

A Competency-Based Approach to Hiring School Counselors, Psychologists and Social Workers

By Dennis P. O'Hara, Ed.D., and Carolyn J. Probst

*For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf,
and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.*
-Rudyard Kipling

Hiring decisions offer an immense opportunity for school leaders to influence the trajectory of their organizations in the immediate and long-term. However, very few school administrators have appropriate training, if any at all, in how to select the best candidates. Effective hiring for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers presents further unique challenges including the fact that these positions do not open as frequently as classroom teaching positions, administrators are less likely to have worked in one of these roles, and the required competencies are often less tangible than knowledge of content and pedagogy.

Why Are Hiring Decisions So Important?

Hiring people is not difficult. Who among us has not shared stories of receiving hundreds of resumes for one teaching or counseling position? The challenge and opportunity lie in making great decisions and hiring the best people. Most are familiar with the expression, "You're only as strong as your weakest link." When considering the importance of hiring the best candidate, we prefer to conjure the image of Rudyard Kipling's *Law of the Jungle* in which he says, "For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack." People represent an organization's greatest asset. The strength of any organization lies in its people, those who are bright, passionate, insightful, and committed to closing aspiration gaps and changing students' life trajectories.

Conversely, in *The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions that Undermine Learning*, Platt et al. (2008) state, "The cost of hiring the wrong candidate can be higher in terms of supplementary training, wasted salary, adverse public relations, and lost productivity than the cost of more extensive recruitment. Clear standards and procedures must be set for recruiting and hiring promising new teachers if we are to build and sustain cultures of excellence" (p. 279).

Why is it Difficult to Make Great Hiring Decisions?

In what he describes as the great paradox, Claudio Fernandez Araoz (2007) says, "Great people decisions lie behind individual success, and ultimately, behind organizational success" (p. 21). And yet, the path to effective hiring is replete with challenges. For example, although we often receive numerous applications, as Araoz (2007) explained, there are only a small number of exceptional performers. An exceptional person is one who can make a tremendous difference for an organization. The difficulty is that upon initial impression, the differences between a typical person and an exceptional person may not be obvious.

In addition, assessing applicants for complex positions, such as counseling, is much more difficult than many realize. Effective counselors must possess a unique blend of the "hard" and "soft" skills. Hard skills represent the knowledge base, intelligence, and experience while soft skills refer to personality, emotional intelligence, self awareness, and capacity to empathize. Identifying these qualities, and to what degree each applicant possesses them, proves difficult considering few interviewers have undergone training and fewer still possess these qualities in the right balance themselves.

Acknowledging Barriers to Great Decisions

Each of us enters a hiring process with biases, both conscious and subconscious. If these biases are not uncovered and acknowledged, they can have dire consequences with regard to the ultimate hiring decision. Perhaps, the first bias that must be acknowledged is our own overestimation of our ability to choose great candidates. Too often, candidates are deemed exceptional for reasons that do not guarantee exceptional performance, such as educational background, appearance, speaking skills, or employment history.

We are reminded of another barrier in Jerry Harvey's (1988) "*The Abilene Paradox*." In *The Paradox*, Harvey describes a visit among a husband and wife and her parents.

The story opens on a 104 degree afternoon in Coleman, Texas. When one member of the group suggests a ride to Abilene, Texas, the others happily agree, only to later learn that none of the four actually wanted to go to Abilene. *The Abilene Paradox* teaches us that a group of people can collectively agree on a decision or course of action that is contrary to the beliefs or desires of some or all members of the group. This tendency presents yet another barrier to making great hiring decisions because individuals sacrifice their convictions in favor of what they think the group believes.

Although not an exhaustive list, the barriers discussed above are perhaps the most pervasive and influential. Much attention and effort must be focused on addressing these barriers and identifying others prior to beginning any hiring process.

A Competency-Based Approach

To clear the barriers, we recommend a competency-based approach to hiring. Araoz defines competencies as, "...behaviors that outstanding performers use more frequently and more consistently than typical performers" (p. 127). Our definition of a competency-based approach to hiring is one that requires an understanding of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personality traits needed for success in a given role. What exactly are the competencies required when hiring school counselors, psychologists and social workers? Should your new counselor, psychologist, or social worker be:

- A. The Believer
- B. The Innovator
- C. The Ever-Evolving Expert
- D. The Bridge

A competency-based approach to hiring will reveal the correct answer is, and the top performer will be, "E, All of the above." We have identified four overarching competencies required of school counselors, psychologists and social workers.

