

Win-Win Selection

An O.D. Approach

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This paper stresses the importance of viewing the selection and interviewing process as a basic precursor to establishing trust and positive identification with a company's objectives. Using the LIFO® Method, it illustrates how shared information between a candidate and company can provide a good first step towards building a mutually rewarding relationship for future OD efforts.

Several years ago, Cecilia Bergamini, an expert on performance evaluation made a startling statement in an address to IFTDO in Brazil. "I no longer believe in performance evaluation after my recent experience with the LIFO® Method. The use of performance evaluation stems from a 'machine line' conception of people not the 'human use of human beings' that is advocated by modern Organization Development specialists. If we really believe that the effort should be made to harness the abilities of people to synergistically contribute to our organizations, then evaluating is less appropriate than properly contracting with employees about their jobs and mutually determining how they can use their contributions with those of others." We agree wholeheartedly with Bergamini and believe that what we know now about organization development can be extended to the whole process of employee treatment. In this article we would like to expand on this theme and show how, from the international experience of our LIFO users, this possibility can change and enhance the initial contact and relationship that is the

selection process itself. While our examples will refer to the use of the LIFO method, the approach is sufficiently general so that other methodologies can be substituted.

Let us begin with a candidate's first impression of a company he/she is desirous of joining. If those impressions are indeed lasting ones, what image is left with employees after reading advertisements, contacting representatives and experiencing a typical selection interview? A positive impression based on courtesy, openness, consideration honesty and a welcoming attitude or a negative one based on distrust, painful assessment, lack of respect and suspiciousness? How will such an impression affect integration with the organization, fellow employees and attitudes toward the work team? If, as is often advocated by many O.D. writers, openness, frank confrontation of differences,



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explicit contracting and discussion of expectations are the prerequisites for building the trust and respect that leads to effective organization culture and teamwork, then this should also characterize everything that the corporation does. Certainly this should be true of its recruitment and selection process.

Complete delegation of such functions to recruitment and advertising specialists and the desire to “sell” can often create poor or misleading impressions for new employees. This may be unwittingly created by others in the recruitment process who may not represent the organizational culture in the way desired for its personnel and operating mode. Since reputations are also acquired by the manner in which prospective candidates are treated, it behooves organizations to choose a process which enhances it even with those who will be rejected.

The process of creating positive identification with company goals and teams therefore begins with the introduction—the advertising, the application reviews, communications and the interviews themselves. This article will review some of the current factors that affect selection processes and describe a method that has been used internationally to build positive regard for the prospective organization and the candidate.

In viewing current organization development efforts one discovers that corporate vocabulary contains a new lexicon comprised of terms such as: “business redesign,” “re-engineering,” “flattening,” and “right-sizing” to name change processes. In addition, it is readily apparent that competition is relentless. It appears that the fundamental way to address competition is by increasing productivity, increased output per unit of input. Haven’t we heard this somewhere before? The only problem is that output is often in a less identifiable, and some may say less measurable form. It is not, however, any less tangible.

What has changed is the nature of the inputs and outputs. More than ever before the “raw material” of business today is knowledge (although skills, energy

and resources are also required). Possibly even more important than the raw material itself, is the owner and steward of the knowledge—the knowledge worker. To a far greater extent than ever before, the employee, not the company is the keeper of the company “jewels.”

Demographic research informs us that our employees are more concerned than ever about the quality of life. Many do not want to follow in their parents’ footsteps of being the company person. The work force is more highly educated, more mobile, more affluent and most importantly, interested in working to live rather than living to work. Candidates no longer look for “a job”, they are looking for “the job”. The employment contract is today, more than ever, a bilateral agreement with greater demands by the knowledge worker-employee. No longer can prospective employees assume that a candidate will jump at the chance to carry their business cards. The prospective employee needs more assurance of success and compatibility with the new organization.

Concurrently, with the shaky economic conditions that exist, organizations and their leaders have been lulled and even misled into believing that the recruitment and staffing market has evolved into a buyer’s market. With all the downsizing or to put it on a more positive vein, rightsizing, there are seemingly many potential candidates for each and every position. The problem is that as organization’s “concentrate” their employee populations, each hire becomes more critical.

As knowledge processes become more critical, individual personal processes also become more critical. Overlay this with the fact that more and more work is accomplished by teams of knowledge workers and “learning” is becoming the premiere core competency of the decade and we soon realize the recruitment process is becoming increasingly complex. Organizations cannot afford several chances through a trial and error process to find the right person for the job.

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While there is no one ironclad, foolproof method of assuring that the “perfect” person has been hired there are some tools available that may facilitate a more productive and organizationally developmental, application of the recruitment and selection process (strategically thinking). One set of tools for that purpose are such concepts and methods as those contained in the LIFO® system.

