

THE STONEWOOD PERSPECTIVE

A S T O N E W O O D G R O U P I N C . B U L L E T I N

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Cirque de Selection

Under the Big Top of Picking Winners

In this *StoneWood Perspective* we examine the elusive quest for excellence in selection. We describe the complexities of picking winners and how organizations most commonly deal with them. Finally, we lay out an approach by which to enhance selection decisions in all organizations.

Why selection excellence is so elusive

As we neared the offer stage on a difficult search, the CEO of our client organization asked that the final candidate submit a handwritten letter formally expressing his interest in the position. Though the request was unusual, the candidate complied and awaited the final step in the process. A few days later the company advised us that it would no longer pursue discussions with this candidate. The only explanation offered was that the company had a lingering concern about 'fit'. Though puzzled we complied. It was only when the next candidate was also asked to write a letter that we learned that the CEO had a muse, a cleric turned handwriting guru whom he consulted on all key hiring decisions. After reviewing the first candidate's handwriting sample, the consultant determined that the combination of light pressure (apparently a dead giveaway for low-emotional energy) and a decidedly left-leaning slant (cold and indifferent personality) were conclusive evidence that the candidate was a poor fit for the company in question.

Though it covets the stature of a science, selection has always been the sum of stubbornly independent and subjective inputs. Lacking unifying laws that distinguish the physical sciences, there is little consensus on the attributes that predict success in leadership roles, or how these interact and are optimally weighted in importance. There is also no agreement on the degree to which leadership is situational or why so many leaders appear to have shelf-lives of effectiveness. And there is certainly no consensus on how best to assess candidates for the attributes we cannot agree upon.

Organizations struggle to take measure of the irregularly shaped openings into which candidates must fit. They wrestle with whether to hire for the company they plan to become, the company they wish they were, or the company that they actually are. Unable or unwilling to acknowledge the 'work-in-progress' that they are, organizations hold up idealized representations against which they evaluate candidates. Invariably, the skills required to navigate from the idealized to the actual state are assumed to be the responsibility of the candidate.

Candidates have their own stakeholder issues. With varying levels of self-awareness by which to know and describe themselves, their preferences and their likely fit for a given role or organization, candidates awkwardly parry and thrust with potential employers as both sellers of services and buyers of jobs. Wanting on the one hand to partner with their potential employers to make good selection decisions, they are at the same time fearful for the interests of their careers and families. As emotions and conflicting goals force tradeoffs in rationality, the consistency of their strategies and decisions ebb and flow.

With so many stakeholders and such complexity, hiring begs for thoughtful, disciplined approaches. But as someone recently wrote, simplicity sells and complexity languishes. With few systems-level approaches available, and a reluctance to make the investments they require, organizations retreat to the comfort of expediency and simplicity. They probe generic strengths, weaknesses and career aspirations. They lob leading questions, make snap judgments and allow likability to triumph over job-fit. Gut-feel, hunches and trick questions pepper the discussion. Someone hears that a lot can be learned about a candidate from what they worry about, what they read, how they dress, or their hobbies, so the hiring manager asks, despite having little idea how the answers inform better decisions. Supplementary questions pertaining to

astrology, birth order and ‘what wild animal is most like you’ take many interviews deep into an abyss of logical and legal indefensibility.

But as its many victims can attest, selection is no ordinary beast. It is a hydra which responds to having one of its nine heads cut off by growing two new ones and organizations pay a big price by underestimating it.

Improving Selection Decisions

There has been much written on the elements of a thorough, well conceived selection process. While some may debate the specific tools, general agreement would exist on the following steps:

- Upfront job analysis supplemented by culture and employee attitude surveys at the organization level
- Behavioral and chronological interviews supplemented by verbal, numerical reasoning testing and personality/motivational profiling at the candidate level;
- Exhaustive reference checking to validate the aforementioned, and finally;
- An integration or ‘on-boarding’ plan to aid the successful candidate’s transition into the organization.

