

Making the Right Hire: Assessing a Candidate's Fit with Your Nonprofit

Your organization is looking to fill a senior management position. You have already carefully defined the skills and concrete work experience necessary for someone to succeed in the specific leadership position for which your organization is hiring and you have written a detailed job description. Your recruiting efforts have turned up a strong candidate whose skills and background seem to be a perfect fit for the job description. However, you're not quite sure how the candidate will fit with your organization's culture. What are some ways you can assess a candidate's cultural fit?

We have seen this scenario and heard this question many times, especially in cases where nonprofit organizations have created new positions or when they are considering non-traditional candidates for a position, such as individuals with primarily for-profit experience who are looking to bridge to the nonprofit sector for the first time.

Determining whether a specific candidate is the right fit for your organization's culture and work style can be challenging. Through our talent matching work over the years, and a set of in-depth interviews with senior nonprofit managers, we have identified some practices that consistently seem to increase the chances of getting this right. By following these practices, your organization will be in a good position to assess this sometimes elusive issue of "fit."

The process of ensuring that a job candidate will be a good cultural fit for your organization can be roughly divided into the following three steps. Ideally, the first two steps should be completed before you even start reviewing resumes. The third should be done once you have identified several strong candidates. The three key steps are:

1. Assess your organization's culture
2. Define what you are looking for in a senior manager beyond just the job description
3. Learn about a potential candidate's personality and work style

Step 1: Assess your organization's culture

When you think about finding the right people for your organization, you need to first understand your own organization's culture and work style. There are many ways to assess your organization's current culture, ranging from conducting an extensive organizational assessment and audit to simply sitting down and

Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor
Boston, MA 02116
P 617 572-2833
F 617 572-2834

New York

3 Times Sq., 25th Floor
New York, NY 10036
P 646 562-8900
F 646 562-8901

San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104
P 415 627-1100
F 415 627-4575

thinking through what types of people have succeeded at your organization. One organization hired consultants to interview all the 60-plus staff about what made people successful at the organization and distilled the answers down to the six most commonly cited characteristics. Another smaller organization simply had the management team develop a list of their core values. "Thinking about your organization's values can be a good starting point," suggested Kieran McGrath, associate director, talent and recruiting, at Bridgestar.

At a bare minimum, asking the following questions about your current organizational culture can help clarify what type of work environment your organization offers to potential candidates:

Work style:

How do we get our work done? Collaboratively? Independently? A combination?

How do we make decisions? Consensus-driven? Authoritatively?

How do we communicate? Verbally or in written form? Directly or indirectly? Voicemail, email, or in person?

What are our meetings like? Serious? Lighthearted? Tightly or loosely structured?

Professional opportunities and advancement:

What types of people tend to do well here? Individual contributors? Team players? People who are proactive or more responsive?

How are we structured? Hierarchical or flat? Centralized or decentralized authority? Clear reporting structures or matrix?

How do we reward people who do well?

What happens when people don't perform well?

Work hours and commitment to work:

How many hours a week do we expect senior management to work on average? How does this expectation match up with the hours that senior managers work in reality?

Do we provide flexible work schedules or allow for telecommuting, or do we prefer people to work set hours?

How much travel do we expect of senior management?

Do we expect senior management to be available and accessible after work hours?

Are we looking for someone who will be here for a certain number of years or as part of a succession plan for senior management?

Architecture, aesthetics, and atmosphere:

How are our offices set up? Open environment? Closed-door offices?

How do we dress? More formally? Less formally?

How do we have fun?

Once you've done an assessment of your current organizational culture and work style, you can then think about whether you want the new senior leader to contribute to the existing culture or to be a part of changing the culture of the organization going forward.

Step 2: Define what you are looking for in a senior manager, beyond just the job description

Even the most carefully crafted job description cannot capture every aspect of what the real job will entail in a particular organization. Further, an individual's work style and approach to communications can significantly influence how a job is executed. As a hiring manager, you need to have a clear understanding about what you are looking for in a candidate, beyond the skills listed in the job description. Kathleen Yazbak, Bridgestar's managing director, national relationships, emphasized that "personal style and fit with organizational culture must be carefully evaluated in the job search process."

One caution: Though your goal may be to find a candidate who fits well within the current culture of your organization, that does not necessarily mean you should look for someone who is a cookie-cutter image of the rest of your management team. It is critical to balance your search for fit with your goal of building a team with a diverse set of backgrounds, experiences, ideas, and working styles.