The LIFO® method was created by Stuart Atkins in the late 1960s and developed and expanded by Atkins and Allan Katcher over the next three decades. Their research was initially driven by the difficulties managers have with conducting performance appraisals. They were intrigued by the focus on strengths and weaknesses as a dichotomy and the underlying fear of most managers that if they work to rid themselves of their weaknesses they might lose their strengths.

The result was the LIFO® method of describing individuals’ organization of their attitudes and behaviors within four behavioral dimensions that span the entire spectrum of human behavior. By identifying common themes of values, attitudes and beliefs that underlie these dimensions, people were helped to understand the source of personal strengths that can be leveraged for success.

There are several unique aspects of the LIFO® methodology that distinguish it from other models of behavioral measurement and classification. First, it is not-normative, there is no ideal, good or bad, right or wrong, better or worse.

Second, it does not probe psychopathology. This methodology merely categorizes the behaviors of individuals that are readily apparent to any and all persons with whom the individual relates, into the four dimensions. Then it provides a lexicon with which to discuss differences and similarities of perspective and behavior amongst individuals and in groups.

Third, it has been used in more than twenty countries around the world with equal success (among them more than 700,000 Japanese managers!).

Fourth, the LIFO® system is strength based. The model describes behaviors in terms of more and less productive use of strengths. For example, someone may perceive aggressiveness as a weakness and assertiveness as a strength. An alternative way of looking at aggressiveness is excess assertiveness—a less productive use of the strength of assertiveness. Thus it encourages management of behaviors rather than the monumental task of changing them.

The most significant difference between the LIFO® system and other similar systems is the fact that it regards the individual who responds to the questionnaire as the expert. As ironic as it sounds, this is unique. Each individual is trained to conduct his or her own interpretation and analysis.

You may be asking yourself, “Well then, what good is it?” The answer lies in the fact that it helps individuals to organize the way they see themselves and provides the words to describe it both to themselves and others in a non-judgmental way, yet realistic way that facilitates understanding and discussion.

Use of the methodology in selection and recruitment provides a framework for evaluating compatibility of an individual (based upon his or her self description) with members of the candidate’s potential organizational constellation. **It does not test performance capability.** What it does is furnish a structure to identify compatibility with those characteristics identified as essential for successful job performance in the specific situation and with the specific managers, supervisors, colleagues and organizational subordinates.

In the selection process, therefore one concentrates on how a person is likely to access and use his or her behavioral skills inventory and how such use can fit in with the existing staff and culture. Such a procedure promotes and encourages managing diversity toward

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synergy. It will not identify an “ideal fit.” Instead it encourages and facilitates discovery of creative approaches toward assuring jobs make full use of individual capabilities singularly and in concert with others.

In following such a process one gains insight into the degree and frequency with which individuals select and use behaviors drawn from the four behavioral dimensions. No individual profile is ideal or correct. The system provides additional insight into tendencies which are only relevant when viewed within the context of other individuals’ tendencies.

One can also identify situations where compatibility can be questioned. This helps identify the reasons and suggest methods for managing interpersonal stress. Instances which are likely to be severe can be highlighted for further examination and decision as to whether the specific job situation makes sense for the candidate.

For example, a Vice President of Marketing desired a bright, dynamic and dedicated staff person to execute a complex marketing plan. A candidate considered was one who had these qualities but who desired a position where he would be responsible for developing the basic marketing strategy. Autonomy was extremely important to him. Despite a brilliant history of success, the situation did not augur well for the candidate. The Vice President who viewed design as his province and who did not desire to work in a collaborative mode, would not be the best supervisor for such an employee (nor would the employee be viewed as desirable from the Vice President’s point of view). The job would hardly be structured for success.

This potential conflict (and problem) was readily revealed by their respective LIFO[®] profiles. Both men demonstrated very strong orientations that emphasized their investment in independence and control, often expressed in a confident and assertive manner with little interest in trying to negotiate differences or expressing views diplomatically. When this was discussed with the candidate during the interview, the

candidate acknowledged that this would be an impossible situation for him and withdrew his application. Yet, in a similar situation, with a slight difference in the profile of the manager, it was possible to redefine the job to permit relatively independent functioning with little supervision in an area of high technical expertise.

Other options are also available. Given a candidate with strong skills, capable of making a strong contribution, it may be wise to assign him/her to a supervisor with a different and more compatible profile—or with understanding of the differences, help both parties to develop a working mode that will allow management of differences and tap each other’s strengths.

