



# BoardRoom Press

A summary of news,  
resources and events

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## Assessing Behavioral Attributes in Leadership Selection

Sometimes during your tenure on the board, you'll likely be involved in selecting new leaders for your organization. Perhaps as a member of a selection committee recruiting to replace your retiring CEO or as a part of a board member selection process. Part of your task will be to identify what background, skills, experience and characteristics your organization is looking for in a desirable candidate. While such criteria are usually weighted more heavily in terms of background, skills and experience, they often include other attributes, such as integrity, commitment, tenacity, ability to take risks, that may be more difficult to assess. Yet it is just these attributes that many times spell success or failure once a person is on the job.

"The fact is that no matter how smart a person appears, his or her failure to perform successfully in a role is caused by behavior-how he or she gets things done-

eighty percent of the time," contends David Shabot, partner with the executive recruiting firm of Korn/Ferry International. "The building blocks of a person's personality are the best predictors of their behavior and performance.

"Consider the following hypothetical situation. You're interviewing for a candidate to take over for your current CEO, who's about to retire. You're looking for somebody who can make a few changes and quicken the pace inside your organization, which is too laid back to compete in your increasingly capitated market. The candidate you just interviewed came across very well. He had all the right answers and comes from the right schools. He learned from all the right mentors and gained experience in several reputable organizations. He socializes well. He's smart and savvy. He reads the trades and lives the issues. So, you hire him. After eight

months on the job he loses one of your most important managed care contracts and does little to spark internal changes. Where did you go wrong?

"It's likely that you hired somebody who, despite his work in successful organizations, may not have had enough experience moving quickly in the marketplace," Shabot said. "He may have been too *passive* to move the organization forward. What you need was someone more *aggressive*. In other words, you mistook a candidate with the right background but the wrong behavioral attributes for someone best equipped to lead your organization in today's environment."

Shabot recommends a three-part process to help more accurately identify a person's behavioral attributes and determine whether they correspond with the organization's needs. Here's how this

process might be applied to an executive search.

“First, make sure you’ve created a well-crafted position specification that details the personal characteristics, experience and skills necessary for success, including those that meet or exceed the requirements of the position.” Shabot said. “Second, formulate your own behavioral hypotheses – basic assumptions about the person’s personal style and aptitude – within the first ten minutes of meeting them. Finally, use the selection process to gather information that will either support or conflict with these hypotheses.

Shabot suggests the following ways to get behavioral feedback from candidates:

- identify how the candidate functions in various circumstances – high stress, frustration, elation – when conducting reference checks;
- build in different settings and circumstances during the interview process to allow you to interact with and view a candidate in ways that can bring out their “real self”;
- ask questions during the interview and reference check that will help you reach some conclusions about a candidate’s fundamental behavioral characteristics and

how and when they manifest themselves. Examples of questions designed to bring a candidate’s underlying personality to life appear in the box below.

### **Sample Questions**

**Intelligence.** Is he a fast thinker? Can he articulate a concept clearly? Can he rally the forces?

**Experience.** What types of organizational cultures has the candidate worked in? What did she learn about working successfully in those cultures? How did these cultures match with her personal style?

**Skills.** How well does the candidate manage ambiguity? How well does he move from one task to the next? Can he define a problem succinctly or take a nonlinear approach to problem-solving?

**Interpersonal capability.** How does she communicate – straightforwardly or passive/aggressive? Is she warm and charming? Complacent or compulsive? Is she confident, indecisive or insecure? Does she seem patient enough to withstand a lengthy process or does she give in to frustration?

**Passion.** How strong is his love for what he does? What aspects of his work is he less passionate about?

According to Shabot, once you’ve asked the appropriate questions and had the chance to view the candidate in real and

hypothetical settings, it’s time to test your hypothesis by creating a candidate profile that includes a behavioral component (see box at right). Shabot recommends doing so right after the interview or meeting with the candidate so perceptions are fresh and focused.

He also suggests concentrating on those behavioral traits that most likely will impact on the candidate’s ability to be successful in the position. In other words, those that most closely match the organization’s culture and market position and those traits previously identified in the position description.

Then, Shabot said, test your profile further during reference checks by using feedback gained to modify the profile accordingly. Compare the final profile, including the behavioral sub-profile, with the original position requirements. Ask yourself and your fellow board members how well they match up for each candidate. What factors are deal breakers? Where can we compromise?

“It’s important to keep in mind throughout the process that there is no one formula that can predict success!” Shabot said. “That’s because elements in a profile will be weighted differently, depending on the organization’s culture and current needs.

“If I’m looking for someone to head a start-up venture, I want a candidate who’s eager to roll up her sleeves and grow the company,” he said. “I don’t want anyone who’s too patient. On the other hand, if the organization is very political, the right candidate will be more facilitative than authoritarian. In this case, patience will contribute to a candidate’s success.”

According to Shabot, while giving more weight to behavioral traits in candidate assessment is immensely valuable, it’s not foolproof.

“If a candidate doesn’t have the baseline level of skills and experience required by the job, the behavioral assessment won’t matter,” he said. “Or, if a board is unwilling to select someone with a leadership style that makes them uncomfortable, even though it may be the most appropriate style to help the organization meet its current objectives, the behavioral assessment also might not be worth the effort.

“Absent these factors, however, using a more systematic approach to behavioral evaluation can help a board better predict success and assess candidates with more precision”. Shabot said. “In this way you can help ensure that what you see during the recruitment process is what you get in reality.”

### ***Candidate Profile***

***Intelligence.*** Good, fast thinker; street smart; articulate.

***Experience.*** Complex operations management; academic credentials: research and development.

***Skills.*** Multi-task capability; research and development; operations: conceptual and tactical.

***Interpersonal capability.*** Credible: politically sensitive; clear communicator; leads by example: likes himself; questionable tolerance level; can be quite demanding; tenacious – hands-on if necessary; politically astute.

***Passion.*** An advocate for the profession: desire to build national stature: loves what he does; driven and mission-oriented.