The Management Moment

The Behavioral Event Interview: Avoiding Interviewing Pitfalls When Hiring

Claudia S. P. Fernandez

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"The Management Moment" is a regular column within the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice*. **Edward L. Baker, MD, MPH, MSc**, is serving as The Management Moment Editor. Dr Baker is Director of The North Carolina Institute for Public Health, School of Public Health, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This column provides commentary and guidance on timely management issues commonly encountered in public health practice.

One of the hardest tasks a manager faces is building a successful team. In fact, difficulty selecting and building a team is one of the top three predictors of future derailment, according to research by the Center for Creative Leadership.[1–3] Hiring the wrong person for the job seems to be a common experience. In my own seminars, classes, and coaching, I get many a knowing nod when I ask if participants have "hired a person for their technical skills . . . and then found that the whole person showed up for work!" Mistakes in hiring can create serious interpersonal issues among staff members and a series of headaches for managers and leaders. Hiring is often considered a tricky and dangerous business, particularly in civil service systems where correcting a hiring mistake is a lengthy and costly process. The job turnover created by poor person-job fit also presents wasted expenses to organizations in both the public and private sector.

One of the most common ways a manager builds a team is through interviewing candidates and hiring. However, building a real team that thinks for itself while executing the organization's mission in creative, innovative, and agile ways is more of a challenge than a manager might suspect.

As LaFasto and Larson say in their book *When Teams Work Best*, "a successful team begins with the right people."[4] However, getting the right people to the table presents a serious challenge. The "right people" must have more than technical skills. While technical skills, which constitute a working knowledge of the job tasks at hand, are critical, equally so are the "soft skills" that characterize the make-it-or-break-it team dynamics that ultimately govern team productivity, innovation, and agility.

Five problems typically plague the old standard interviewing style so common in today's workforce (Box 1). The first error a manager makes when hiring is to spend most of the interview talking about the position or the organization. What the interviewer should be doing is listening intently. Unfortunately, what often happens is that candidates get a lot of information about the job but the organization gets to know little about the candidate beyond what is on the resume.

Archaic and uninformative interview questions present a second common problem with the interview process. "What are your strengths and weaknesses" is a weak tool to understand either the soft or hard skills a potential hire has to offer. Candidates often have

Corresponding author: Claudia S. P. Fernandez, DrPH, RD, LDN, North Carolina Institute for Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, CB 8165, Chapel Hill, NC 27599 (e-mail: Claudia_Fernandez@unc.edu).

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Edward L. Baker, MD, MPH, MSc, is Director, North Carolina Institute for Public Health, School of Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Claudia S. P. Fernandez, DrPH, RD, LDN, directs several leadership institutes at the North Carolina Institute for Public Health, including the ACOG Leadership Institute and the leadership core of the Food Systems Leadership Institute. She is past-Director of the Emerging Leaders in Public Health Leadership Institute for minority leaders and the Southeast Public Health Leadership Institute.

BOX 1 ● Five common interview errors

1. Talking more about the job than about the candidate.
2. Asking for strengths and weaknesses.
3. Getting a verbal resume.
4. Asking hypothetical interview questions.
5. Hiring for chemistry rather than fit.

BOX 2 ● The steps of behavioral event interviewing

1. List the critical performance areas for the job.
2. Create open-ended questions that query the candidate's experience at those tasks.
3. Gather data on the Situation, Task, Action, and Result (STAR) in the candidate's answer.
4. Evaluate the answers for demonstrated job performance.
5. Compare their answers to other candidates' answers (this is sometimes done with a point system).

much-practiced and uninsightful information to share in response to such an inquiry.

A third common error is in how interviewees are asked to talk about their relevant work experience. Typically, candidates are asked to describe what they did in a specific job. This provides candidates with a golden opportunity to shine by describing themselves at their best and telling their interviewer stories of choice, or by giving you a verbal reading of their resume. However, there is no guarantee that these stories will shed any light on how they would perform on tasks relevant to the currently open position. Furthermore, without a good deal of follow-up questioning you might never know what other important facts or events might have been omitted.