Clearly, there are situations where the organizational culture precludes radical differences in style. Where, for example, would a highly organized, detail focused cautious person, needing a great deal of structure, fit in with a group of dynamic, fast-moving, quick decision-makers? The odds would be against success—such a person would not be likely to be viewed favorably, receive promotions or be treated with the kind of consideration that would encourage the optimal use of his/her personal skills. The LIFO[®] method allows for ready detection of such extreme differences and encourages candid discussion of those differences with the candidate and the hiring organization, as well as pointing out the “blind spot” in the organization’s selection process and methods that could be used to overcome it.

In addition, we have found that discussions of background factors are more candid and open following feedback on the LIFO[®] profile than before or without such revelations of the testing process. A truly unique aspect of this approach is that it is especially useful in recruiting and selection if the individuals with whom the candidate will interact in the new position provide data similar to that of the candidate. It is only then that potential incompatibilities can be identified accurately, which can be predicted with a high degree of accuracy. In other words, the system only operates

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well for selection when and if research demonstrates that the incompatibilities and characteristics are significantly differentiable. Furthermore, if incompatibilities are indicated an objective method provides the means and ways to deal with them, encouraging mutual problem-solving by the candidate and his/her future organizational colleagues.

So how does the LIFO® system operate in the selection process? The first step is to have those individuals with whom the new hire will be working complete the LIFO® survey and be oriented in the methodology with specific emphasis on their own profile. This step can be limited to the immediate supervisor of the new hire. However, use with the entire team provides significant advantage. It is recommended that a Strength Management® Report also be used. This report provides a comprehensive description of the way each individual conducts himself under normal and stressful circumstances. It can then be used to provide a concrete basis for analysis, confirmation, refutation or validation.

Analysis of the entire team's profile is worthwhile to determine the group's tendencies. Then a management decision must occur. Does the management wish to hire to maximize compatibility with the existing team? Or, does management wish to hire to expand or extend the perspective of the team? In either event the choice should be an informed and deliberate one as opposed to speculation and guesswork. Neither choice is right or wrong. Both options present unique challenges.

The next step is to have the supervisor of the new hire complete a Candidate Analysis Worksheet. This will help to identify specific job or position characteristics that are important for successful job performance and relations with colleagues, managers and other organizational groups.

Each candidate then completes a LIFO® (Life Orientations) Survey. The survey identifies the individual's behavioral tendencies and preferences under so-called normal or favorable conditions as well as when under stress or in conflict. Prior to completing the survey each candidate

is provided with an explanation of the methodology, its use and utility. It is stressed that the company is interested in having a decision made that will benefit both parties. The candidate is also told that information derived from the survey and similar information about potential colleagues will provide a basis for making a positive choice concerning the candidacy.

After completing the survey the candidate is given the LIFO® Applications Workbook and additional information regarding the LIFO® system. Just before the interview with the candidate a Strength Management® Report is provided that delineates an interpretive conception of the LIFO® profile revealed by the survey. The candidate is encouraged to edit and/or elaborate on the report as he or she sees fit. The edited report, as well as comparable information about the potential supervisor and colleagues, is then the subject matter of discussions during the interview. Our experience is that the rest of the interview which covers background, attitudes, experience etc. is unusually candid, with minimal deception. Employees who are chosen to select the company as one they want to work for after such a procedure and are hired, tend to be ones that stay for a long time.

Optimally, the LIFO® profiles, or even the Strength Management® Report of the supervisor and the other members of the team are also made available to the candidate immediately prior to or sometime during the interview process. With both parties better informed as to the challenges of the interpersonal dynamics following selection the interview can be far more helpful to the decision process than the conventional procedure allows. Such profiles are often used after hiring to help orient candidates and their colleagues to new situations and to understand difficulties that may arise.

Regardless of the outcome of the selection process the candidate has obtained something of value. The interview discussion that occurs and the additional data that this information represents, enables both parties

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to enter the bilateral employment agreement better informed and prepared for the challenges ahead. Further, it starts things off with a basis for openness and trust. Information is shared—it is not simply a one-way evaluative process. Even if the candidate is not hired, there will be a positive gain from the situation.

The recruiting and selection process is at best a difficult one—even more so when it becomes part of the total organizational strategy plan for business growth (as it should be). It is not an exact science. We have yet to find an organization that has found the perfect candidate nor the candidate that has found the perfect job or organization. We are left to believe that such a situation is merely an illusion. What we can do is take prudent steps to enter such a “contract” with our eyes open to the challenges that lie ahead. Armed with the tools to leverage the strengths toward synergy help the candidate to make an earlier contribution to the hiring organization. Further, if the selection process is a model of the values and methods desired to develop an organization to run in an optimally human way, then this win-win model is the way to go! 

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