

KinheadPartners Perspectives

THE OTHER A PLAYERS: Accessing All the “Best”

In the War For Talent, we may have a temporary cease-fire, as this recession grinds on, but hostilities will commence soon enough. But the phrase “War for Talent” has always struck me as a little hollow. It is pessimistic and misleading.

Everyone seems to agree that there is intense competition for executive talent, that it’s tough out there and there certainly isn’t enough “best talent” to go around. But that just isn’t so. The word “shortage” somehow suggests that supply doesn’t equal demand in the job market, a free market if ever there was one. It is true that we have very real aging demographic issues (70 million baby boomers versus 30 million Gen X), and now significant competition from innovative companies in developing countries.

Nevertheless, all this hand-wringing over talent availability misses the point, which is that we are either failing to define, recognize, identify, or attract sufficient “best talent” for key positions. The opportunities are to get better at all four.

The Other A Players

The Other A groups are Gen X and Y, The Quiet Performers, Internal Candidates, and Those Excluded (by overly narrow background requirements). Gen X and Y we often fail to identify and attract, The Quiet Performers we disqualify on personality, the Internals we undervalue, and Those Excluded are disqualified in writing job descriptions. Or, to be kinder, there are widespread tendencies to do so for a variety of reasons, some of which are valid. Nevertheless, we think it makes sense to first define the entire population of possible A

Candidates before doing any eliminating. Then when we do eliminate, we have a better feel for how much of the search population we are leaving behind.

Defining “Best”

Best people win, especially in commercial leadership roles, which is our specialty focus. But what is best? In “Topgrading” (1999), Brad Smart coined the term “A Player” and defined it as being in the top 10% of the available talent. In recruiting executives, the term is used more narrowly, perhaps the top 2% and at much more senior levels. But what does that mean for a given position?

In the March 2007 edition of “*The Harvard Business Review*”, Goffee and Jones, in their article on “*Leading Clever People*” refer to top talent as “*the handful of employees whose ideas, knowledge and skills give them the potential to produce disproportional value from the resources (their organizations make) available to them.*” This is better, because it at least includes a performance measure.

“Without a clear concept (of what best talent is for this position), managers tend to hire to a stereotype...”

Jim Collins in “*Good To Great*” defined five levels of effective performers by competencies, from individual contributors and team members through competent managers, leaders and finally “best” executives. This is the most useful set of definitions we could find, and Collin’s findings are insightful in other ways. The important thing is to have a definition that works for the organization and position, is

agreed upon by all stakeholders, is specific and clear, and has measurement criteria.

Without a clear concept of “best” for the organization and the position, managers tend to hire to a stereotype - whatever their personal concept of “best” is. And that can be limiting in many ways. Best talent is what it is, not what we used to think it was. On the other hand, we develop opinions on types of candidates based on significant and valuable experience. What is important is to avoid being rigid in evaluations, based on the past, and to continue to educate ourselves as new information arises.

Gen Y and X

If you question that stereotypes are in play in hiring, try applying your usual set of hiring standards to a Gen Y and X candidates. This subset of “Other As” refuse to conform to our old notions of “best”, and look very little like their “boomer” counterparts. They think differently, view their careers and opportunities differently, and they think nothing of bailing out of a corporate career to pursue something else. They can resist relocation regardless of the incentives offered, and may be more interested in work/life and quality issues than compensation and other traditional incentives. Attracting and retaining them is more challenging.

“In our work, we have long held the group we label Quiet Performers in very high regard, but have until recently had difficulty convincing clients of their worth.”

The Quiet Performers

In our work, we have long held the group we label Quiet Performers in very high regard, but have until recently had difficulty convincing clients of their worth.

As clients excluded them from consideration, they reduced the search universe of “best” talent available to them. I have always valued humility highly in candidates as a critical business and personal balance trait, so was gratified when Collins defined a Level Five Executive as (an individual who) “builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.” In “*Good to Great*”, Collins produced one of the decade’s best business books, based on hard science (versus the usual opinion). His findings had profound and immediate impact on executive recruiting and retention methodology, in that he debunked several myths about “best” executives. The book was based on the findings of a large impartial research team that spent months studying companies that experienced long periods of unrivaled growth, the reasons for their outstanding performance, and especially the makeup of their leaders.