- A. The Believer - A believer knows that every part of a student's high school experience is preparing him or her for life beyond high school and a believer never takes his or her mind off that importance. The volume of work required in counseling is tremendous. Staying up to date on new information, working with students at all levels and at all stages of progress is both time and labor intensive. The only way to sustain this level of effort is to actually believe that the efforts matter.
- B. The Innovator - Innovation is critical. A counselor, social worker or psychologist who can carry out ideas is common; one who can generate meaningful ideas and creative solutions is harder

to come by. The landscape in education is changing faster than ever. Innovation will be the only way to continue to accomplish the level of work that is required, especially in this age of limited budgets and diminishing resources.

- C. The Ever-Evolving Expert - Counseling, more than many other fields, requires a vast amount of content knowledge. Possessing a body of knowledge is essential, but not sufficient. The landscape is so dynamic that information is outdated the moment it is received. Counselors, of all types, work in challenging and dynamic environments and face a myriad of situations. Constant reading, conferences, and networking are the only ways to truly stay current.
- D. The Bridge - The Bridge represents the nexus between the hard and soft traits. The greatest bridges are strong, but approachable. The Bridge can employ the emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and empathy, as well as knowledge-base, experience, and intelligence. A good bridge serves to connect people, to bring the team together in work toward a common goal. A believer, an innovator, and/or an expert can add results; an effective bridge can multiply them.

Skillful Recruiter Recommendations

Platt et al. (2008) share with us ways to improve hiring decisions. They tell us, "The ability to hire and retain the right people is a key characteristic of a high-performing organization" (p. 279). Essentially, the right person strengthens your organization and enables you to make unbridled progress, while the wrong person makes growth and advancement impossible.

We recommend the following practices as a means of making the best possible hiring decisions:

- As a group activity, before interviews commence, identify the necessary competencies.
- Identify and address potential biases among interviewers.
- Take the group to Abilene, but bring them back by explaining the pitfalls of groupthink and then embolden committee members to share their opinions openly and freely.
- Design and select interview questions that provide applicants every opportunity to demonstrate they possess the necessary competencies. Sample competencies and questions, in no particular order, include:
 - Seek to determine if the applicant is persistent by asking him/her to recount a time when he/

she was initially unsuccessful at an important task and tell what he/she did to improve (Platt et al., 2008, p. 290).

- Assess the applicant's ability to collaborate by asking him/her to share a time he/she has been part of a team other than an athletic team. Ask the candidate what role he/she played and what we can expect from his/her participation in our department or school (Platt et al., 2008, p. 290).
- Determine the candidate's enthusiasm for continuous learning by asking him/her to share the two most recent books he/she has read in his/her content area and how they influenced his/her thinking (Platt et al., 2008, p. 290).
- Observe candidates in action with real students. Demonstration counseling sessions are an effective mechanism to assess the necessary hard and soft skills required of school counselors, psychologists and social workers. Use this opportunity to judge:
 - How does the candidate establish rapport with students?
 - Does the candidate engage all students in a group setting?
 - What assessment strategies does the candidate use to determine student needs?
 - How does the candidate handle students who are reluctant or non-participatory?
 - Does the candidate practice wait-time after asking a question of the student and does he/she process the student's contribution before responding?
 - How does the candidate encourage students to make authentic contributions?
 - Does the candidate foster interactions beyond the superficial?
- Require candidates to submit a writing sample in which they reflect upon the demonstration counseling session.
- In a consistent method, solicit feedback from students regarding the candidates.
- When checking references, be extremely diligent and avoid the confirmation trap. Most employers make the mistake of conducting reference checks with an eye toward confirming their positive feelings about an applicant. Araoz says, "At this dangerous

stage, the problem becomes compounded when we begin to seek confirmatory information for what we believe to be true, while turning our eyes away from any evidence that might contradict our newly embraced conclusions" (p. 72). Find disconfirmatory information at this stage – or take the risk of finding it later when the costs are much greater.

- When you don't get it right, admit it and work to fix it. Araoz recounted an interview with Howard Stevenson of Harvard University who said, "You never fire people early enough" (p. 112). Araoz continued, "In other words, rather than acting honestly, we stall, dissemble, and prevaricate" (p. 112). Acknowledge your mistake and act on it immediately in order to prevent further damage to your organization.

Conclusion

Like Kipling's wolf and its pack, our organizations can only be as strong as the people we hire. Every professional hired in a school possesses the ability to influence students' life trajectories. Araoz says, "No other decisions are so long-lasting in their consequences or so difficult to unmake" (p. 36). These long-lasting decisions can have the effect of sending students' life trajectories off the chart or flattening them. A competency-based approach to recruiting and hiring school counselors, psychologists and social workers will undoubtedly strengthen your organization and surely close aspiration gaps among students, and send their life trajectories soaring.

References

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