



# wolf calling

## Hire the Person, Not the Skills

How do you feel about your hiring track record? In the long term, do you remain pleased with the people you bring on board? Have any hires turned out to be nothing like your forecast of how he or she would do in your organization? If so, you are not alone.

In over 30 years of hiring, I have certainly had some regrets. That crackerjack technician or secretary or planner seemed to have all the necessary credentials. The references were excellent. And I wake up three months later with the people working with him or her at each other's throats. What happened to my high functioning team? He went to Harvard! She worked at Microsoft! The technicians on my hiring panel said this candidate had great technical skills, and well, he or she may well have.

### HOW IMPORTANT ARE SKILLS?

Really, how much of a person's success in an organization is based on their technical skills? Care to hazard a guess? I haven't seen any science on this question, but there are some statistics that might be comparable. In my main field, Information Technology, we are continually worried about projects failing. Technology projects can be fraught with risk and contain multiple opportunities for failure. In fact, about 75% of large (over one million \$,) Technology projects *do fail*.

As a result of this alarming number, the phenomenon has been widely studied. A generally accepted statistic in our field is that, of

those projects that fail, about 4% fail because of something inherently flawed in the technology itself. Yes, I said 4%! The remaining 96% are chalked up to a series of euphemisms like "cultural issues," "organizational problems," "leadership," and my favorite – "personalities." This all adds up to whether or not people are working effectively as a team. Teamwork depends largely on "fit" and most people have a difficult time wrapping their brains around that most elusive characteristic.

Typically, interviews focus on technical expertise and give personal fit a short shrift. It's not easy to interview for "fit." It's kind of "J'ne se quois," or difficult to grasp. And there doesn't seem to be a science out there to help deal with the true art of hiring for fit.

### HOW DO I HIRE FOR FIT?

To begin with, don't be afraid of it. I know that the sour taste of a bad apple lingers long after the thrill of picking the roundest, reddest one has faded. What's necessary is a change in perspective and priorities. Certainly, the technical is important, but please consider these dimensions as well:

- Accountability
- Respect for others
- Dedication to results/outcomes
- Low ego
- Honesty
- Excellent communications skills
- Values in line with the team/organization

WOLF CONSULTING • DIANE VASARKOVY

360.264.5082 CELL: 360.789.3626

EMAIL: VASARKOVY@AOL.COM • WWW.VASARKOVY.COM

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- Able to give “bad news” constructively
- Speaks up for principles
- Seeks constructive criticism
- Wants to grow
- Wants to contribute

## START WITH AN INTERVIEW PANEL

How does one test for these characteristics? Here’s a hint: Start with your interview panel. You do use other input besides your own don’t you? (If not, I invite you to reconsider your omnipotence.) Often we throw a few technical people onto the panel and leave it at that. I suggest you try for a 360° panel or a series of interviews. Personally, I find panels more synergistic. It’s easier for the non-questioner to observe while the interviewees attention is elsewhere.

Getting 360° of input means your panel includes:

- Someone who will work for this person
- Someone for whom this person will work, possibly at multiple levels
- A potential peer of this person
- A customer (or two or three)
- A stakeholder (supplier, contractor, legislator, auditor, etc)
- Someone you trust because he or she shares your values

With a firm grip on your values and those of your organization, sit down and write your interview questions. As a leader, you have articulated your values haven’t you? And written them down? If you haven’t thought about these and put them down in writing, you won’t have a chance of understanding how a new hire would fit into your organization.

## SCENARIO QUESTIONS WORK BEST

I prefer interviewing with scenario questions. They show how a person thinks on their feet and bring out that person’s “default” style. That is, not their inter-

view persona, but how they might really handle a situation. Write your scenarios using actual situations in your organization, past or present. Change the names to protect the innocent and include lots of details.

For example: “You are the systems analyst on a big project. Your customer wants to sign off on your design without checking with his business people. He says, ‘Just handle it.’ You know that if he doesn’t have full ownership of the design, it may not meet all of his organization’s needs. As a result, your organization could take the heat for failing to meet unstated expectations from your business customers. Your manager has said she is willing go over this guy’s head to get his boss to force him to participate. How will you handle this situation?”

Then, below each question, put bullet points covering what you want your interview panel to watch for in the candidate’s answer. Be sure these reflect your own values and important values in your organization. Be bold about looking for these values in the answers. This is the most critical input you can get from your candidate.

If you get any “bad vibes” from the candidate during this process, trust your instincts. You are probably feeling a mismatch on values. And this is a situation where the candidate is showing you her very best behavior. Keep in mind, it doesn’t mean the candidate is somehow “wrong.” It simply means that the fit might not be the best. In the long run, you want to hire someone who can succeed in his role. It’s the best way to be in service to him or her as well as to your staff. ▲

*Have a critical opening that needs just the right hire? For a small investment, you can significantly decrease your hiring risk. Hire Wolf Consulting to formulate your hiring approach, design the interview process and questions, and/or participate as the wild card on your interview panel. Call us. We’ll offer you some pointers, free of charge, even if you decide to go it alone.*

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