The most successful CEOs studied were not big personalities (charisma and ego), but tended to be low-key and modest, even self-effacing. These CEOs earned less than their egocentric counterparts, and they were home-grown, often long-timers with the company, as opposed to the latest talent brought in from the outside. This in itself is food for thought for us all.

Ego has always been counterproductive to the group effort, but in the past extreme (over) confidence was viewed as a positive, even by our most sophisticated search buyers. But ego begets self-promotion, which puts self before the organization. The dismal array of political candidates is the perfect example of personal power needs running counter and against the greater good. In any case, highly charismatic CEOs (or at least those that trade on it) are now out of favor, thankfully.

For the outstanding performers in “*Good to Great*”, their lack of pretense was countered by

intense resolve - unwavering insistence on excellence and very high standards. And it was this non-traditional combination in personalities that set them apart and accounted for their uncontested performance. Behind that, of course, was superior drive and discipline, always the first criteria to look for in best talent. And finally, these executives had in common a focus on putting the right people in the right chairs, then letting the team tell them where to take the business.

To this point we recommend asking executive candidates how and who they have hired. If best talent wins, have they hired the best, how do they perceive “best”, and what do they measure? Who have they hired and how have they performed? If an executive candidate hasn't hired great people, don't hire the candidate. He'll fill the ranks with mediocrity.

“If an executive candidate hasn't hired great people, don't hire the candidate. He'll fill the ranks with mediocrity.”

Quiet Performers represent a huge undervalued group of A Players. We have a Fortune 500 client which often rejects talent for lacking necessary mental toughness, because of a lower key personality, when the track record indicates otherwise. The company has a history of relatively strong personalities, and tends to hire to that stereotype. And the concern with other personality types is whether they can stand up to the peer group. The concern is valid enough, but there is an underlying assumption that brute force has value, and is a desirable management style. Outwardly tough people can come across as intimidating, inaccessible, rigid and cold, and often are. They lack style flexibility to deal well with different kinds of people and change. When this stereotype rules, the quiet performer is pigeon-holed and dismissed.

The classic outgoing business personality isn't at all necessary to the running of a great business. Executive presence is required, but there are many people with more reserved personalities who command immediate respect.

To take a recent example, we generated a candidate for a Group CEO position, who was reserved by nature (and nationality), yet was one of the finest internal salesmen we have encountered. There were several instances in which he changed company thinking and policy with his employer, a conservative and old-line organization. He needed to do so to get his job done, and methodically went about influencing the power structure one individual at a time, with persuasive skills, surely, but also with well-researched and irrefutable business cases.

Internal Candidates

Companies would do well to evaluate internal candidates more carefully, and ensure that because they are known entities, they are not deemed somehow less than could be obtained from the outside. Perfection doesn't exist on the outside, either. Consider how many internal candidates fit the Quiet Performer model, and have been routinely excluded from consideration on personality alone? We should remember that many of Collins' CEOs came from within the ranks, not from the outside. For morale and talent acquisition cost reasons, promoting from within always makes more sense, given equal candidate quality.

Excluded Others

Hiring stereotypes are often based on false or outdated assumptions. In Hollywood, a comedian, who may be very capable in dramatic acting roles, gets typed in comedy and has trouble finding dramatic work. Hollywood wants experience - a sure thing - and misses the critical issues, that the standards, drive and discipline for success, and, in fact, the track record, are already in

place. The likelihood of success in more serious roles is very high. It's why so many known actors also sing and dance. They had to start somewhere. And so it is with executive talent. Best people win; they find a way.

