Lessons in leadership: 30 concrete hiring ideas you can apply straight away

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Despite many organizations' claims of their people being their greatest asset and despite the ubiquitous references to the "battle for talent" heard in executive suites, a typical Human Resources department remains a largely transactional entity, conspicuously absent from the top-level strategic decision making.

It's a great pity, because it is the people within a company who make it either prosper or languish. Yet people management skills in organizations are akin to raising children, investments, and driving: most think that they know how to do it best, but the results are often underwhelming. This is one area where your HR department could start making a difference right away, by coaching and mentoring hiring managers at all levels. But even this simple tactical suggestion may be too tall an order.

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote an article on building a winning team and promised to follow up with a bunch of practical hiring ideas. Well, here they are — arguably each deserving its own article. This is not a nebulous discussion on how things should be but, rather, a set of concrete actionable items that my clients have found most valuable.

Marketing

The strongest position to find and hire the best people comes not from your pounding the proverbial pavement looking for the right people but from your organization being perceived as "the place to be."

A strong brand is as important for hiring as it is for sales. People line up for jobs at Google and Microsoft, but why would anybody want to work for your company? If you are a senior leader, make this side of the overall brand development your priority.

If you lead a division, department or any other entity, no matter how small, develop your group's own brand within your organization. You will know that you've succeeded when people start asking whether you are hiring and you hear rumblings from less capable managers about your "stealing the best people."

To make brand development most efficient, enable your staff to be ambassadors of your group's brand. Let them tell others why it's cool to work for you.

How to market your group's brand: showcase; communicate outward; make sure you are a permanent feature of the corporate newsletter; do cool things and tell people about them; establish close relationships with as many decision makers as possible; hold open-doors sessions; run seminars on your specialty; etc. The investment of time in this area will pay off.

Looking for and finding

There are organizations and events in every city and online where the people you want to have on your team tend to congregate. Network, learn, connect. Ask for recommendations. Showcase your brand. I am amazed how many managers don't know what's going on and what's hot in their profession, industry, or locale. Get out there. Don't be afraid to offer a job to someone with an ostensibly high profile. I find that rejection is often automatically assumed ("Why would she be interested?"), but you don't know until you ask. After all, what is the worst thing that can happen?

Avoid recruitment agencies. With rare exceptions of boutique and executive operations, screening of candidates' resumes is typically done by low-level, poorly compensated staff with little or no knowledge of technologies, vague understanding of business concepts, and certainly no awareness of your priorities. Why would you trust these people to find out who is fit to work for you?

Likewise, do not allow your HR department do any prescreening.

If you must use an agency (mandated, in a mass hiring mode for entry level positions, etc.), establish a relationship with the account manager and ensure that they understand your needs and priorities exactly.

If your organization has a co-op program, make sure your department is a part of it. If not, start your own. Establish a relationship with the head of the recruitment office at a university or college, speak to graduates (part of promoting your brand), and get the best summer students. Then, hire the stars (otherwise, what's the point of going through all this trouble?).

Don't confuse (yet this is far too common) short-term staff augmentation with long term building of a winning team. When I need my trees pruned, I simply hire someone who is good at it. If I wanted to hire a permanent gardener, my criteria would not be limited to technical skills (I told you in the previous article what I look for).

Hire for the goals of tomorrow, not the ones of today.

Advertising (you won't need it when you have a strong brand)

Write the position advertisement yourself or delegate it to one of your people. If you need to get a nod from HR before it goes out, by all means get it, but don't trust them with writing.

Think about your requirements carefully. Why are you looking to hire a person? What is important and what is not? Then, write it down, getting to the point quickly.

Include a one-paragraph introduction on the hiring organization, no more.

Skip the HR talk ("mental effort required," etc.) and don't bother listing requirements that no one in their right mind would admit not conforming to (excellent customer service skills, courteous, excellent team player, superb problem solving skills, etc.)

For IT positions, only list required technologies that matter. I was helping a client to stop losing great prospects to the competition when I came across requirements of "proficiency with MS Word" for a VP position and "experience with TCP/IP" for a QA Analyst. The first one is laughable, and I have no idea what they meant by the second.

Do not use internal job descriptions when advertising a position. They often disclose too much information that your competition really shouldn't have access to.

Avoid internal acronyms. A client once complained to me that they hadn't been able to fill a senior IT developer position due to lack of interest. Upon examining the online advertisement, I found it to be for an "XCCX Developer," XCCX being an acronym for one

of their business application complexes. Removing the scary acronym from the heading led to a flood of good applications.

Selecting

Here is how much trust I put in IT resumes: next to none. It's a good conversation starter at best.

Experience is overrated. Guy Kawasaki was selling jewelry before he was hired by Apple. Carl-Henric Svanberg, the CEO of Ericsson (telecom), is going to BP (oil and gas) in a couple of months as a Chairman. Yet many hiring managers stubbornly look for some arbitrary number of years in the industry, with a particular technology, in a particular environment.

There are many reasons why this is a poor, damaging practice, but I'll give you just one. A talented, motivated and hard working person can learn more in a year than his average colleague in three years. Why wouldn't you want the first candidate? If you demand three years of experience, he won't make it to your short list. See, if you are asking for this, you are looking to hire conformity, not talent.

Diplomas and certifications are overrated. Outside of regulated professions, such as engineers, nurses, or doctors, we pay too much attention to formal education and certifications than is deserved. Knowledge can be acquired through other means and we all know of the famous dropouts who don't feel constrained to add CHIRP or CHOP or CHUM to their name.

To expand on the previous point - look for the skills that you need, not the package they usually ship in. A head of customer service of a well known organization once told me that it was hard for him to recruit English majors given his budget. When I asked why on earth he needed English majors, he answered that he needed people who could reply to complaints in writing. My suggesting that he simply needed people who could write reasonably well was an epiphany. The problem was quickly resolved because this is one skill that is easy to test for.

Tests, by the way, are perfectly appropriate for many positions, such as developers. A common issue with tests is that they are often misguided. Using developers as an example, poor tests include testing for knowledge of syntax or offer a candidate a convoluted problem which one of the resident staff resolved a day before after many months of trying. This is a waste of time. You want to see the understanding of the realm, the thinking process, the intelligence. Mini cases usually work well.

Avoid irrelevant metrics. The size of a project budget is a poor proxy for project complexity and is no indication of the project manager's abilities. If someone managed a department of a hundred employees, it does not mean that she wouldn't be able to manage a group of three hundred, nor does it mean that she was good at it. Years of experience in this or that is one of the poorest metrics of all, as I already pointed out.

Hire people with diverse skills and experiences. It provides for a capable, innovative team which draws on the complimentary strengths of its members. A group of people who do, think, and look like you is not what you should strive for.

Offer

No matter how tempting or how much you are pressured into it, never ever offer employment conditions that are not equitable. Not only is it because the immediate savings can be very quickly undone by a sudden departure of a key employee for greener

pastures, it is also unethical.

As in any negotiation, understanding the candidate's priorities will help you structure the offer to the satisfaction of the both sides.

Establish remuneration based on value of one's work, not on seniority, age, gender, or hours spent in the office. We have been living and working in a knowledge economy for the past thirty years, a notion that hiring practices in many organizations haven't yet caught up to.

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