

Step 5: Hiring for Cultural Fit

Author: Andrew Wolkstein

This article picks-up where *Step 4: Vetting Candidates* leaves off and discusses the importance of hiring for cultural fit. A candidate can be perfect from a technical standpoint and still be a dramatic mismatch for the position at hand if they are not culturally aligned with the company or their closest colleagues. Some argue that hiring for cultural fit will undercut diversity, but this need not be the case. Hiring for cultural fit does not equate to hiring a clone of one's self or would-be "friends". It means that a team will be pulling towards the same goal - not that they will get to the goal by traveling the same path.

So what is organizational culture and how do you hire for it?

Heart and soul: that is what culture is. It is the essence of an organization. And just as every individual's personality is a unique blend of his or her values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, interests, experiences, upbringing, and habits, so too is the core culture of an organization. Herb Kelleher, founder of Southwest Airlines, put it this way: "Think of culture as your distinctive advantage—as your unique fingerprint. Everything (in our strategy) our competitors could copy tomorrow. But they can't copy the culture—and they know it."

A successful company's culture is naturally reinforced because it manifests each day in language, decision making, and daily work practices. It shapes work enjoyment, work relationships, and work processes, and those who live synergistically with a company's culture would find it hard to imagine another way of operating. Employee alignment to the culture enables productivity and contentment. When employees are aligned with their organization's culture, they tend to have similar answers to the question, "Why is the organization important?"

Once an organization's culture is defined and actively considered in the hiring process, new employees contribute faster, perform better and stay longer with the organization. Fear and stress go down because employees inherently work together more synergistically. Organizational learning is easier. Employees inherently imbue each other with the latest thinking and practices. Most exciting ... work is more fun! Simply put, hiring for cultural fit tilts the tables of success in everyone's favor.

In the hiring process, questions must be asked that probe into a candidate's alignment with an organization's culture. Of course, it is a prerequisite that this core culture has been identified and can be articulated. When you hire for cultural fit, you hire with an emphasis on values as opposed to skills. This is critical as many skills can be taught and developed. Not so with values. Utilizing a hiring template that contains questions tied to culture, as well as what to look for in responses, can be highly valuable.

As an example, if leadership with humility is highly valued, does the candidate strive to keep an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented? Does the candidate maintain a commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique? Appropriate questions could be as follows:

- Tell me about a time in your career that you'd like to have back if you could. What is the biggest job related mistake you have made?

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- Tell me about a situation when you deferred to someone else's view of how to tackle a problem.

In another example, a core cultural value may be adaptability and flexibility. Appropriate questions could be as follows:

- Tell me about a time when you had to adjust to someone else's working style to complete a project or achieve an objective.
- Tell me about a time when you put your needs aside to help a co-worker.

Some additional questions addressing culture include:

- What matters most to you in work? What makes (or will make) you excited about work?
- What does "work ethic" mean? What is your work ethic?
- Define the perfect job for you. What makes it (or would make it) perfect?
- What two performance areas, or skills would you still like to develop? Why?
- How would your most challenging direct reports describe your leadership style?
- How do you play to your strengths? How are these strengths obvious to others—what do they say about these strengths?
- What are three things that motivate you to perform in work, and three in life?
- What would you do with a free afternoon? How do you like to spend your free time?
- How do your friends describe you? What makes them think this?
- What personal qualities do you have that you are most proud of? Why?
- Here is a situation you will encounter in this workplace (example here). How will you handle this in a way that adds value and positively impacts performance?

Whether working with an internal recruiter or a search firm, formal steps must be taken to evaluate a candidate's alignment with a company's core culture. Poor hires are simply too expensive, both monetarily and emotionally, to leave cultural alignment to chance. According to a study by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), a bad hire can cost up to five times that person's annual salary. Additional impacts include decreased confidence in leadership, lower employee morale, customer dissatisfaction, lost customers, and reduced quality.

While the ultimate arbiters of cultural alignment will be members of the hiring team or manager, third party recruiters can also be very effective in assessing fit. In order to do this, search consultants must ask astute questions of their clients and, more importantly, truly listen to the responses. They must pay attention to what is said and, sometimes just as telling, what is not. Of course, the deeper the relationship between the search firm and the hiring company, the better a search consultant will be at assessing cultural alignment.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE LEVEL TALENT ACQUISITION

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Once a candidate has been identified, recruited, attracted and vetted for technical and cultural alignment, it's time to extend the offer. As anyone with significant hiring experience knows, it's a real heartbreaker when you get to the finish line only to have an offer declined. Fortunately, if the candidate has been through the process described in these articles, the likelihood of acceptance is already heightened. The next article will address offer extension and provide additional insight into how to increase the likelihood of a successful hire.

About the Author:

Andy is an Executive Vice President, Search Consultant at Robinson Resource Group. Andy entered the search business as an associate and worked his way up to his current role as EVP, Search Consultant. Andy has an intimate knowledge of every facet of the search process enabling him to successfully fill even the most challenging assignments. In addition to his search experience, he has extensive hands-on experience in market positioning, growth strategy development and execution, and general operations from his years in business.

From an industry standpoint, Andy has broad and deep expertise in the engineering and construction field. He also has comprehensive experience in information security, diversified industrial/manufacturing, recreational products, hospitality & entertainment, and professional services. Search assignments have included most functions including human resources, sales/business development, marketing, public relations, project/program management, procurement, finance, general management, and C-suite.

Andy is a member of Society of American Military Engineers (SAME) where he has served as the post membership chair. Additionally, he is a member of Vistage, HRMAC, and The Executives' Club of Chicago (ECC). He is a proud husband and father of two wonderful children. His family enjoys many activities together, particularly downhill skiing and hockey. They are also very involved within their community including providing care for local foster children.