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Candidate Assessment Test: Painting an Accurate Picture

By Bruce Dingman

Gaining a thorough understanding of a candidate's potential to lead and contribute within an organization is a prime component of any executive recruiter's job. Myriad nuances must be considered as we attempt to paint an accurate picture explaining who a candidate is. While an artist approaches each new work as a unique piece, he often uses the same system or structure to create his art. Likewise, we use a systematic approach to create a mosaic of each individual candidate, including evaluating professional skills, knowledge, and experiences, as well as personality distinctives which are critical to an executive's success in a new organization.

In order to paint the truest portrait of a candidate and enable our client to make the best decision, we rely on an exhaustive structured interview process. Brad Smart, who gave a name to this process in his book, "[Topgrading, How Leading Companies Win by Hiring, Coaching, and Keeping the Best People](#)" places great emphasis on structured interviews as he evaluates leaders for such companies as General Electric, Gateway Computers and others.

The first (and extremely important) interviews are often given the least amount of attention. These are the interviews of those who are going to work closest with the new leader being hired--board members and other executive team members. It is during this phase that we come to appreciate who our client is and what skills, experience, and personal traits are going to be required. Only when we have gained this accurate vision of what we are seeking can we then attempt to find just the right person.

Our candidate assessment process centers on the belief that ***the best indicator of future performance is past performance***. In almost 25 years of successful consulting, we have never found evidence to disprove this belief. Our personal interview process, when coupled with thorough, 360-degree reference interviews of bosses, peers, and subordinates, gives our clients a thorough understanding of each candidate. As a practice, we spend as long as one hour personally interviewing each reference, and try to interview at least six references for each candidate. References do not simply validate what we have learned in personal interviews with the candidate, but provide additional, essential insights about the candidate.

Finding and selecting the right executive to help an organization succeed is one of the most vital undertakings of any leadership team. The effect of a senior executive on a company is unquestioned—the right leader can mean momentous growth and improvement, while hiring a person who is unsuitable costs time, effort, and opportunity for growth, all of which amounts to a considerable amount of money. One expert calculated that the cost of replacing an executive earning \$100,000 or more can be up to 14 times their salary, and the higher the pay scale, the greater the impact of that person's departure.

We are forthright with candidates in telling them that we will attempt to contact references that they may not have provided. The most telling question we ask a candidate is, "If I were to speak with your former boss, what would he or she say were your strengths, weaknesses, and overall performance?" We then take that answer and validate it by *interviewing* that former boss.

As we attempt to uncover a candidate's strengths, weaknesses, and potential fit, it is vital to ask the right questions, those that are valid to the position and organization and which allow for detailed, comprehensive answers, rather than a simple "yes" or "no." A good interviewer can circle around and ask a question in a different manner to get the information sought, and can listen with

discernment in order to answer, "What did the person really mean by that, and what does that tell me?" Only in such a manner can faint yet important nuances be discovered.

We rely predominately on our structured interviews to gather information, as opposed to formal candidate testing. We do this for various reasons. Testing usually asks information only of the candidate taking the test, and since the test's accuracy depends on how carefully and precisely the candidate answers the questions and how well they know themselves, the picture rendered by some tests may shed an inaccurate light on the candidate. Additionally, some tests offer little room for discernment--they often do not catch the nuances which a good interviewer can notice and clarify.

Others agree. Mr. Smart has said, "...most [personality tests] don't accurately predict the success of high-level executives, and I'll tell you why. It's because human beings are way too complex and crafty. They see through the questions and give the answers they know you want to hear." Daniel Fisher, an organizational psychologist and head of assessment at Worklab Consulting, adds that "there is a lot of research that shows that the smarter you are, the better you are at faking your way through these kinds of tests."

There are a wide variety of assessment tests available, some which test for personality, others for motivation, and still others for intelligence. However, tests often tend to categorize a person with sharp colors rather than subtle hues, so the resulting rendition may not reflect the real person. Over reliance on test results can be dangerous. However, as an affirmation, to focus on areas requiring more attention, or to provide a decision maker with more comfort in the choice, they are often quite useful. When clients have asked us to include such tests to our procedure, in each case, such testing has supported the conclusions already reached in our standard assessment process. What must be remembered is that personality, intelligence, or personal interest tests render *only part of the picture* about a person--they do not complete the painting. A comprehensive personnel assessment process using a whole-person approach to evaluating information about the organization and candidates will improve the effectiveness of executive hiring decisions. It's not glamorous--it's just hard work, coupled with the right process and expertise, which often results in a masterpiece.