viewpoint

How to Evaluate Attitude

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Have you heard the cliché, “Hire for attitude; train for skills”? If you’ve had the unfortunate experience of working with an individual who is not coachable, unwilling to listen to feedback and lacks motivation, then you understand the importance of a positive attitude.

A study conducted by research and training firm Leadership IQ concluded that poor interpersonal skills cause more new-hire failures than lack of technical skills. This study confirms that the ability to work collaboratively is not only a desirable attribute—it has become a requirement to succeed in today’s fast-paced, collaborative business environment.

We all know a poor attitude when we see it, but it’s difficult to describe in the interview evaluation. How can you uncover someone’s attitude during an interview? Candidates are not likely to say that they have a short fuse and lose their temper. So when they say, “Oh yeah, I’m always open to new ideas, and I’m a real team player,” how do you know they’re telling the truth?

Attitude is reflected in how we do things, not what we do. For example, employees might have worked on three project teams this year (that’s what they did), but does that mean they’re good team players? How did they function and behave on those teams? Did they volunteer to be team leaders? What suggestions did they contribute? When someone made a suggestion they didn’t like, how did they respond? Who was the most disruptive team member, and how did they deal with that person? Did they ever represent a minority opinion on the team, and how did they present their opinions? What was the most significant conflict on the team? How did they contribute to resolving that conflict?

You want to know how employees behave when they’re part of a group. Attitudes are reflected in group activities. You also want to know how employees behave when things don’t go well. Our attitudes should establish a mutual expectation to explore this. Once you and the candidate agree that there’s a need to look beyond technical expertise, the conversations tend to become far more candid and truthful: “Describe a time when you needed to be assertive, and who you offended in the process,” or “Describe a time when you decided to back off, and why did you back off from being more candid?”

Third, if the goal is to evaluate attitude, life experiences are definitely relevant. I once interviewed a project manager who did very well in the morning interviews, and then several of us joined him for lunch. Before lunch, there were positive comments that the candidate worked on many projects and was very organized.

During lunch, I learned that every summer he and 12 friends went on a weeklong fishing trip. They each took turns organizing the trip, and this past summer was his turn to plan and organize the trip. He candidly shared that he didn’t like being responsible for organizing the trip and planning all the details.

It became more evident as the interview went on that he applied for this management position because he viewed this as the only way he could advance his career and make more money. He actually liked the technical aspects of being an engineer, but he thought being the project manager was the only way to get ahead. We decided this job was not a good fit for his skills, and he would eventually be unhappy.

It takes exceptional interpersonal skill to uncover the experiences that will demonstrate how we behave when no one’s looking. If you concentrate on the “how,” you will learn a lot more about a candidate’s attitude.

And life’s experiences have already taught you that trying to change someone’s attitude is far more difficult than helping someone develop new technical skills. Hire for attitude, train for skills. In the long run, it is worth the extra effort.