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Hire for attitude; you can teach knowledge, skills later

A MAY 2002 STUDY BY CHRISTIAN & TIMBERS of 601 executives from Fortune 1000 companies highlights a revealing fact: these leaders hired for experience, but fired for "soft skills" such as honesty, integrity, energy, intensity and leadership.

My solution to this problem is simple: make attitude a key factor in your hiring criteria, then train for skills and experience.

On the surface, this notion sounds impractical and implausible. But don't brand me as crazy yet. Most organizations hire for skill and experience, then hope that that person will also have the right attitude. Your initial screening process will identify those candidates with the requisite background. The bottom line, though, is that while skills and experience are necessary, what people know is less important than who they are. What we know can change very quickly, but who we are evolves, if at all, at a glacial pace.

WHY DOES ATTITUDE MATTER?

Attitude is essential to professional success. Since attitude colors how we see the world and other people, it affects our beliefs and behavior. As a result, attitude impacts our ability to handle teamwork, customer relations, and a fast-paced, dynamic environment. If those challenges don't describe the produce industry, I don't know what does.

Your employees' attitudes make the difference between a pleasant, productive working environment, and a dreary, "energy sucking" atmosphere where people dread to go. One pessimistic, negative person can breed a downbeat outlook that quickly infects everyone. On the other hand, an optimistic, energetic co-worker provides a fun, refreshing spirit that can energize your entire workplace.

In a nutshell, attitude matters because people matter. The attitudes of the people you hire today will determine your company culture,



CHRIS NELSON
Mixtec Group

productivity and competitiveness tomorrow. Employees with positive attitudes will be the ambassadors of your business, showing co-workers, customers, and competitors what makes your company great.

HOW CAN YOU HIRE FOR

ATTITUDE? Jack Welch of General Electric understood how critical it is to hire employees with the right attitude. As he commented, "All we can do is bet on the people whom we pick. So my whole job is picking the right people."

But how *do* you pick the right people? In part, you must let intuition guide you. We all have experienced the "gut feeling" that a certain person possesses the integrity, energy and intensity to be a superstar. Don't be afraid to act on that emotion and to explore the person's possible fit and compatibility with your company.

Once you verify that the candidate has the requisite skills and experience, your "drilling down" interview should focus on the person's attitude. A few questions can reveal key aspects of the individual's personality:

■ Ask the person to tell you about a time when he or she went above and beyond to assist a customer or co-worker. How the candidate responds will highlight his or her dedication to the position and to the organization at large.

■ Ask the individual to describe the most difficult customer or colleague with whom he or she has ever dealt. Was the candidate able to adapt to and

work around that person? Does the candidate admit any mistakes in handling the situation, then explore how he or she would act differently today?

■ Ask the person to tell you about the last time that he or she asked for feedback. Was the candidate willing to learn and to be coached? How did he or she act on the information?

■ Ask the person to explain how he or she has used humor to diffuse a tense situation. An appropriate sense of fun is essential to a positive outlook.

These are not hypothetical, "what would you do?" questions. Instead, they explore previously demonstrated behavior since we know that past behavior predicts future results.

You can further target these questions by profiling your company's existing "A players." What personality traits are key to these individuals' success? Once you grasp what makes your own superstars shine, you can hunt more knowledgeably and precisely for future talent.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER HIRING?

After you hire someone with a great attitude, closing the loop is critical. You must then orient and train that person for any processes, systems and proficiencies that are unique to your company and to the position in question.

An employee with a great attitude will be coachable and eager to learn; however, you must provide the structure and materials for him or her to master. Training your new superstar will reinforce an optimistic outlook by allowing him or her to succeed at the task and position at hand. From then on, the sky's the limit because, for those with a great attitude, the only place to rise to is the top.

— Chris Nelson is president of the Mixtec Group, a Pasadena, Calif.-based retained executive-search and consulting firm specializing in produce. He can be reached at chrisn@mixtec.net.