Over the years, we have implemented each of these steps into our own search process with results that are compelling. But while a number of our clients have embraced the discipline that such a process demands, others have raised questions of practicality. They remind us that interviews are the tool of choice for selection decisions, and the first stop on any road to improvement. They have pushed us to make tradeoffs, to lighten our process, to delete what they consider burdensome steps and to make substitutions that will have minimal adverse effects on the quality of decisions made.

For those organizations looking to enhance their existing decision-making process around selection, we offer the following compromise approach:

Understanding the Position to be Filled

Selection excellence is impossible without an accurate understanding of the role to be addressed. Such an understanding flows from five basic questions:

- What is it the person has to do?
- What will they need to do well in order to be successful?
- How will they be measured?
- What is the context or characteristics of the environment in which they must function?
- Where do the risks lie?

A detailed list of tasks and responsibilities is the starting point in any recruitment exercise and it is usually the easiest for any organization to produce. After reviewing these responsibilities we ask how the hiring manager will know if the successful candidate is performing well in the role. We press for specific measures of performance and timelines. Organizations often defer this discussion until after a successful candidate has joined the firm, but in our experience it is much better before as it adds clarity by which all parties can make better decisions. This, in turn opens the door to a discussion on the skills that will be required to meet those deliverables. The ensuing dialogue is enhanced yet further by continually asking ‘why’ after each answer. Where possible, we ask to speak to someone who is considered capable in the role and we delve into what they do and how they do it. We nudge the client to talk about how the right person will likely go about doing the job, and the obstacles they will need to overcome in order to be successful.

We ask the hiring manager to talk about the company, the challenges it faces and how these affect the role in question, both today and into the future. We enquire into the company’s culture and ask for the opportunity to speak with others who can also comment on how things work at the company. We especially look for executives who have joined the firm in the past year and ask about their transitional experiences, what surprised them and their perspective on the company. We look for red flags, inconsistencies and since we will be searching for someone to fit into a given team, we try to quickly gauge as many members of that team as possible. As organizations often appear different from the top than the bottom, we ask to speak with subordinates to gain their perspective on the company, the role being recruited and the challenges lying before it. While soliciting such broad input helps us immensely as search consultants, it also gives evidence as to how much the corporation values the input and opinions of its employees.

Among the most difficult issues in selection is determining which attributes really matter and we make a point of deliberating on this at great length. While most senior roles share a need for certain ‘motherhood’ attributes, a whole list of others are often assumed or undervalued. Thus, while most organizations will focus on evaluating candidates’ strategic capabilities, communication and team skills and results orientation, qualities such as judgment or decisiveness are often assumed. This can be a grave error. Consider for example how the question of judgment ultimately defined Ontario Conservative leader John Tory in the last provincial election or how decisiveness, or a lack thereof, continues to mark Paul Martin’s legacy as Prime Minister of Canada. Other overlooked attributes include resilience, flexibility and

persistence all of which are tested under adversity and thus rarely contemplated by organizations hiring for a rosy future. Ask any early staged company whose ultimate destination deviated from that which was anticipated at the outset, and they will agree that these three attributes are critical for success.

Finally, we decide with our clients how we will evaluate candidates when we meet them. We discuss the questions that will be asked, how answers will be evaluated and what issues/attributes each member of the selection committee will focus on so as to avoid duplication of effort and omissions.

Evaluating Candidates – The Interview

Interviews are precision instruments all too commonly wielded as utility tools. They are timed events which seek to extract the essence of a given candidate who has been plucked from his natural setting, dressed in his Sunday-best, and immersed in an often sterile interrogation room. The context robs the interviewer of the social cues by which to normally make sense of another person. Deprived of natural sources of color and depth, the interviewer must finesse them out of the interview itself. They must tease out the themes and storylines which cut through, underlie and make sense of the candidate's career and life. Here's how....

Interviews seek to answer three fundamental questions:

- Can the candidate do the job?
- Are they likely to do the job?
- How will they do the job?

