

Buried Treasure*

From The Profiles Advantage Newsletter

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Who Knows What's Hidden Right Under Your Nose?

In the 1970s, the Dallas Cowboys football team adopted the philosophy of drafting the best athletes they could find, some of whom did not have any college football experience. In the process, they found genuine talent that everyone else in the National Football League had overlooked. In the long run, however, the Cowboys decided it was more productive to focus on drafting football players who had already proven themselves on the football field.

We see that many businesses have designed their selection processes in a similar manner: They almost always hire good people, but they place some of these people in positions for which they are ill suited. Perhaps you've heard someone say, "He looked good in uniform, but he couldn't play." That's a way of saying that an employee appeared to have all the attributes for success in a particular job, but didn't perform up to expectations. Everyone has hired and promoted people who turned out to be disappointments. The number of times we have heard about top salespeople who became lousy sales managers is painful. That mistake occurs because neither the company nor the employee has a clear understanding of what it takes to become an outstanding sales manager. Oh, sure, the company has a job description in a file somewhere that the sales manager could dust off and read if he or she wanted to, but traditional job descriptions are inadequate today.

Personal Story from Bud Haney

We all subscribe to the idea that our people are among our greatest assets, recognizing that outstanding organizations tend to have superior people policies and, on the face of it, superior people. Accordingly, many of us spend a huge amount of time chasing the rainbow, convinced that we will find a pot full of those perfect people at the end of it. Instead, we should be focusing on identifying the potential of those who already make up our teams. And therein lies the secret of those organizations with a people-based competitive advantage—it's not just that they identify and recruit great people (although that does help), but that they work with the people they have to make them great, to find their unique attributes that can be developed and employed effectively within the organization, and to build the sort of serious competitive advantage that only good people can confer.

Find the pattern in this series of numbers: 8, 11, 15, 5, 14, 1, 7, 6, 10, 13, 3, 12, 2. If you're stumped, you'll find the answer at the bottom of this chapter. Once you've looked at it, read on.

So what? Well, the simple point is that looking at the familiar in an entirely different way can sometimes produce results that we scarcely expect. Your people are like that—you assume that because you've worked with them for awhile, you know what they are and what they're capable of. That's true, but only to a point. Uncovering genuine hidden potential requires a shift in the way you evaluate your people.

Take the following actions to get started:

1. Uncover Your Team's Career Goals, Aspirations, Likes/Dislikes, and Strengths/Weaknesses

You can't begin this process without knowing a lot about each member of your team. Start by talking with them regularly. Find out what they like to do. Research published in a 1999 *Harvard Business Review* showed that people excel at jobs that interest them more than they excel at jobs that seem to be a good fit for their education, skills or experience. Find out what your people enjoy doing, their career plans, and their business and life aspirations. Don't limit yourself to informal chats. Use more formal means like the Profiles Checkpoint Multi-Rater System, and psychometric assessments like the ProfileXT, to determine the particular strengths of your key assets. The authors of the HBR research cited above put it perfectly: "...the best way to keep your stars is to know them better than they know themselves – and then use that information to customize the career of their dreams."

2. Make Better Use of Strengths

When you feel like you have a good grasp of each team member's strengths, start looking for new ways to use them. Brainstorm ways to apply these strengths in new and imaginative ways that enhance the roles of each of your people and that address problems that you haven't previously been able to address. In one successful example we recently observed in the IT industry, a talented project manager was put into the role of sales manager, not because she knew an awful lot about sales or had a gleaming sales record—quite the contrary—but because she was particularly good at organizing campaigns, marshalling resources, motivating her team to action, and seeing initiatives through to the end. Take off the blinders when it comes to applying strengths in new ways.

3. Turn Weaknesses into Strengths

In the movie *Enemy of the State*, Gene Hackman tells Will Smith, "...in guerrilla warfare you gotta turn your strengths into weaknesses...if they're big and you're small, then you're fast and they're slow...you've got to work with what you've got." You must do the same with your people. Look at those characteristics that you currently perceive as shortcomings, and then look at situations where those attributes might be utilized to your advantage. After all, most weaknesses are just overused strengths. For example, a customer service representative who's just too assertive to "put up or shut up" with angry customers may actually make a very successful salesperson, capable of overcoming objections not easily overcome by others. Consider the marketing executive who comes up with killer

campaigns but just can't seem to follow them through to the end. Focus that person solely on developing the creative campaigns and assign project management and completion to someone better suited. Look at every shortcoming you currently perceive in your team members, determine where a weakness might become a strength, and figure out how you can capitalize upon it. You'll be amazed at the results.

4. Feedback, Feedback, Feedback

In a recent study, 25 percent of employees said that one of their main reasons for changing jobs was lack of feedback from management about their performance. Make it a formal objective to provide positive feedback on a job well done to every one of your people at least weekly. This requires you and your management team to actively seek opportunities to provide feedback. Not only does this increase the interest level in the job being done (we all like to be recognized), but it also helps to reinforce positive behavior and performance at the expense of negative alternatives. Also, experience shows that when you provide feedback to the team, they'll provide feedback to you.

If you've been searching for a competitive advantage, then the answer just might be under your nose. Before you start exploring more exotic sources, look at the people who are driving your company right now. You'll find untold treasure buried behind those familiar faces you see every day.

Pattern in the numbers?

If you are familiar with numbers and number-series puzzles, you are probably naturally inclined to calculate the mathematical relationship between 8 and 11, and then between 11 and 15, and so on until you can speculate as to the mathematical progression – and there is none! The numbers are arranged alphabetically!

Your people are so familiar to you, but if you look at them a little differently, you can learn an awful lot more about what can make them great for you and your organization. (Thanks to Donna Engelson of Profiles National Capital for this teaser.)

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