



# Staffing: Plug a Hole or Take the Best “Player” Available?

BY BOB GREENFIELD

---

In most walks of life, establishing a clear focus is a good thing, and the sharper the focus the better. However, when it comes to employee recruiting and hiring to build a high performing team or workforce, I’d like to suggest that a narrow or laser-like focus might not be the best approach and can be unnecessarily limiting.

I’m always intrigued in learning about different professional sport teams’ strategies as they prepare for their respective Leagues’ drafts. A professional sport’s amateur draft is one of its two principle mechanisms for recruiting and “hiring” its work force. Their broad strategic philosophies can probably be clumped into two main categories: drafting players to address clear needs or “plugging a hole”, and drafting the best player available regardless of their specific needs at that time.

This is a classic dilemma. Should a team draft a player who may fill a known and defined need, or take the best player available, even though that “best” player may be at a position where they are not currently in pressing need? This is a dilemma because it’s always easier to build a work force when you hire to fill specific needs. It’s easier. But is it more effective at building *winning* teams and organizations? Is it applicable to non-

sports organizations like yours? It is an interesting debate and perhaps one without a clear cut winner.

I’d like to argue the case for taking the best player available and its broader applicability to work organizations. In our non-sports businesses and organizations, it is unconventional and certainly less practical to simply hire the best player irrespective of the fit between skill and experience and a particular opening. I wrote that it is easier for sports team to draft to fill specific needs. What is true in professional sports franchises is even more true in organizations where HR departments are often laser focused on meeting an internal customers’ explicit specifications. I know from conversations with many managers that they often don’t believe they have the luxury to take the “best player available” given the pressing need to backfill a particular position or address a critical staffing need.

Let’s start with the question of how to define “best player” in the first place. Is it the candidate with the best resume, brightest credentials, most prestigious pedigree, and best fitting job skills? I think organizations may too often hire the “resume” and skill and knowledge sets without looking carefully enough at organizational (culture) “fit” and key intangibles. Examples of such intangibles include adaptability, work ethic, humility

and willingness to learn about and fit into the organization culture, winning attitude, etc. These qualities are worth their weight in gold.

When you find an employee with such qualities, someone who is truly a great “fit” in your organization’s work culture, the odds are very high that they will become a valuable asset regardless of their current skill set. The preoccupation with hiring the right “skill” fit is similar to the preoccupation with having the right organizational **structure**. Even in the PERFECT organizational structure, a group of people poorly led and motivated and with commensurately poor attitudes will always find a way to fail. Yet in the most awkward organizational structure, the right people, a group of motivated go-getters willing to persist until they find a way to succeed will accomplish their goals in spite of the structural impediments. It’s always about having the right people. I am convinced that the kind of “people” that differentiate winning organizations from the rest has much more to do with attitudes than skills.

I would rather have dedicated, professional, resilient, self-motivated, refuse-to-lose “team” players developing the skills they need than perfectly-skilled people who are unmotivated and cannot (or will not) work well together, as it is far easier to teach the organization, product, market...anything, than it is to teach integrity, work ethic, diplomacy, political savvy, presence, and a winning attitude. Said another way, I’d rather hire the inexperienced candidate with the winning mind set and help him learn what he needs to about my business, than hire the experienced and credentialed person who may not be able or willing to Un-learn things that will not serve him well in my organization. So “best player” for me is much more a function of intangible qualities than technical job skills.

Am I saying that what a prospective employee “knows” is irrelevant to their future job performance? Yes and no. Yes, their job-specific knowledge may be irrelevant in the long term. No, their ability to know, i.e., their intelligence, is incredibly relevant. Intelligence is an absolute pre-requisite. I’m counting on that great attitude’s ability to be a quick study and expeditiously make up for the gap in experience. Learning ability and curiosity are critical for both the experienced and inexperienced candidate.

But at the end of the day, I think there’s something very analogous between sports teams and work teams. Talented and versatile athletes with a team-first attitude and an unshakable commitment to do what it takes (including subordinating an ego) to win will achieve superior results to the team with unadaptable experts who have a much clearer concept of what’s “not my job”.

With a light apology to those who prefer not to see sports related to business, perhaps we can all learn something from the way professional sports teams’ general managers think about staffing *their* high performing teams. In our narrowly focused efforts to fill a specific position, we may overlook the available all-star who plays a different position. Organizations are nothing more than the people who comprise them. Get the best ones you can.

---

Copyright 2008, Bob Greenfield, All Rights Reserved.

Bob Greenfield helps his clients clarify and create the impact they want at work and in their lives. Bob is owner and principal consultant of Greenfield Management Strategies (GMS). GMS works with individual and group clients in the private, non profit, and public sectors. Visit Bob online at [www.greenfieldmanagementstrategies.com](http://www.greenfieldmanagementstrategies.com) , gms.inc@att.net, or contact him at 818 506-7100.

This article may be reprinted or forwarded to colleagues and friends as long as the above copyright notice and contact information is attached in its entirety. If you reprint this article, please let us know that you have done so and forward a copy of the article source or a link where the article may be viewed to Bob Greenfield.