



# Hiring the RIGHT STUFF

**WHEN I THINK BACK ON THE MOVIE THE RIGHT STUFF** (1983), I recall how inspirational it was covering the “race for space” that emerged during the early ‘50s. The stakes were high given that this was really a race between the Americans and the Russians for world dominance. The film covered the selection, training and the inevitable highs and lows of the “chosen” few, culminating with man landing on the Moon in July 1969. What an extraordinary achievement in such a short period of time with unthinkable risks. The movie left you feeling totally uplifted and with the clear understanding that there is nothing like good old competition to achieve the near impossible.

By the same token, the movie left me perplexed as to what was truly meant by the idiom “The Right Stuff”. The opening scenes covered the breaking of the sound barrier by Chuck Yeager, arguably the greatest “fly boy” in the history of aviation. Yet, he was passed over for the exclusive astronaut club. Surely a man revered for his unmatched flying skills, 20/10 vision and self-sacrificing bravery would qualify for inclusion in the space program? A self-described cowboy, Chuck was somewhat of a loner...and oh yeah, he didn’t have that all-important university degree. For whatever reason, General Yeager – as he became known in later years – didn’t have the right stuff.

In the world of executive recruitment, so too are we in pursuit of the “right stuff.” Our clients expect us to find them the right individual who

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will take them to the stars as well. However, getting there is predicated on first gaining alignment with our clients on what is meant by “right.” While this would seem inherently doable, managing expectations is one of our greatest challenges.

Our search firm promotes the notion of “focusing on the fit” and has coined the expression “putting a square peg in a square hole.” While the concept is continuously evolving the underlying principles have remained the same. I like to portray them as follows:

■ **One size does not fit all** – While functional expertise is essential to every executive role, it is too crude a tool by itself to determine fit. As an example, the educational requirements and work-related experience of vice-president engineering in a semiconductor company are vastly different than those of vice-president engineering at an enterprise software firm. Likewise, the life stage of a company in which one crafted their skills is an important element of fit. A vice-president sales in a large multinational organization will be quite unlike his counterpart in an emerging company. The former will likely need to be deft at people management, organizational planning and strategic account selling and be valued further for his/her ability to “lead from behind,” whereas the latter will be defined more by the ability to drive results, display an abundance of initiative and lead by example.

There are other environmental factors that will also influence fit. Market appeal of the opportunity (e.g. iPod, Xbox 360), the financial stability of the organization, brand recognition (e.g. Cisco, Microsoft) and timing will contribute in determining who is right for the role. Not aligning the right skill set with the right opportunity can stifle progress or cause serious setbacks. It doesn't mean that one skill-type is superior to the other. It simply means that different situations call for different individuals.

■ **Understand the strengths of the individual** – What distinguishes one person's suitability over another often comes down to the strength of the

personal attributes. Talented chief financial officers are sighted for their financial expertise, superior organization and planning skills and ability to think strategically. Having a professional designation and experience in a senior financial capacity for 10-plus years is merely table stakes. The ability to carefully craft and present a long-term financial plan and then go and secure those much needed funds is highly valued.

Similarly, candidates for a vice-president marketing opportunity will be valued for their role expertise and strategic attributes. However, the need to have a strong customer focus, keen market awareness and be an agent of change that will likely separate the victor from the masses. It is vital to know what will distinguish one from all others in pursuit of an opportunity. Conversely, knowing what one doesn't know is equally important in avoiding a career misstep.

■ **Scaling – it applies both ways** – There is a prevailing belief that the experience gained in a large corporation will be highly valued and adaptable to an early stage company. Perhaps. Some can do it from the get-go while most will struggle. One's ability to take risks or be decisive can often be influenced by the relative depth of the company's coffers. For some, uncertainty and hesitation will creep in when confronted with limited financial and human resources to do the things that they took for granted in a previous corporate life. As well, the roles in the entrepreneurial environment are less defined and the ability to switch from performing mundane administrative tasks one day to presenting to the CEO of a prospective client the next is all part of the milieu.

In the reverse, growing as an individual as the company grows presents a different set of challenges. In an early-stage company, many individuals are experiencing a leadership role for the first time in their career. Can they grow with it? The tools and resources available to assist in their personal development and growth are often limited or absent all together. They experience “trial by fire” and consequently the risk of failure is much

higher. Again, it is very important that both the company and the individual be of the same mind about just how far he/she can scale. Many a promising opportunity has been scuttled by not letting go when one should or by pulling the trigger on an aspiring executive too quickly.

■ **Culture counts** – All companies will tell you that they offer a wonderful place to work and that people are highly valued. And that is true as long as you embrace the established culture. Understanding culture is far beyond the definition of the word. Culture can entail philosophy, values, acceptable behaviour, pace, energy and morale, but is also influenced by market conditions, the economy and the company's success. Fitting into the company culture is necessary and typically ingrained. This is particularly important when considering a mid-career change where leaving a more established organization in which things are predictable to the uncertain world of the startup is analogous to cutting the umbilical cord. When integrating into a new culture, there is a period of uncertainty and adjustment and the ability and willingness to embrace the incumbent culture is a measure of fit.

By focusing on the “right stuff” for the fit, the chances of success for our clients and those we place are significantly higher. While General Yeager may not have become an astronaut, his illustrious career makes obvious that he found the right fit. Fortunately for us we have the benefit of hindsight, which has 20/20 vision.

#### ABOUT GREG BOYLE



*Greg Boyle is a partner with the Stonewood Group in Ottawa, an executive recruitment firm. Prior to joining in 2000, Mr. Boyle spent the first 25 years of his career in a variety of senior marketing and sales roles in local high-tech firms, concluding in co-founding and becoming president of iMPath Networks and winning New Business of the Year for Ottawa in 1997.*

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