For example, one executive director acknowledged that his work style was more visionary and less focused on implementation and that he was a fiery communicator who sometimes ruffled a lot of feathers in the process. When he looked to hire an associate director, he recognized he needed someone who was gifted in implementation, was more of a calming presence, and was a patient, clear communicator. In short, he wanted to ensure that the culture of the organization remained balanced.

Some categories of questions you might want to consider in developing your list of fit criteria include:

What kinds of senior management personalities and work styles currently exist in our organization?

What adjectives would we use to describe the people who have been successful in our organization?

What kind of decision-making style do we want this new senior leader to have? Are we looking for an approach that is similar to the executive director's or for a different, complementary style?

Are we looking for someone to create more teamwork within the organization or to establish more authority and hierarchy?

What kind of leadership style are we looking for in this position? Someone who will promote the status quo or someone who will shake things up within the organization?

Are we looking for a senior leader with more "gravitas" or someone who will lighten up the existing team?

What types of personalities work well with the various stakeholders we interact with and what characteristics will this person need to have in order to be successful in these interactions?

Creating a complete and specific inventory of what you are looking for in an ideal senior leader can be immensely helpful. In addition, if your goal is to change your organization's culture, some questions you might want to consider include:

What types of culture change are we looking for? (e.g., more serious or more light-hearted, more collaborative or more independent work styles)

What kinds of different personalities and work styles will lend themselves to bringing this type of desired culture change?

What types of personalities and work styles might represent too much change for our organization to absorb well?

These kinds of questions will help you identify what types of personalities and work styles will fit best with your goals for the senior leadership position and the direction the organization will take in the future once this new senior manager joins the team.

Step 3: Determine the candidate's fit with your organization

Once you have a clear understanding of your organization's culture and how you want this new senior hire to affect that culture, you can begin evaluating how specific job candidates measure up against your fit criteria.

Some aspects of “fit” and personality are more easily assessed than others. For example, it may be patently obvious in an interview whether a candidate has a characteristic such as a “calming presence.” In contrast, characteristics such as “has a good sense of humor” or “is a team player” or “is flexible” can be more difficult to assess during the interview process. Some for-profit investment banks ask candidates to tell a joke as part of the formal interview process in order to assess whether or not they have a sense of humor and are able to think quickly on their feet. While we do not necessarily recommend this particular tactic, there are many other ways to get the information you need to determine how well a candidate will fit with your organization.

Maximize interactions during the interview process

During the formal interview process, “It is immensely helpful to have a 360-degree view,” said McGrath. “This means having candidates interact with not only the people they will report to, but people who will be their peers, and the people who will report to them.” McGrath added that although it’s incredibly time-intensive, “scheduling a day of a long series of meetings with a candidate can ensure that any facades are worn through.” In addition to receiving formal feedback from people who interviewed the candidate during the process, be sure to ask the receptionist, the person who scheduled the interviews, and anyone else who interacted with the person for their assessment of the candidate. Candidates for senior level jobs will probably also meet with board members, allowing you to get feedback about them from the board’s point of view.

One organization created a half-day interview process in which job candidates had formal, one-on-one interviews with senior management members in the morning, followed by a lunch meeting with members of the support staff. It was extremely informative—and sometimes surprising—to see how various candidates reacted to this requirement and how they treated the support staff during the lunch. Several promising candidates who had seemed respectful and inquisitive when interviewing with senior managers were ultimately not offered a position because they had been rude or dismissive of the support staff during the lunch meetings.

Ask a lot of good questions

In order to assess fit, ask questions such as, “What did you enjoy most about the last place you worked? What did you not enjoy?” or “What are you looking for in a colleague or co-worker?” or “When you think back on your favorite job, what was it and why?” and “Describe your favorite and least favorite bosses.” The types of answers you hear will help inform how well the candidate’s favorite work experiences match up with the kind of work environment and personalities at your organization.

“Ask candidates what they like to do for fun,” suggested McGrath. “This can be a great way to ask a personal question without violating any employment laws.” For example, one hiring manager discovered that a candidate ran marathons in her free time—this information served to confirm that the candidate had the discipline and persistence to succeed in the job. In addition, invite the candidate to ask questions as well. You can tell a lot about people based on the type of questions they ask—whether they are insightful or not, big picture versus detail-oriented, process versus people-oriented.

