

Leadership and Culture: Finding the Right Fit

Patricia M. Schaeffer, Talent Strategy Partners LLC

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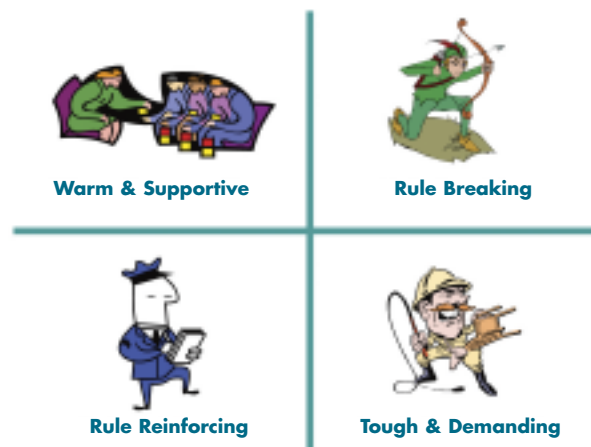
As a CEO, how do you find the right CFO, or any other executive for that matter? Well, that's easy enough, right? You simply look for the person with the best credentials and experience; in the case of a CFO candidate, a CPA with a Masters degree in finance or business who has 10 years or so of experience in accounting, budgeting, financial reporting, tax, audit, financial strategy, and planning and forecasting.

But the perfect job candidate is not always the one with the best credentials. Have you ever hired a person, especially into a key leadership role, who turned out to be an unmitigated disaster despite having interviewed well and having had exactly the right combination of educational background and work experience? If you answered "yes," you aren't alone.

Traditional interviewing techniques ignore a critical qualifying factor – cultural fit. Education and technical and business skills are important, but they aren't necessarily indicators of successful performance; they are the ticket for admission.

The best candidate for the job is the one with the right credentials and the right cultural fit. What is cultural fit? Cultural fit comes from possessing the attitudes and exhibiting the behaviors that are necessary for peak performance. These differ from organization to organization depending on strategic focus and how things get done.

Effective leadership styles match culture.



Conventional wisdom is that past performance is the best indicator of future performance. So, if you are the head of an organization where performance has been driven by getting things done through collaboration, inclusiveness, and influence, you'd be making a mistake to hire an executive who has been successful in the past by using an autocratic leadership style (unless your aim was to drive cultural change).

You can interview in a way that will reveal cultural fit, whether you're looking to sustain or change the culture. The technique is called behavioral interviewing. This is just a fancy term for asking questions that prompt a candidate to tell stories about how they have gotten things done in past jobs.

As an example, let's say that you want to find a CFO candidate who has in the past gotten things done by influencing others. You could begin with the question, "Tell me about a time when you had to "sell" a change in an accounting practice, one that the organization had been using for a long time and was wedded to." As the candidate answers the question, probe for the *context*, *behaviors*, and *outcome* with follow-up questions such as:

- "What were the circumstances that led you to the decision that the change needed to be made." (context)
- "How did you sell the concept? What did you say or do; what were you thinking? Who did you talk to?" (behaviors)
- "What was the result?" (outcome)

Look for a response such as, "I thought several of our practices were out of compliance with SOX. I did the research and assembled the data. I talked with knowledgeable people I trusted, inside and outside the organization. I saw that my assumption of non-compliance was correct. Then I went to the CEO. I laid out the facts and their sources, the benefits of making the changes, and the consequences of not making the changes. The CEO was skeptical at first, but the data was so compelling he had to go along with my suggestion."

With few exceptions, behavioral interview technique forestalls theoretical answers that tell you nothing about the real person, like "I would..." "I always..." "My style is..." Even better, it reveals events in the candidate's past and how that individual actually handled those events. Combined with traditional interview questions about background and experience, behavioral interviewing can greatly increase the probability that you will select a candidate who is a good fit – technically and, more importantly, culturally.

About the author

Pat Schaeffer is a founding principal of Talent Strategy Partners, **a management consulting firm that specializes in Creating Deliberate Cultures™** – identifying, through research-based models, the values and behaviors necessary for peak performance. Talent Strategy Partners' blend of expertise – in HR strategy development, behavioral interviewing, talent planning and review, leadership and professional development, and performance management – helps organizations create deliberate cultures that inspire and enable people to do their best work. Talent Strategy Partners consultants have the ability to understand a business's game plan and organization culture, strategically aligning the whole organization to achieve its desired results in ways that are consistent with the culture.



Talent Strategy Partners LLC
15 Highland Drive
Media, PA 19063-5630
610.361.9562 phone
www.tsphr.com