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For Workplace News

## Behavioural interviews match right candidate to your organization

There are right ways and wrong ways to hire and promote within organizations. But can those same principles be applied to elections? Of course, the method of selection is drastically different, but with national leadership contests taking place in both Canada and the U.S. this fall, I thought it would be interesting to test some assumptions in another very critical, real-world arena.

Whether an organization is hiring an entry level employee or the top executive, I advocate strongly for establishing a behavioural competency profile first and conducting the interview or the assessment according to that standard. A profile is a determination of fit. It takes into account the skill requirements of the role, but it's also grounded in the values of the organization. It doesn't matter how skillful or experienced a candidate might be, if he or she doesn't fit those values, they're not going to

## Election question: Can you assess political leaders like new hires?

succeed in the way the organization needs them to. Remember, success doesn't just mean achieving results but achieving results in the right way. A job holder who fails at his role but fits the organization's values may not be much of a contributor. But a person who succeeds while violating the organization's values is a virus that can spread bad behaviours and bad feelings inside the firm and with its external customers and partners.

An interview based on that profile is two and a half times as likely to select the right candidate than a traditional interview. Behavioural interview questions are carefully crafted and the answers systematically measured. Traditional interviews rely on the words a candidate uses to answer questions. Behavioural interviews look for how clearly a candidate's past actions demonstrate the right values. A candidate doesn't have to have held the same job in another company to prove they're a good fit. You can get the data you need from experiences beyond a job. What you're looking for is consistency and frequency of those values demonstrated over time in a variety of arenas.

You can see a little overlap with those approaches in the seemingly haphazard and chaotic way the public assesses

political candidates. Not everyone can be an incumbent, so we need to evaluate our candidates on past experiences that have some relevance. Sometimes it's an easy task to assemble a record and line up the pluses and minuses of achievement. Yet past experience in a related job can be thin for some candidates. McCain and Biden in the U.S. and Harper and Dion in Canada may have long public track records, but Obama is a freshman senator and Palin was virtually unknown the day before her introduction at the GOP Convention. Cynics in the profession of marketing politicians say that too much of a record makes it more difficult to sell a candidate.

More than actual job-related experiences, the public tends to look for signs that a candidate shares their same values and ideals. Again, cynical professionals go to great lengths to package their candidates so that their words can be identified with carefully polled values. Republican Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin's dramatic impact on the poll numbers is a case in point. The Republican base looked at her adherence to specific hot button issues like being unwaveringly pro-life and pro-gun. Her impact was even more resounding among white women, however, who swung by 20 percentage points to her

camp perhaps because they identified with what they perceived as her shared values as a working mother. Those who bemoan Palin's or even Obama's lack of job-related experience are missing the point. Values are a much stronger pull for voters. We only wish that we could be sure those values are real and are really what we want or need.

Today, political parties seem to be in the business of bringing forward candidates who represent clearly defined values that segment a population. It's been a while since we had a candidate in either country who represented values larger than party and encompassing the entire nation. If an organization had this kind of problem, it would probably be advised to broaden the pool of applicants or develop a more rigorous leadership model to assess from. The population of diverse nations, however, are less likely to hold a common leadership model up as the gold standard.

At the same time, it's also true that we're rarely surprised by the performance of a leader once they've held office for some time. In my experience, the attitudes, characteristics, values and strengths, and weaknesses that a candidate shows in an election are consistently demonstrated once in office. If we're disappointed supporters, we've probably chosen to ignore or overlook those weaknesses and negative characteristics because the professional spinmasters told us too. If we voted for the other guy, we tend to see any failures as proof that our negative assessment was correct all along.

Perhaps we could defeat the cynical manipulators if we opened our minds to assessing values and skills in a variety of ways. Even the Christian Right was disappointed with President Bush, it's been reported, because he failed to live up to his promises. Maybe if we looked beyond a litmus test of cliched agenda items to an assessment of how character is demonstrated through action in other ways, we wouldn't be surprised by the results of our selection.

No leader is perfect or will perform perfectly all the time or will please everyone. Leaders can fail or disappoint even in organizations that have rigorous control over their selection process. A democratic election is most definitely not the most rigorous way to select a leader. When my dad was a small town mayor in New Jersey, he was fond of the saying, "The American people get the leader they deserve." The beauty of democracy is that we are responsible for the leaders we select, which is why we should take that responsibility as seriously as possible.

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• *The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing, and Keeping Top Performers (John Wiley and Sons, August, 2001)*

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