Seek out informal interaction opportunities with the candidate

If possible, try to find ways to spend time with the candidate outside of the formal interview process. It is perfectly appropriate to invite a candidate for a senior position to attend a brown-bag lunch, participate in a staff meeting, or come to an upcoming fundraising event. In each of these situations, you can learn a lot about the individual. Watch to see how the individual participates in these various settings, how s/he interacts with staff, or how attentive s/he is during a staff meeting. One executive director recounted how a candidate had difficulty staying awake while he was visiting a staff meeting. Needless to say, he didn't get the job!

Take the opportunity to ask candidates about their impressions of the brown-bag lunch, staff meeting, or fundraising event. Ask them what they think about the organizational culture and whether they have any questions or concerns about the issues that were discussed, or the group dynamics. If they attended an event, inquire if they have any recommendations for improving the event and what they would have done differently if they had been running it. Assess how open they are to giving solicited feedback and how much unsolicited feedback they offer. Take note of how critical or constructive they are in their suggestions. Observe what kinds of things they observed. Are they more interested in the organizational dynamics or are they more concerned with the processes and procedures? The manner in which the candidate answers these questions can tell you a lot about whether or not s/he will fit with your organization's culture.

Do the airport test

Many managers have probably experienced the discomfort of having one or two people on staff who just don't get along with others in the organization. Such a situation can be a drag on productivity and morale. It is not always possible to genuinely like everyone you work with, but it can make a big difference in the workplace if most people enjoy each others' company. When interacting with job candidates, one good way to test for this “likeability index” is something we call the airport test. Imagine that you are traveling for work with the candidate and you discover your flight is delayed. How do you feel about being “stuck” with this person for two-plus hours in an airport with not much else to do? Can you imagine being happy about

this, neutral, or do you think you'll dread it? Just asking this simple question can help clarify how you really feel about a candidate and his or her fit with your organization's culture!

Use reference checks to gather more information about fit

Conducting reference checks is more than just a formality in the interview process. It can be a very powerful way of learning about a person from the perspective of five or six people who have worked with the candidate in a variety of roles and positions. Yazbak advised: "It is important to interview individuals who have known and worked with the candidate, ideally for a long period of time and in different settings." When asking for a reference list, request that candidates include peers, direct reports, their own bosses, and/or individuals external to their organizations with whom they worked fairly closely (e.g., a vendor, a client, or a partner in a collaboration). "Speaking with this broad list of people should provide a rounded view of how a candidate interacts with people at different levels within and outside the organization," added Yazbak.

During the reference check, be sure to ask more than just "yes" and "no" questions, probing on issues of whether people enjoyed working with this person and whether s/he got along well with people from a wide range of backgrounds. Some good questions to assess fit include: "How would you characterize XX's general management style?" (e.g., authoritative, consultative, task-master, etc.) and "What type of work environment does s/he need to succeed?" Other helpful questions can be found in the article, "The Reference Check: More than a Formality," on the Bridgestar website.

Pay attention to your gut instinct

After interviewing the candidate, spend some time reflecting on how the interviews went from a fit perspective. Ask yourself questions such as: "Does the candidate share the same values as our organization?" and "Can I imagine the candidate working effectively with our team?" and "Would I be able to work with this person?" and "Would I enjoy working with this person?" If there are fit criteria that the candidate does not meet, think long and hard about whether those criteria are still important to you and whether this candidate offers sufficient trade-offs to warrant putting them aside.

When looking to staff a brand-new position or when considering bridge candidates, this process of negotiating your tradeoffs can be especially tricky. Oftentimes a new position requires someone with different ways of approaching problems, which may not fit as well with the current organizational culture. Or you may be bringing in a new person to change the culture in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. "Asking yourself what things you can't live with is another helpful way to make sure you're covering all the bases," advised Yazbak. When you've done your research and looked at how a candidate stacks up against your organization's fit criteria, step back and listen to your gut before you make a final decision.

Summary

Finding the candidate who is the best cultural fit for your organization can be a very challenging task. It requires insight into your own organization's culture and keen observation of the candidate's personality and work style. By proactively developing a list of ideal fit characteristics that go beyond the job description, and maximizing opportunities to learn more about candidates through formal and informal interactions, you can have greater confidence in finding the right senior manager for your organization.

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