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Diversity of Thought: The Next Frontier

By Randy Hain, Managing Partner of Bell Oaks

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The term “diversity” is taking on new meaning among companies that are focused on building dedicated and strategic workforces. Most sizable companies today utilize some form of diversity initiative in an effort to provide appropriate jobs and career opportunities for minorities and women. They should be commended for their efforts and congratulated when successful. These initiatives typically address race and gender, but how often do companies’ hiring policies target candidates who *think* differently and don’t fit the traditional culture standard that has been in place since the company was founded? Diversity of thought—often the last form of diversity to seep into a company’s culture—is becoming an important recruiting strategy for today’s leading organizations.

As the Managing Partner of an executive search firm in a major U.S. city, I have been exposed to countless clients who truly understand the concept of race and gender diversity initiatives, but get nervous at the thought of hiring candidates who don’t exactly “fit” their culture. The idea that someone would think outside-the-box and challenge conventional thinking (even if done appropriately) makes them cringe. They consider “group think” or uniformity-in-thinking as a positive outcome of a productive meeting or decision-making process. These are some indicators of rampant conformity I’ve recently heard: “Great meeting—everyone is on the same page,” “You need to play the game to fit in here,” “He is a real maverick and won’t make it around here,” or “Great background and education, but she’s just not a culture fit.”

Jim Collin’s breakthrough book, [Good to Great](#), exemplifies this point further in the following paragraph: “Indeed, one of the crucial elements in taking a company from good to great is somewhat paradoxical. You need executives, on the one hand, who argue and debate—sometimes violently—in pursuit of the best answers, yet, on the other hand, who unify behind a decision regardless of parochial interests.”

Assessing Your Organization

In James Surowiecki’s book, [The Wisdom of Crowds](#), he argues that “under the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them.” He maintains that “wise crowds” need diversity of opinion, decentralization, independence of members from one another, and a good method for aggregating opinions. Diversity of thought inherently brings in fresh information; independence keeps people from being swayed by a single opinion leader; people’s errors tend to balance each other out, and considering all opinions helps ensure that the results are considerably “smarter” than if a single expert had been in charge.

The growing dependency on assessment testing tools among large companies to screen job applicants is something to consider. On the surface, it seems like a great idea. Determining if someone is qualified for a

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specific role is certainly appropriate, but testing specifically for culture fit can often lead to hiring decisions that result in corporate “sameness.” Who in a company will challenge outdated strategies? Who will confront the status quo and present fresh ideas? Too often, outside-the-box thinkers are viewed as management headaches. The character traits that fuel their unique perspectives and unconventional thinking can be a challenge for traditionally-trained managers.

Dr. Ron Young, CEO of TROVE, an Atlanta-based leadership development and coaching organization, says: “Utilizing assessment testing to identify the ‘secret sauce ingredients’ that make top performers excel and selecting for those ingredients in new hires is not the same thing as hiring for cultural fit. In fact, people who fit seamlessly into the existing culture are more likely to be moderate—not superior—performers. Consequently, the misinformed use of assessment testing can create a regression toward the mean rather than raise the performance bar.”

He continues: “Savvy organizations know how to identify top performers and hire more of them, managing their integration into the culture in a way that reduces rejection and increases the propagation of the new hires’ performing uniqueness. The goal is to influence the status quo rather than to allow the status quo to be squelched.”

But changing *how* you hire is not enough. Companies must also evolve to provide leadership training that teaches its leaders how to identify, hire and ultimately maximize the potential value of candidates who think differently. Take this idea a step further and managers will learn how to identify these types of thinkers within the company, and then engage the necessary tools to help them grow and ultimately be promoted to a level where they can influence strategy.

Aligning diversity of thought with a company’s business strategy, workplace strategy and marketplace strategy sets it up for success. Leading companies are altering their approach to employee selection and learning to embrace diverse thinking throughout their organizations. Consider what some of those executives are saying:

- From a speech given by former Hewlett-Packard Chairman and CEO, Carly Fiorina: *To be successful, we must harness diversity of thought. Yes, diversity of people, diversity of background, diversity of experience, diversity of skills. But most important, diversity of ideas. This is about a new definition of diversity that has to do with more than national origin or race or creed — it has to do with keeping the market in motion by feeding it new models, new ideas, new approaches.*
- CNN Worldwide President Jim Walton at a recent World Report Conference: *We need to have people with diverse thought challenging us in the planning of what stories to cover, who to interview, what questions to ask, and we feel this is a start, to continue to grow our fine profession.*
- David Greenberg, Senior Vice President of HR for L'Oréal USA, recently quoted: *Do we have enough diversity? Not just international and ethnic diversity, but a diversity of thought—which is key to how L'Oréal fosters innovation. A diverse group of people can be more innovative than a homogenous group. There might be more friction and discomfort among people who think differently, but the output is more innovative.*

The kind of creative, innovative diverse thinking necessary to solve business problems is limited by what we bring to the table, as manifestations of our perceptions, perspectives and value systems. It takes much less effort to stay within our comfort zones and surround ourselves with people who think like us. It is also a very good way to lose customers and market share.

Shifting the Paradigm

One of the keys to operationalizing this change throughout an organization is to alter the fundamental building blocks of the company's hiring process. First, this requires careful review and modification of job descriptions and how they are being used—do they contain language that perpetuates looking for the same type of candidate versus focusing on broadening the requirements for the role? Make sure they also focus on areas that qualify candidates for soft skills, intelligence and even *non*-industry experience.

Secondly, as Dr. Young of TROVE points out, modify the utilization of assessment testing. Assessment testing today, while growing in popularity, runs a real risk of promoting stale cultures and people that fit a certain profile. These tools can be modified to screen candidates differently and measure more broadly, instead of the typical narrow set of parameters.

Finally, companies need to embrace the paradigm shift from the very top of the organization. When executives and Human Resources collaborate to identify diversity opportunities and begin an open dialogue about hiring differently, you will see those organizations thrive. Just as important is acknowledging that existing leadership must develop new strategies for leading these outside-the-box thinkers.

This whole concept of hiring, developing and promoting for diversity of thought is not novel. There are companies, especially in the technology sector, who are doing a pretty good job of bringing in the right people and unleashing their potential. Do companies like Google, eBay and MySpace focus on hiring people who think alike, look alike and act alike? Or, does their success lie in the pursuit of intelligent, diverse (in thought) and creative people who can help them make breakthrough discoveries, challenge the rules of convention, create exciting new products and reshape the marketplace? Definitely the latter.

Companies should look closely at this model because establishing a workforce that is diverse in thought and ideas is a business imperative. If Surowiecki's assertions are correct, organizations that tap into the collective power of the "wise crowd" can catapult their strategy, and ultimately their success, to the next level.

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With a nearly 40-year legacy in executive search, Bell Oaks specializes in identifying, attracting and hiring professionals to critical positions with companies across the country. Founded in 1970, the national firm has particular expertise in the areas of sales and marketing, human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, and manufacturing/operations/engineering. Bell Oaks is consistently ranked as one of the leading search firms in the South and was recently named one of Atlanta's Best Places to Work by the Atlanta Business Chronicle for the second consecutive year.