Excluding categories of candidates from consideration is how we screen in writing job descriptions and deciding on our definition of "best". We would prefer clients think inclusively instead, or at least to consider the size of the search universe after deciding on all the requirements candidates must have to qualify. In too many cases, we are left with a very small talent pool from which to recruit. In fairness, the search world has a habit of contributing to this problem in the interest of giving the client everything they want in a candidate. Nobody wants to settle for less than desired, so the client and his search partner collaborate to limit the search universe, often severely, and exclude the Other As.

This is so basic as to sound rudimentary, but bear with me for a moment. Let's take a most basic candidate requirement - industry experience. While we certainly don't advocate going outside the industry for all executive positions, if the best is elsewhere, we prefer to go there. A business is a business, and smart people will be up to speed quickly. "Best" talent will almost always outrun the best the industry has to offer, and quickly (unless, of course, the industry is unusually talented).

“Best’ talent will always outrun the best the industry has to offer, and quickly (unless, of course, the industry is unusually talented).”

For these reasons, the search universe should be specifically defined in job descriptions and search documents and examined carefully. And search people, when faced with too limited a talent pool, need to address the issue at the

outset with clients. This is why choosing search providers with industry and recent space experience makes sense. They will be familiar with the quality and quantity of talent available.

There are other ways in which corporations limit the "best" talent available for key jobs. Lack of careful thought in crafting position descriptions is one that is easily remedied. Corporate culture issues can be a huge limiter, and is much more difficult to deal with. These generally take the form of corporate stereotypes, or ingrained hiring criteria that need to be regularly revisited for validity. For example, many of our clients are operationally driven, and are now working hard to achieve commercial excellence with our help. Some demand substantial operations experience, and yet most marketing leaders don't have that experience (or view an operations rotation as necessary to their careers). So the operations experience requirement eliminates most of the available "best" commercial talent from consideration. On the other hand, operations is king in these organizations, and it may be worth the price to have that expertise in commercial leaders. But the question begs to be asked.

Some very large companies proclaim that certain kinds of people do well there, and certain others don't. Once again, this has everything to do with personality makeup, and may be an admission that the culture routinely rejects Other "A"s. As companies continue to grow (and competition for talent increases), the availability of candidates that fit a stereotype is greatly diminished. Corporate cultures that accept and nurture a variety of personality types in performers will win.

So why do we rule people out? What are the criteria, can we afford them, and how limiting are they? One way to cut through this clutter is to judge candidates first by the key

performance criteria - high personal standards, drive and discipline, as evidenced by track record, and a history of hiring great people.

Track records can be claimed but not earned, and always have to be verified and quantified. But drive and high personal standards will always be the determiners of success.

“One way to cut through this clutter is to judge candidates first by the key performance criteria – high personal standards, drive and discipline, as evidenced by track record, and a history of hiring great people.”

So if the track record is there, but the personality strikes you as inconsistent with the track record, and the track record has been verified by reference checking, believe the track record, but discuss the personality with those references. Effective leadership is effective leadership, and takes many forms.

In some respects, all the other traits we look for in best talent (and we could fill a page with adjectives), will follow, if track record, drive and discipline, high personal standards, and great hiring are in place. This is so because a candidate driven to succeed will need to develop those traits to continue to do so. Personal development goals can't be met otherwise.

Attracting “Best”

Our clients - US diversified industrial manufacturers - are smokestacks, competing for talent with far sexier industries, at least on the surface. That's a fact that can't be ignored, but it can be mitigated. Be a great smokestack and innovate. People go to work in exciting places.

Accommodate the Generations because that is where the new talent is. They won't conform to old standards and they won't do what you want them to do. The employer/employee contract today in the case of “best” talent will be a compromise, and will serve both parties well. Individual candidates have some capacity for compromise, but companies have far more, especially in a virtual world.

And finally, nurture high-promise internals and think inclusively in defining position requirements. Limit the search horizons no more than is absolutely necessary.

David Kinkead is President of Kinkead Partners, a specialized boutique search firm focused on commercial leadership for well-managed industrial clients.

*Kinkead Partners
106 Quarry Road
Glastonbury CT 06033
P: 860-659-4664
info@kinkeadsearch.com*