Challenge "Samers"

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I often hear a phrase coming from the lips of hiring managers that makes me cringe. "We want to hire someone who will fit into our group." A lot of effort is expended in screening candidates with personality tests, multiple interviews, even role plays in order to determine that the new hire will be similar in thinking to the existing team. I think this is a big mistake.

It is often the maverick or even outcast among a group of people who comes up with the genius solutions to problems or creates entirely new streams of income. When we seek to have everyone "fit in" we lose the potential for diversity of thought that is a major part of the creative process.

My leadership team was blessed with a mixture of line managers from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicity, and gender. These were in a constant state of flux because all were growing and moving in their careers, creating slots for others.

Often, it was the minority representation that brought the group up short when we were off base. They would help us realize our gut perspectives were not to be trusted. They would point out when we slipped into a dangerous "group think" or "monoculture" mentality.

In "The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership," Steven Sample described it this way:

"A highly homogeneous organization is as susceptible to disease and infestations as a large biological monoculture. Every farmer knows that when he and his neighbors plant tens of thousands of contiguous acres in a particular variety of wheat year after year, that variety will soon become vulnerable to new diseases or new strains of insects. Ecosystems that are biologically diverse are much tougher and more resilient in the long run than monocultures, and so it is with organizations that contain a wide variety of people working toward a common goal."

It was important to have a variety of people on the team and critical to listen when they pointed out our naiveté. It kept us growing and searching for a greater appreciation of diversity. Although no group ever fully understands the issue, at least if we embrace diversity, we can be a little less blind.

Obviously, it is a good idea to avoid putting a person on the team who is a total misfit, is disruptive, or always brings up a contrary point of view creating dissent. Instead, try to foster a mixture of ideas and points of view by following the actions:

1. If personality tests are used to screen candidates, seek to place people with different style patterns.
2. During interviews, try to determine the level of independent thinking while also determining an appropriate level of teamwork.
3. When asking about prior experiences and background, put high value on skills that will add new dimensions to the existing team rather than map closely with existing team skills.
4. Do not look for clones in terms of demographic and ethnic characteristics. Always seek to increase the variety of the team where possible.
5. Seek to make strategic moves of people from one team to another that will add diversity of thought to both groups.
6. Continually reinforce the idea that we can gain our greatest strength from diversity.

Building a strong team means not going the comfortable route where we hire and place people just like us. That is a formula for mediocrity.

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