First, closely examine the job description, not only for the obvious technical or clinical skills necessary but also for the interpersonal or client-centered skills that are mission critical for the success of your enterprise. Second, create open ended questions about how the candidate has accomplished similar tasks in the past. For example, if you want to ensure that your new hire has the skills to manage difficult or angry stakeholders, then you could fashion a question such as: *Please describe a time when you dealt with an angry, hostile or unreasonable customer.* Make sure they tell about only one experience, and not a generalization of several experiences. Your clue will be answers such as, "Well, I usually…" or "Typically I…". Generalizations allow the candidate to gloss over key specifics and won't give you the predictive ability you're looking for. When they tell you about one specific recent event, their answers will give you insight into several dimensions of behavior around patience, ability to deal with adverse situations and difficult conversations, customer service, and ability to represent the organization well. Collect answers following the S-T-A-R system: The SITUATION they faced, the TASK they needed to accomplish, the ACTIONS they took, and the RESULTS they achieved. That STAR format can help you identify the true stars you want to hire. Furthermore, since people are very likely to repeat in the future what they did in the past, you will have a very good idea of how they can contribute to your team—based on relevant data, and not a preference for cats or dogs. You can also hire for thought diversity and not wind up leading a clone army that all thinks alike.