

HIRE the right leaders

To get your hiring right, select your leaders with a specific mandate in mind.



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Hiring new leaders is a crucial activity in any organization. After all, the new leader will determine not only the direction in the relevant department, but may also set the tone, what behaviors are promoted, which ones are career enhancing and which ones are career destroying. Despite the importance of the hiring process, it is often carried out starting with a generic job profile based on the task the previous leader had in the organization, and in some cases with external recruiting advisors for senior leadership positions.

In most cases, internal candidates are considered first and, if none seem suitable, a job ad is posted or a headhunter may be tasked with the search for potential candidates, especially when the search starts while the current role holder is still in the job and there is high secrecy around the upcoming change. What results is often frustrating for all the parties involved. Given the generic profile, sometimes the organization is flooded with applications which are questionably fit, and it is difficult to identify a candidate which stands out. When headhunters are involved, they try their best to bring in candidates which look good on paper, but also in these cases the chances of success are more or less random,

since headhunters themselves are given the job description from the organization and tend to search in a limited pool of candidates.

The selection of a new leader is a surprisingly difficult task, with considerable frustration for most parties involved and often doesn't lead to a really suitable candidate. For instance, the Corporate Executive Board (now part of Gartner) estimates that 50% to 70% of executives fail within 18 months. A senior leader who asked to remain anonymous, revealed that he had been appointed after two wrong appointments in less than three years and found an organization which was quite challenging to engage because there was the belief that a new change would occur soon anyway. These are situations where the organizations suffer, but also the candidate may be penalized for a situation which is most often not caused by him or her.

STRATEGIC MANDATE

The high number of failed appointments could be avoided. Instead of starting from a generic job profile, our research on CEO and executive succession suggests that the search for new leaders should start from a strategic mandate for the position. Before writing up a job profile for the leader required, all involved parties, the

Human Resources department and the CEO included, need to decide what the next leader should accomplish in the position. Will the task simply be to maintain an existing organization and team or to develop it onwards? Is the task to fundamentally transform the organization? Or is the task about starting something fundamentally new? Each of these mandates requires different leader profiles with very different personalities, skills and capabilities, as well as set of experiences. For instance, a leader that excels at keeping an organization steady or driving the final 10% of performance improvement rarely has the energy, personality, and drive to transform an organization or start a new one. Similarly, a transformational or an entrepreneurial leader will go up the wall in no time when asked to simply maintain an existing organization without change.

Designing the mandate requires a strategic analysis of where the unit to be led currently stands, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and how it needs to look several years down the road to contribute to the company strategy. Such an analysis will identify the degree of change needed as well as the characteristics that are essential in a leader to drive the development.

CREATE A FOCUSED JOB PROFILE

Starting from this analysis and the mandate that it generates, a focused job profile can be formulated that highlights not only the experience, but also the personality, skills and capabilities for the leader who will be right for the specific role, and thereby making it much easier to evaluate candidates or give a headhunter a focused search task.

Starting from a mandate for the position is valuable beyond the selection phase. Agreeing with the new leader on the mandate helps to define from the outset what should be accomplished, sets the boundaries for the new leader and helps to focus on what matters in the organization. As a result, what we call "new job remorse" is less likely. We all know leaders that may have joined an organization following an exciting recruitment process just to find out shortly afterwards that what they thought they would be doing in the new job had nothing to do with what the organization really wanted and/or would be willing to allow.

A C-suite member, who asked to remain anonymous, decided to resign after less than six months in the role, having realized that the recruitment "pitch" of needing to change and innovate, was not really supported by the CEO who in reality appreciated compliance and obedience without room for challenging decisions and the status quo. While new job remorse may lead some leaders to leave almost immediately and therefore the damage is minimized, all too often, remorseful leaders hang around the organization for a year or two until they have found another opportunity thereby setting back the organization, not allowing the necessary actions and creating a de facto leadership vacuum.

HR SHOULD BE MORE INVOLVED

To professionalize the recruitment of senior leaders along the lines we suggest, the Human Resources departments should be given a stronger role in the organization. All too often the HR department is given the administrative burden of the recruitment, but is not considered a true business partner that participates in strategic conversations around how different parts of the businesses need to be developed and what the implications are of these development needs for the profile of leaders.

As the corporate world evolves and we all take on board the lessons that COVID has taught us, new leaderships skills will be needed and they will also differ depending on the organization. And with the professional support of the HR team, the recruitment of the C-suite and other senior leaders will quite likely be more rational and more linked to mandates and less to general job profiles and existing friendships or assumptions. ■

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