A fourth less serious interviewing error is to present a scenario to a candidate and ask, "What would you do in this situation?" While it does assess some technical skills (eg, does the candidate know the correct procedure, the correct medication dosage, the correct paperwork to complete), it does not assess whether the person actually follows his or her own advice in a real-life situation. Book knowledge does not always predict behavior. Being able to abstract "what if" allows the interviewee to present an ideal scenario with his or her impeccable behavior at the center of the story. While it makes for a good interview from the candidate's perspective, it has relatively less predictive value for how the candidate will actually perform in the job—particularly if the question revolves around interpersonal aspects of work rather than dry, technical, fact-based tasks.

However, the most serious error a manager can make in hiring is to hire for chemistry—that sense of how you *click* with a candidate. Do not make the error of thinking that "chemistry" describes a hiring preference or a criterion, because in truth, the failure to hire well is one of the top reasons that managers derail, according to research from the Center for Creative Leadership. In hiring for chemistry, the manager often ends up with a like-minded team who mirror his or her own weaknesses. While having good chemistry (interpersonal workings) within the team can be helpful and constructive, "going on one's gut feeling" should not be the guiding factor in making a new hire. There are many steps a manager can take to promote the chemistry and cooperation of the team after the players with the best fit are chosen. These

steps will be addressed in a later *Management Moment* column.

Don't hire for chemistry does not imply that you should ignore the candidate's people skills, often called soft skills. These are critically important to nearly every job in public health, and certainly to positions in management and leadership. The difference is this: feeling the chemistry in interviewing describes a potential colleague who you would like on your team, who seems to have a similar worldview to yours, who might make a good golf or lunch partner, who you can conceive of becoming a friend. While that might be great icing on the organizational cake, it does not measure a candidate's soft skills, hard skills, or organizational fit. In fact, one of the most valuable things a leader can have is a team that represents a diversity of worldviews, maybe even differences in perspective, which would make a lunch out not quite so, well, appetizing. Fit is not about "fitting the leader's preferences." It is about finding the edge that the organization itself needs.

So what is a manager to do? Professional human resource firms and head hunting agencies have figured this one out: the first step is to throw out the old style of interviewing candidates. Rather than asking, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" to prospective employees, or "What would you do?" when presenting various work-related scenarios, what is critical for the manager to get at is how the candidate has actually performed in the past. Past behavior predicts future behavior. If you interview candidates at all regularly, a good mantra to put on your wall is *in human behavior, the past predicts the future*. Choose the candidate who has proven himself or herself in the past on tasks relevant to those required in the currently vacant position.

There is a name for this technique broadly used by corporate and academic recruiters: it is called the Behavioral Event Interview (BEI). The BEI is a way of interviewing that demonstrates effectiveness based on actual experience. Spencer and Spencer give a wonderful description of how to conduct this process in their book *Competence at Work*.[5] The company Development Dimensions International (DDI) has a patented version

of the process called *Targeted Selection*.* The first step in this BEI process is to closely examine the job description (Box 2). Pull out the critical areas that will determine the success of the person in this position and fashion open-ended questions about how the candidate has accomplished similar tasks. For example, if partnering and leading collaborative efforts are critical to successful job performance, then prepare a question that will gain you information on how the interviewee managed the interpersonal and creative aspects of partnering and collaborating. A question like "Describe a time when you had to create partnerships with another organization or group despite contentious relationships between the parties" will give you insight into several dimensions of behavior around innovation, creativity, and the ability to get along with others as they create win-win opportunities.

Let us examine this a bit more closely with a public health example. In Step 1, you list the critical areas of job performance, which, for a US Air Force epidemiologist, includes the following[6]:

- Conducts preventive medicine and communicable disease control, occupational health, food safety, and disaster response programs.
- Applies epidemiological and statistical methods to identify and evaluate factors increasing disease morbidity and mortality.

