Putting people first

Mindset: The power of hiring for strengths

In this issue, ***Nicola James,*** *Managing Partner, Thomas Brooke International, explains why, when hiring someone, you should concentrate on their strengths rather than their weaknesses*

Have you noticed that some people are primarily motivated by a positive drive for success, while others (the majority) are motivated primarily by fear of loss, risk, and avoidance of negative outcomes? That particular difference in mindset greatly influences people's lives, because it affects how they make decisions all the way from major choices down to the everyday.

LOOK FOR AND DEVELOP STRENGTHS

Although coatings typically have to be developed with a primary emphasis on avoiding failure – for obvious reasons! – using the same philosophy about developing people is not the pathway to success. In fact, the most successful leaders and managers are the ones who look for, and develop, the strengths of their team members. That sounds like a motivational speaker cliché; but in fact, understanding the importance of hiring and managing for strengths not weaknesses can be transformative for both you and your team. Let's explore the reasons for that.

First, the foundation. Strong strengths in one area typically go with weak weaknesses in another. That is easily visible in sports: while people can adapt to different types of activity, a world champion weightlifter will not win a medal for the 100m sprint. The same is true with personality. Think of your company's top sales person. He or she thrives on making new contacts every day, adapting to different personalities, is not crushed by rejection, loves the thrill of the chase and finds closing the sale incredibly satisfying. But most great sales people have some significant weaknesses, such as lack of attention to detail, impatience, lack of regard for established procedures, lack of respect for authority figures and bosses, etc.

'Hiring and managing for strengths, rather than avoiding or trying to compensate for weaknesses, yields much better results to your team and business.'

On the other hand, someone who is average at a lot of things and is a good basic, reliable player will probably not win the sales award anytime soon.

STRONG PERSONALITY TRAITS ARE MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

What I am saying here is that certain strong personality traits are just mutually exclusive. For example, my personality is entrepreneurial, persistent, outgoing, people-focused, curious, decisive – great characteristics for success in leading an independent executive search firm, which is a pretty maverick occupation. But I score in the lowest percentiles on tolerance for repetitive activity and probably below zero on regulatory compliance or established procedures and guidelines. I studied chemistry at university and loved it; but never held a job in a lab because I wasn't cut out for the environment.

Are those weaknesses? Sure, if I were going to pursue a career as a research chemist. But my job description contains little of those activities, by design: I have delegated them elsewhere to people who are better than me. That way, I do what I do best and they do what they do best and we are all happy.

And yet, so often when hiring, managers look at candidates for open positions or when managers evaluate their teams for development and performance, they place far more emphasis on the perceived risks associated with weaknesses, than on looking for and developing exceptional strengths on their team. But those relatively few managers who truly understand the power of hiring for and managing for strength, unleash their people's unique gifts and capabilities, and amazing things happen. Top performing teams always recognise this truth. That is how they outperform their competition.

Think about it. Every hour or dollar or rupee you invest in developing someone's exceptional strength you will be rewarded many times over. The capability of that person to excel in the area of their gifting will win the big contract, develop the new product to solve a performance challenge or motivate and lead the organisation to excel. But you could look at those same people and choose to avoid hiring or promoting them because of the potential risks – the strategist who is less than stellar at execution; the sales person who tends to go around established channels instead of colouring inside the lines; the brilliant chemist who struggles with disruption. Or you could invest a lot of money on training for people to shore up their weaknesses, with the end result that they will be competent at best and probably miserable.

PUT PEOPLE IN A POSITION TO SUCCEED

Now, I am not suggesting that you ignore weaknesses on your team or weaknesses in a prospective employee. Far from it. Look at them objectively. And of course, some character weaknesses, such as anger management problems, low self worth etc, are inherently problematic and should be avoided at all costs. But when possible, base your decision and plan on strengths, and find ways to minimise the amount of time the person spends on activities that are in their weak areas. Put them in a position to succeed, to excel. Give your top sales people the best possible support contacts who are detail oriented subject

matter experts to help them cover all the details in a major proposal. Make sure your strategic, visionary leaders have a strong tactical backup team with complementary strengths in execution, to ensure projects and key initiatives are executed effectively.

Let your most talented R&D people focus on developing products that will succeed in the market and build a great customer service group who are gifted in patience and handling day to day problems, so issues are escalated only when needed.

RISK AVERSION LIMITS SUCCESS POTENTIAL

The theme here is that focusing on avoiding weaknesses limits the ability to tap into strengths. The value equation just doesn't work. It's a false logic that comes from a mindset of fear – what could go wrong? – vs a mindset of opportunity – what could go right? Many managers are so risk averse that they settle for lower performance from their teams without realising that their risk aversion has limited the upward potential for success.

Risk aversion in hiring and management can have many root causes: the inherent cautiousness of the manager; experience with a bad hire in the past; perceived need for consensus in hiring leading to the 'lowest common denominator' effect where the hiring decision is the end result of too many divergent opinions being given weight in the process. A major cause is a defensive attitude from fear of negative fallout on the part of the manager: this person could do amazing things but they have the potential to fail spectacularly and if they do, I will be blamed as their manager. That may be true. And it certainly is part of any decision about who you hire or who you want on your team. But conversely, if you hire someone with a real gift and put them in a position to excel and if you effectively manage and develop them, could they raise the performance of your whole team? Could they make you look good? Is that reality just as possible as the negative scenario? And which is the more powerful way to frame your thinking?

Recruiting senior managers and leaders in the coatings industry over many years has afforded me the privilege of interviewing many extremely successful individuals all over the world. I have had the opportunity to ask them in depth about their successes, their failures, how they developed their teams to turnaround failing businesses or grow far beyond market rates. While very story is individual and every company culture and internal process is different, the common factors stand out all the more across such diverse environments. And a consistent characteristic of winning leaders and managers is their emphasis on the possibilities and strengths of their teams. They hire and manage for strength, and take a very pro-active approach to attaining their goals. They are not cavalier and they do objectively assess risk; but they base major people-centered decisions on the potential upside.

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Hiring and managing for strengths, rather than avoiding or trying to compensate for weaknesses, yields much better results to your team and business.**
- **Intentionally consider "What could go right?" not just "What could go wrong?" Recognise that the path to exceptionalsuccess has some risk. Practice thinking about what is possible, on an ongoing basis, rather than just reacting with "CYA" to avoid potential fallout.**
- **Seek out those with exceptional abilities and put them in a position to succeed, where they can focus on using their gifts. Avoid placing them in positions that they spend too much time on weak areas and instead put people with complementary strengths in place.**

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