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In the Lead

Managers Err if They Limit Their Hiring To People Like Them

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In work, as in love relationships, we often seek idealized versions of ourselves. We align ourselves with others who have qualities we admire or who mirror our personalities, interests and beliefs in some way.

This can be tricky for managers who must hire and lead employees. If they ignore their values and styles of working -- and how these fit or clash with prospective hires -- they may end up with employees they dislike and can't easily motivate. Yet to excel in their companies, managers invariably need a diverse mix of perspectives as well as skills. In fact, they're likely to fail if they simply hire employees who resemble them and the others on their team too closely.

"The power of any group of people is the power of the mix," says Renee Wingo, chief people officer at Virgin Mobile USA of Warren, N.J. "You may do all right, but you're not going to create any magic as a manager unless you bring together people with diverse perspectives who aren't miniversions of you."

When hiring her own staff of 10 human-resource professionals, she says she tried to create "a stew that wasn't mushy but distinct, where we could all taste the carrots, potatoes and other ingredients." Her staff includes employees with 30 years of experience and 18 months of experience; people who are technology-oriented, manufacturing-oriented and service-oriented; full- and part-timers; and extroverts as well as introverts. "There are folks who would be inclined to party in New York on weekends and others who prefer sitting by a warm fire with a dog at their feet," she says.

This mix serves a vital business function, she argues, "because if we can come together and represent all these different points of view we can better appreciate and serve" Virgin Mobile's diverse work force. But it makes her own job as a manager more difficult, she acknowledges. At weekly meetings where her staff discusses problems and projects, she says she has to encourage an airing of different opinions but also keep everyone focused enough to make decisions. "It's kind of like being with a group of people who are debating where to go to dinner, and one person is insisting, 'We have to go to the East Side,' and another says, 'No, the West Side,' and it's my role to ask, 'Why don't we talk about what we want to eat?' " she says.

One common quality all her employees share is a desire to work in a diverse group. Ms. Wingo says she screens for this quality during job interviews by asking candidates to describe how they have made decisions and what they have valued most in other jobs. "It's a positive when they say they loved coming together as a team and learned things they never knew about," she says. "But if they say, 'Well, things kept changing and I didn't agree with people I worked with,' I question whether they'd fit here."

Denise Morrison, senior vice president and president of global sales at Campbell Soup, also puts a premium on team players, partly, she admits, because she defines herself that way. "Someone who wants to do all the scoring on their own may sometimes add to an organization, but in corporations the whole is greater than any one part," she says. To make sure she isn't simply hiring people she personally likes, she often asks others who report to her to interview candidates she is considering. "It's very hard not to be subjective when you are interviewing, so it's good to get a number of different perspectives on a candidate," she says.

Ms. Morrison also knows she needs employees with experience very different from her own. She has worked at a number of large corporations, including Procter & Gamble and Nabisco. But at times she has recruited staff with small-business experience, especially when launching new marketing or product strategies. Small-business entrepreneurs, she says, "have had to think outside the box to survive and know what it's like to work with thin resources."

What does she do when she inherits employees who clash with her collaborative style? "If they're always trying to grab the limelight, I tell them what I expect in the way of teamwork, and if that doesn't work and they're a good performer, I try to see if there's a better fit for them" elsewhere in the company, she says.

How well prospective employees fit with the company's culture may be even more important than how well they mesh with their hiring manager's style. Brian M. Sullivan, chairman and CEO of executive recruiter Christian & Timbers, recalls that when he was recruiting managers for Wall Street companies some years ago, old-line investment companies like J.P. Morgan sought MBAs from Ivy League schools, while less tony firms like Prudential Insurance preferred candidates from less privileged backgrounds who had often worked their way through college. One Prudential executive "used to tell me, 'Bring me the scrappers who can make money on the back of an envelope,'" Mr. Sullivan says.

He worries about executives who won't hire outsiders and always insist on surrounding themselves with people they already know. In today's lean and competitive environment, he says, "you don't need drinking buddies. You need people who will shake things up."

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