Then in Step 2, you craft questions to ascertain the candidate's actual behaviors in relevant situations, such as

> Tell me about a specific experience you had conducting a disaster response initiative. Specifically, I'd like to hear how you addressed the communicable disease issues that arose from the incident.

> Or

> Tell me about a time when you applied statistical methods to identify and evaluate factors relating to disease morbidity and mortality. I'd like to hear about how you translated that information into policy recommendations.

For Step 3, you listen very carefully—and take copious notes to record the situation candidates describe, the task they had to accomplish, actions they took, and the results they achieved. This is called the S-T-A-R method and stands for *Situation*, *Task*, *Action*, and *Result*. It is the interviewer's guide to conducting a successful, informative interview. You can use it to quickly scan the candidate's answer for missing information and continue to probe on that basis. Some helpful probing questions include "Who was present?" "What were

you thinking or feeling at the time?" "What happened as a result?" "What was your role?" "What did you say?" and "What did you do?" These follow-up questions will help you examine the depths and relevance of the candidate's experience.

In Step 4, you critically judge how well candidates answered the questions and how that gives a demonstration of their skills. You could even create a 5- or 10-point value scale for how well their experience matches your needs and assign the points earned to each answer. Discussing the STAR answers given and the point values assigned with colleagues who also used BEI to interview the candidate will help you gain expertise in this method. In Step 5, you and your colleagues compare the different job candidates' BEI results to ascertain who has the kind of experience and skills that most fit your organization.

Let us look at another, less tangible, example. Organizational culture is a critical factor impacting the productivity of a team, office, or organization. Leaders and managers can have a great impact on organizational culture. As Janet Porter has written in this column previously, "employees don't leave their job, they leave their boss."[7] It is imperative for managers to make hires who will create a positive, constructive culture within their organizations. How can you ascertain what new hires might do to impact this often-troublesome area? Ask them to tell you about a time when they had to take steps to change or influence the culture of their organization.

When using behavioral event interviewing, be on the look out for generalizations such as "well I usually . . .," or "typically I . . .." If the candidate offers such a response, then you need to ask more detailed questions, such as "Can you give me a specific example?" Also, be sensitive to the interviewee theorizing about how he or she *would* respond, and again follow up with more specific questions about the actual experience. Some candidates who have not experienced a BEI might at first be thrown by this type of questioning, but with your patient follow-up probing, they should be able to share their relevant experience with you. What will also be abundantly clear is if they lack this experience.

Your next step is to decide whether they have the skills to do the job. Certainly, not everyone will need to have experienced every aspect of a job in order to be able to perform well at it. We all remember when we got our first position supervising or managing others, or had major budgeting responsibility. As managers ourselves we know that there is a first time for everything as one progresses through one's career. The thing to look for is evidence that the candidate is coachable—has taken opportunities to grow, receive feedback, improve on skills, and develop talents. The ability for self-reflection, identifying developmental areas, and successfully

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*For more information on Targeted Selection, visit DDI at www.DDIworld.com.

addressing them is a meta-skill of particular note. This is especially true of the soft skills arena. One of the senior leaders I coach once said something that is true of most senior level managers and leaders, "I know I'm a smart person. I know I can learn the technical skills of this new area. I've learned a lot in my life—that's not the hard part. It's the people issues that present the real challenges." You can use the techniques of behavioral event interviewing to get a window of insight into those difficult-to-assess skill areas that make or break organizational and team success. You can also use these techniques to help safeguard yourself from the most common errors in hiring.

Professional human resources firms and head hunting agencies typically use the BEI process. Their follow-up questions are carefully crafted and points are awarded for answers so that each interview can be scored for comparison. Even without going to such lengths, the technique as outlined above can help you make the right hiring decision the first time and lower employee turnover costs to your organization.

As you use the BEI techniques you will build a team that should have highly predictable performance and interpersonal interactions. Since past behavior predicts future behavior and past performance predicts future performance you should find few surprises in how your team meets challenges, collaborates, and innovates.

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