

LEADERSHIP TRAITS: A TOP 10 LIST FOR SELECTIVE INTERVIEWING

Look for these traits when interviewing potential employees.
After all, they are tomorrow's leaders of your firm.

BY LORI OAKES-COYNE

MY DAD ALWAYS SAID that there are two kinds of people in this world: leaders and followers. In order to successfully develop strong leadership at your firm, you need to start at the beginning: When hiring, screen carefully for natural leaders. These are the take-charge people with lots of ideas who often think creatively. Look for these traits even when hiring junior or technical staff; they're tomorrow's leaders.

Here are some traits to look for when interviewing:

Taking charge. The ability to take charge and lead teams and projects is essential to your business. Look for evidence of taking charge in business as well as non-business situations. In school, was your candidate in student government, head of a musical group, or a resident assistant or teaching assistant? In business, I am always impressed with people who seem to have held more responsibility than typical for their years of experience. For example, look again if your prospect is only four years out of school but held the role of project manager in their last job. Someone else noticed their leadership skills, and so should you.

Academic leadership. People who work hard in school are the kind of people who are likely to work hard in the workplace. Take notice of academic achievement and think twice about mediocre performance. When I first interviewed with Mark Zweig, I was 12 years out of college, yet I remember him asking about my SAT scores, GPA, and GRE scores. And I remembered them all without hesitation because I worked hard to achieve them. I realize people test differently and people can change, but in all my experience with hiring, academic achievers have never let me down.

Work ethic. I'm all for work-life balance, and firms need to be cognizant of not overworking and burning out their employees, but a solid work ethic is really about the ability to be effective and productive while working. One way I like to evaluate recent grads on work ethic is to inquire how they paid for school. I am satisfied if I hear about summer jobs, work-study financial aid positions, and late nights of babysitting. For more experienced people, I like to hear stories about getting projects or tasks completed on time and/or under budget, as well as some bragging about utilization or how much overtime they earned.

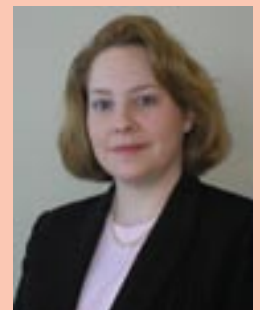
Entrepreneurialism. If you look to the leadership of your firm, you are likely to observe entrepreneurs in action. These are people who recognize when there is a need or demand and strive to fill it. Whether it's for a gadget that keeps the fizz in your pop or an idea for a new business line, this type of forward-based thinking can be a great asset for any firm. Ask your interviewee if they've ever

invented something or had an idea for a new product or service. If their eyes light up, you've got yourself an entrepreneur.

Risk-taking. I'll bet most firm leaders score pretty high on risk tolerance tests. Going into any business, especially one based on results—like consulting—is a risky venture. On the other hand, experience has shown me that the majority of employees at engineering and architecture firms are likely to be fairly risk-averse. You're probably familiar with the recent trend for personality profiling, which gives engineers a way to quantify something intangible, like personality. In the Myers-Briggs system, for example, most A/E/C staff fall squarely in the "ISTJ" profile, which describes an "introverted, detail-oriented, rational-thinking, planning personality." These folks don't generally care for change or risk. Unfortunately, for our businesses to thrive in today's dynamic, competitive marketplace, we need visionaries at the helm who are willing to take chances in order to leap ahead.

Problem-solving. If there's one thing that's true about almost every project in the A/E/C industry, it's that each one has a unique set of requirements and challenges. In order to complete projects successfully, you not only need those people who can apply standard rules, formulas, and models, but also people who can find new and better ways to get them accomplished, preferably methods that are faster and cheaper. Ask your prospects to illustrate how they've solved problems in the past. People and firms whose approaches center on the status quo will soon languish next to their problem-solving competition.

People people. You're not looking for Miss America, but you are looking for employees with a minimum of people skills. Every person in your firm, from the president to a CAD technician, will in one way or another be required to interact with other people internal and external to your firm. Many folks outside of your firm, including regulators, vendors, community members, and clients, will pass judgment on your company based on the interactions they have with your field or administrative staff. So look for people who aren't



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painfully shy, who can speak articulately, who make eye contact, and who have basic manners.

Communication. The ability to communicate effectively is the key to success for most things in life: marriage, parenting, and yes, even business. It's not only about the ability to speak fluently, but also includes the capacity to write and listen actively. In fact, listening to the client and adapting your service to their needs is fundamental to consulting. Pose enough open-ended questions to your candidate to have a chance to observe their communication style, and either get writing samples or consider a brief writing test during the interview. And, if they are multilingual and have experience communicating using the most modern technologies, even better.

Career progression. Natural leaders usually demonstrate acceleration in their career progression that outpaces their peers. Even if it's that by the end of the summer, they were responsible for opening or closing the ice cream shop in addition to scooping, they've shown differential leadership. When asking your candidate about their experience in a particular job, be sure to ask them to describe for you how they progressed in that role over time. If they can't describe any advancement, move on to the next candidate.

Adaptability. In consulting, our business must continually respond to changes in the economy, new technologies, and the regulatory environment. And your employees will experience internal change via staff hires and departures, implementation of new procedures, and project turnover. However, most engineers I know strongly prefer the status quo. So when interviewing, ask your prospect to demonstrate some of their experiences with change and how they reacted. Your staff's ability to remain resilient and optimistic in the face of change is critical to your firm's and your staff's success.

This is certainly not an all-inclusive list, but if you consider these traits while conducting your next interview, perhaps you will be more successful at selecting for leadership—and reaffirm my dad's old adage. MSC

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