USING PERSONALITY TESTING FOR EMPLOYEE SELECTION
Should we use them?

I recently had a conversation with a client that got me thinking about the best usage of the kind of personality/style testing that we use in our leadership development programs (principally the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, FIRO-B inter-relationship preferences, California Psychological Inventory, etc.) Occasionally, clients have asked me how to use these instruments in hiring "good" people for their organizations. I usually answer with the standard line that we used to use as Network Associates of the Center for Creative Leadership and the test publishers we primarily use, that these "tests" are for development purposes, not for the screening out (or in) of certain personality styles or characteristics.

In general, I believe this statement is true; some of the tests can be faked, if the candidate finds out, or intuits that you're looking for a particular "type" to hire. Moreover, peoples' behavior does not always match up exactly to their preferences, so there may be considerable slack in interpreting the candidate's qualifications as a match-up to the employer's needs.

So, how, if at all, can we use this testing information to assist us in making important employment decisions? Or do we just go on the usual information we can get from interviewing the candidate, and from previous employers, about qualifications and previous experience in doing the job we need to get done?

Lou Adler, a popular executive speaker [1], emphasizes a focus on the candidate's experience, not their qualifications. He recommends we interview them about what they have done to solve the kinds of problems or challenges that one would face in the job in question. This methodology is very convincing, and probably very productive, but for me it leaves out two important components: First, the developmental aspect of any job: i.e. what can a person learn to do, if they are really motivated to achieve in a new/different area. And secondly, how is the "fit" of the person with the team they will be working with: can that person's performance be maximized with the support of the "right" people around them, especially if one of those people is you, the supervisor who's doing the hiring!?

So let me suggest a two-step procedures (or set of procedures) that my experience tells me yields results. An example is a fast-growing Mexican subsidiary of a U.S. multinational that was looking for top executives to manage their growth. What we did was to design a package of tests that we thought would provide a good profile of the candidates' character and behaviors. This was facilitated by the fact that many of the company's executives had already taken our leadership development programs, and the "assessment-for-development" test package was both familiar and shared. That is, we could "profile" a candidate's personality styles and, at the same time, look for a match-up between those styles and the general profile of the company's top managers.

Next, both we and the hiring-decision representative talked to the candidate about the testing process: why we were doing it and the benefit to the candidate even if he were not selected for the position, in terms of self-knowledge and "fit" with the company's executive profile. We then tested the candidate (usually using MBTI, FIRO-B, and CPI), scored the instruments, and set up a "feedback conference" with the candidate. During this session, usually about an hour, we reviewed the results, just like we do in a feedback session in a leadership program, and compared them with what we knew about the company's overall profile. We emphasized that this was a confidential session, and that the data would not be divulged to the company, except as the person himself did so. We then set up an appointment with the HR director responsible for the hiring to together review the candidate's data, the three of us. The candidate fed back the results to the HR director, and I coached him where necessary. We all also agreed that, after this session, I would not again discuss the specific results of the testing with the company's representatives, in the absence of the candidate himself. Sometimes this discussion went on for two hours, talking about the company and its culture as a fit for the candidate's personality styles.

So the process was at once, transparent, oriented around discovery and development, and an attempt on all sides to really understand if the prospective employee was right for the company, and vice-versa. Even in the cases where the candidate was not hired, they felt well attended to, and a party to the employment discussion and decision. Many expressed that they had never before felt as good about the hiring process in other jobs they had interviewed for.

(Contrast this to another example of one of our participant clients, who had been tested and interviewed by the prospective employer, but was not hired nor told why, nor had any of the test results explained to him. This effectively poisoned the participant around the prospect of testing, to say nothing of the impression that the prospective employer left him with. These things catch up with us, you know!)

The second step, the team support process after hiring took place, was not quite as structured. It consisted mainly of team training interventions where we helped the team, partially through the application of MBTI/FIRO and other instruments, to integrate the new member and work effectively together. This is far more complex a process, involving the coalescing of a group into a team. Many ideas around this process are taken up on in the Teamwork Section of this website….

REFERENCES:

[1] Adler, Lou, *Hire With Your Head*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ. ©2007.