Our approach combines a chronological trip down memory lane with specific probing for evidence that the candidate has tackled similar sets of challenges in the past. We take the candidate all the way back to school and have them walk us through the various decisions which combined, have placed them where they are today. We look for themes that cut across the companies, jobs and people they have chosen to work with and for. We probe into the reasons the candidate was hired into previous roles, who they worked for and the mandates they were given. We ask how they went about addressing the challenges presented to them, why they approached them in this manner, the results, what they might have done differently and how they have tried to apply those lessons going forward. We look for evidence of self-awareness, where the candidate has thrived, where he has not, the kind of people he works best with and why. We look for evidence of learning and steady improvement, drive and desire. Since levels of motivation often change with means and age they cannot be assumed and thus

we probe into work habits and priorities. We look for clarity of thinking and problem solving. We look at the caliber of colleagues they have surrounded themselves with, and how they have gone about hiring, motivating and retaining them.

Seeking to mitigate our clients' risks, we look for evidence that the candidates have tackled similar challenges in the past, preferably under similar circumstances. Can they take us through previous instances when they were asked to build a distribution channel for an organization at a similar stage of growth? Can they take us through instances when they lead a company through its commercialization stage? If so, how did they do this and why did they approach it in this manner? Do they understand the issues? Is there evidence that they have scaled up or down in the past, and if so how did they do it, why were they able to do it, and what have they learned? Have they demonstrated the ability to adapt to different cultures, leadership styles and challenges and is there reason to believe they could do so again?

Pursued in this methodical fashion, interviews can effectively surface the important themes, patterns and answers on which good selection decisions can be made. The discipline is important however for this is insight tapped via the periphery rather than head-on. Interviewing is finesse, not force, and it does not lend itself to short-cuts.

We take a similar peripheral approach with references. References have invariably been offered for the likelihood that they will be supportive of the candidate and thus questions must carefully probe the 'what's, why's and how's' of the candidate's experience with that reference. Also, where possible the sample size of references must be enlarged to enhance their validity.

Finally, while many would question whether 'on-boarding' falls under the realm of recruiting or performance management, in our experience far too many senior level hires report for duty only to be left to their devices to figure out how to fit in and be successful. A strong case can be made for an intermediary step by which the new hire and organization agree to a plan by which the individual will learn the culture and history of the new employer, expectations, and the key relationships that will prove most beneficial to his or her success.

The Quest for Excellence

Research continues on a variety of new fronts into how selection decisions can be improved. For example, on the heels of mapping the human genome, neuroscientists at the University of Arizona are strapping electrodes to the scalps of managers as part of a plan to map the electrical

patterns of the managerial brain. Long ridiculed as modern day phrenology, brain mapping is becoming ever-more sophisticated and showing promise in applications such as selection and training. One researcher recently discovered a relationship between prefrontal cortex activity and managerial competence. The greater the prefrontal cortex activity the more likely an individual can manipulate a variety of ideas simultaneously and plan for the future, both of which the researcher argues are critical managerial functions. For this researcher, selecting high performers is a simple matter of applying a battery of tests which will tap directly into individuals' cortex activity, tests which he has developed and is now marketing.

As neuroscience unravels more of the brain's mystery, some believe that selection will eventually be simplified to a neural computation, a matter of specifying and matching human hard-drives if you will. But before you rush out and buy your office an EEG machine, consider the cover story in this month's *Scientific American Mind Magazine*. Laying claim to the 'latest research' they argue that effective leadership has less to do with how neurons fire in response to experiences than with the ability to mobilize and energize people to act and follow. To do this, leaders must connect to the values, opinions and hearts of those being lead. Leadership is not a head trip, it is a heart trip. They argue there is no fixed set of traits, no single computational number assuring good leadership, only traits specifically desirable to a given group being lead. Effective leadership is custom software, not hardware. It is Captain Kirk, not Spock.

As the debate rages on, science will continue to make strides in our understanding of leadership and selection. And while organizations should be buoyed by the promise of these advances, they should also be wary for science alone will never slay the selection beast. A recent publication noted that the most important predictor of whether a patient actually benefits from cancer testing or treatment is not the sophistication of the technology being used, but rather the skill of the administering doctor. Similarly, advances in selection will always require skillful hands to apply and interpret them, hands which respect the context and complexities of selection's many

moving parts. No algorithm or neural computation will replace that commitment, or the discipline and skill accompanying it.

About The Author

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