

THE PACKER

May 5, 2003

Look for character, self-awareness, commitment in applicants

WITH THE 129TH KENTUCKY DERBY on May 2, many of us may have day-dreamed about picking a winner.

Just imagine the excitement ... the exhilaration ... the ecstasy. (And if last year's net payout of \$1.875 million didn't generate a thrill, what would?)

Enough fantasy. Suppose we mute the siren call of those thundering hooves. In real life, picking winners for your organization is far more important than anticipating the recipient of the Kentucky Derby crown. At each and every rung in your corporate ladder, an A player who represents the right fit to your company can help generate positive returns to your firm's culture, reputation, positioning in the marketplace and, ultimately, your bottom line

WHAT CHARACTERISTICS DEFINE A WINNER?

Albert Einstein emphasized that "you can't fix a problem with the same people who broke it." So how do you differentiate between the C player, who created the problem, the B player, who just lets the problem be, and the A player, who can actually fix it?

Character: Character is a cornerstone of winners. A dishonest person may succeed temporarily, but he or she will lose the trust and confidence of others eventually. Maintaining absolute integrity must be the first law of leadership. We still respect business icons like Lee Iacocca, Steve Jobs and Jack Welch because they admitted — rather than lied about, glossed over, or spun — their mistakes.

Self-Awareness: Self-awareness is another key to leadership. Winners are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They know how to capitalize on their advantages while compensating for and learning from their limitations. Leaders of the past knew how to tell; leaders today must know how to ask when necessary.

In his book "Friendly Fire: The Accidental Shootdown of U.S. Black Hawks over Northern Iraq," Lt. Col. Scott Snook of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., says it best: "The tough aspect of leadership development is reflection and feedback. No matter how great you are, until you sit



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back and figure out how what you've learned makes sense for you and the company, you won't develop as a leader."

Self-Esteem: A third, related characteristic is high self-esteem and self-confidence. A winner is secure enough to know what he or she does best and what a team can collectively do better to achieve the desired results. It is nearly impossible for your staff members to respect someone who cannot respect himself or herself first. At the same time, a leader must avoid veering to the opposite extreme. A braggadocio boss who is unwilling to share credit can be just as difficult to handle and, worse yet, can exert a negative influence on others' performance.

Commitment: Commitment is a final defining factor. In "The Stuff of Heroes," former Air Force General William Cohen says a successful leader goes beyond grasping the subject at hand and declaring his or her expectations. He or she must also "get out in front" in dealing with the issues at hand.

In the produce industry, this willingness to get out from behind the desk and into the trenches is key. By and large, your staff will follow a leader who has faced his or her problems eyeball to eyeball far more enthusiastically than an ivory tower visionary who seems inaccessible and out of touch.

HOW CAN YOU PICK A WINNER ?

Put away those Lucky 5 lottery tickets and Kentucky Derby pick sheets. Selecting a winner doesn't happen by accident. Instead, when seeking an A player for a key management position, most successful companies stack the

deck in their favor during the recruitment phase.

The first step is making your company attractive to potential leaders. It's almost a cardinal rule: Great people usually go to work for great companies. What makes you great? What differentiates you from your competitors? To secure a truly top-notch leader, you must focus not just on buying the right candidate, but also on selling your company as a challenging and fulfilling place to work.

The second step is drilling down on the leadership characteristics outlined above. At first glance it is difficult to tell fool's gold from the real deal.

In the same way, it is often hard to distinguish initially between a candidate with great surface patter and no depth and an individual who indeed possesses the qualities required.

I wish I could tell you that a magic bullet exists for discerning whether someone truly walks the walk of leadership. (Believe me, my job as an executive recruiter would be much simpler if this panacea existed.)

Unfortunately, the tools are more complex: a listening ear for what the candidate says, an attentive eye for what she or he does, a gut feeling about the person in general and a large network of trusted friends and associates to canvas about the individual in question.

No matter what the candidate's song and dance, past results he or she has achieved must play a large part in your decision matrix. As Warren Wilhelm wrote in "Learning Architectures," "Leaders can look pretty, talk nice and dance well, but if they don't get good results, they're not good leaders."

While your choice of an A player may not earn you the Kentucky Derby's drape of yellow roses nor a kiss from a pretty girl, in the long run it will pay far larger and more gratifying dividends.

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