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Attributes of an ideal CEO

Bringing biz logic to search for a prez

By Steven L. Katz, August 31, 2008

Think about how most large organizations hire a new leader. Then think about our presidential campaigns. Is this the best way to evaluate candidates vying to become the nation's chief executive?

You know, the person who will lead a trillion-dollar global organization, command the world's most lethal military, wield the power to write and enforce laws, and maintain the authority to print money.

Most organizations looking for a new boss start with an executive search firm. They write a job description. They create selection criteria, solicit applications, review résumés and then conduct interviews.

The presidential process reverses this logic.

Voters meet and "interview" the candidates first. Then they just keep doing that for months, in all the states and U.S. territories.

Candidates tell the voters what criteria we should use to evaluate them. And as for qualifications, we let the candidates self-certify as well: "I'm the best-qualified candidate running for president."

So what if we used the 2008 election for an experiment? Instead of voting, let's say we hired an executive search firm to find the next president of the United States.

How might the headhunters work? Which qualities and qualifications, traits and experience would they deem crucial to this position as the most powerful of all CEOs?

"Being president shares an important and defining similarity to every CEO position: There's no one above you," said Paul Schneider, a partner in Chicago's SSP BPI Group, a leading international executive coaching firm.

"However, what we observe repeatedly ... is that reaching the top requires one skill set, while a distinctly different set is needed to work effectively from the top," Schneider said.

So what does working effectively from the top as president entail?

In my own White House experience under President Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s, I looked at the presidency as akin to being an NFL coach—except the president was running all 32 teams at once, all playing at the same time.

The White House is a most dynamic environment. And unlike the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation, a president faces the scrutiny of the Congress, the public, the media, even the world, with almost every decision.

"It is interesting that we have no requirements other than age and citizenship to become president," said Edward

Santimauro of Korn/Ferry International. "When we do CEO searches, we labor very hard to define the specific requirements and competencies necessary for the successful placement."

Santimauro's firm focuses on "20 key leadership characteristics."

"We have our clients rank these and arrive at their top seven mission-critical factors organized into categories of: strategic skills, operating skills, courage, energy and drive; organizational positioning skills, and personal and interpersonal skills," Santimauro said. "The candidates' skills are then matched with mission-critical skills."

Jason Hanold, a search executive with Russell Reynolds Associates in Chicago, said the best candidates combine hard skills that can be measured and quantified; and soft skills that generally refer to how well someone works with people.

"Most leaders fall down on the soft issues like relationships/chemistry/values/ability to motivate," said Jack Clarey, president of Clarey, Andrews & Klein in Northbrook. "Very seldom do I see failure because the person was simply not smart enough or lacked the technical skills to perform."

"All the more important in the presidency, because this isn't office politics, this is real politics!" Clarey added.

Santimauro agreed: "Study after study says that executives fail not because of their technical skills or industry experience, but because of their [lack of] ability to lead and fit into a culture."

So how can voters evaluate these skills in the candidates?

Hanold provided a chart that lists some of the hard and soft skills a firm might evaluate if searching for a president, something that each of us voters is already engaged in. A handy checklist, perhaps, for the electoral booth in November?

Finding one person who is an ideal fit for such a profile is a tall order, but the competencies and personal qualities are a valuable tool.

So what is the most important competency that search executives look for? Teamwork and whether the candidate can lead, create and play well on the best teams.

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