

# Guest Author Bob Cooper: The Leader As Talent Scout

## Have you ever regretted a hiring decision?

You thought the individual would be a self-starter, but you found yourself having to give constant direction. Perhaps you needed someone with excellent customer service skills, and received complaints about the individual's attitude and behavior.

One explanation for this dilemma can be found in the book "Now Discover Your Strengths" by Buckingham and Clifton. The authors differentiate between knowledge, skills, and talents. Talents are innate, whereas skills and knowledge can be acquired through learning and practice. You don't teach someone to be a self-starter, no more than you teach someone to have a talent for empathy. This is why even after providing training on assertiveness skills, or how to provide excellent customer service, we don't see much improvement or any at all.

I learned this lesson many years ago from a mentor named Bill. Bill was Vice President of Distribution and an excellent talent scout. During an off-site management retreat, Bill introduced his new warehouse supervisor. Bill explained that what he needed for this position was someone who has excellent communication skills, is decisive, and assumes accountability. Bill explained that he found the new warehouse supervisor in his health club. He had observed over several months how this individual communicated with others, the respect he was shown, and how he thought about resolving problems. Some of you might be thinking – "He found a manager while working out?" The point Bill was making is that he knew that he can provide the knowledge and skills required to be a

warehouse supervisor, but he needed the talent to lead. I remember the day Bill asked me to move from the position of Quality Circle Facilitator (a staff position) to Customer Service Manager (with 30 direct reports). I said “Bill, I don’t know this operation, and I have never held a management position – why did you select me?” He looked me in the eye and said “Bob, people believe in you, and will follow you. You will learn the departmental functions, I can’t teach what you have.”

The point in sharing these stories from Bill is this – you must think about your hiring and promotional decisions very carefully. If you focus primarily on knowledge and skills which can be taught, and overlook an individual’s talent, you can find yourself regretting the decision.

## **How do you find talent?**

One strategy is to use behavioral-based interviews to assess whether or not this person has the talent you need. For example, if you require someone who is decisive, you might tailor your questions toward asking the candidate to discuss difficult decisions they had to make, and how they went about it. You might need to follow-up by asking for specifics. If empathy is an important talent, you might ask the individual to describe specific situations where a customer was very upset, and how they handled the situation. Pay close attention to how they describe the situation, and whether you get a sense that they fully connect with the importance of empathy. Although this is not an exact science, it puts the focus of your interview on the most important area – talent. We often make the mistake of looking at a resume and being overly impressed with the individual’s accomplishments. The real question is – how did they go about getting the job done? Are they consensus builders? Do they build strong teams? How did they overcome obstacles? Did they develop a successor? With an internal candidate, don’t make the mistake of promoting

someone who has good technical skills and poor interpersonal skills, with the hope that they will learn to deal more effectively with others. Identify the talents needed for the role, and determine if this individual “owns” this or not. Don’t try to train them to be strategic, or nice, or anything else. They are who they are, and that’s OK. Select individuals who demonstrate on an ongoing basis the talents needed for success.

You might not find your next manager in a health club, but leaders should always pay attention to an individual’s talents.

Our role as leaders is to build on people’s strengths, not placing too much attention on improving weaknesses. Place individuals in jobs that allow them to leverage their strengths. If someone loves dealing with customers, and has a natural ability to do so, don’t put them in the back office. If someone doesn’t deal well with others, don’t force them into a position where they need to build consensus, and then be disappointed when it doesn’t happen.

I encourage you to use peer-interviewing as a strategy to find a good fit for a position. The person being hired will need to work well with colleagues, so why not engage the colleagues in the selection process. Teach your staff to also be talent scouts.

An organization is only as good as its people. Being a good talent scout is a competitive advantage. You build customer and staff loyalty, reduce turnover and the associated recruitment expenses, and build a winning team for the future.

Always be on the look out for talent, it’s always around you.

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