Management Assessment: It's Not Just Metrics

The practice of management assessment is both an art and a science. As a science, we establish core competencies for a prospective executive, assess his/her abilities against those competencies, and predict how successful that individual might be. As an art, we probe beyond the obvious and become attuned to an individual's body language, behavior and personal chemistry in evaluating a prospective "fit" with an organization. By finding a balance between "gut feel" on one end and metrics on the other, we can develop a process that yields both a quantitative and qualitative assessment of internal or external candidates. Following is a brief and broad overview of the procedure.

There are many assessment firms, tools and programs available to augment a company's internal practices; but a clearly defined strategy and process may help to increase the probability of a successful, long term hire. A carefully planned and executed course of action will also provide a diverse group of assessors with a single methodology to make their decision. This plan should not be "boilerplate", but rather designed for a specific role, whether seeking a Director for the Board, a new CEO or a key member of your senior management team.

The first step is to determine who will be part of the selection process – whether it is a formal search committee or a group of select individuals. The team should be comprised of those who are in the best position to evaluate, influence and select candidates for a specific role in the company. These individuals must have an in depth understanding of the position's (and the company's) unique challenges. They should not be diverted from the evaluation by a candidate's charisma – the fact that we like a candidate personally is not always the best forecast of their performance. Nor can we assume that if a candidate has achieved prior success within one culture, that it is a guarantee of his/her success in any other culture.

The next, and perhaps the most important step in the process, is for the team to review the company's strategic business plan, determine the critical issues the desired executive will face and define the specific competencies that will be essential to his/her success. This detailed list may be used as the foundation for a formal position specification. Specifically, it should identify the professional experience and accomplishments required of prospective candidates (industry expertise, leadership ability, etc.) as well as the softer attributes (listening skills, integrity, ability to energize a team, etc.), with a defined ranking system to measure candidates against. It should also address the characteristics necessary for a strong cultural fit; a lack of fit being one of the most prevalent reasons why senior executives fail. When this procedure is completed, and the assessing

executive or team has been selected, candidate identification and the interview phase may begin.

Vetting candidates is based on the previously identified criteria, complimented by behavioral interviews, where open-ended questions are posed to elicit detailed responses that help determine the potential personal harmony between the hiring executive and the candidate. Such questions may include "Give me an example of a conflict you faced and how you resolved it" or "Describe the riskiest decision that you have made and what you learned from the result".

Once the final candidate has been selected, thorough referencing must be conducted. It is critical to talk with those individuals who know the candidate well but were not the candidate's chosen references. While some references may be done by an outside source (such as an executive search firm), hiring executives who are directly involved in speaking with references have a much better chance of understanding the subtle nuances that may not come across strictly by reading a document.

Selecting the correct executive has measurable impact not only within the senior management team but on the Board, shareholders and customers. While companies have yet to find an infallible method of selecting the right leader every time, a well defined and comprehensive process will help reduce risk and increase successful hiring practices.