

Forget About Generations—Focus on Assessing Talent

By

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In your chain of command, you may have “Baby Boomers,” “Gen Xers,” some members of “Generation Y,” and probably some from “Why Nots?” or whatever names have made their way into the books since I started writing this article. Authors fill these books with advice about how you must manage and lead the people in your organization, based solely on the year of their birth. Apparently you will automatically understand all those who share your generation but remain flummoxed by those who don’t.

This new, pervasive, insidious “ism” is sweeping the country, if not the world. People who would never dream of engaging in sexism or racism don’t hesitate to jump on the “generationalism” bandwagon. Scores of experts have cropped up to explain how managers should handle each generation differently. But before you invest your time, consider this: Bill Gates, Bill Clinton—Baby Boomers. Tom Hanks, Michael Jordan, and Jay Leno, also Baby Boomers. Osama Bin Laden—a Baby Boomer. Can somebody tell me what these men have in common with each other? If this much diversity exists in this short list of Baby Boomers, doesn’t it make sense that uniqueness and variety exist within each generation in your organization too?

Generationalism offers the lazy executive an excuse not to appreciate the unique contributions of each person. Aside from wasting your time studying this never-proven theory, you will engage in biases that will certainly stand in the way of you identifying your stars. Top performers know no generational, gender, race, or religious lines. But they do share three traits: They are smart enough to do the job; they are driven to do it

well; and they have integrity. Throughout history all the great leaders who positively influenced the course of humankind embodied all these traits. Certainly each came from a different generation—often separated by hundreds if not thousands of years. You probably don't need to know more about each generation's preferences, but what you do need to understand is how to size people up better—how to assess top talent.

A New Model of Talent Assessment

One of the most critical responsibilities of senior leaders involves making decisions about talent. Of all the leadership and managerial duties you'll face, this is probably the least intuitive, the most complicated, and the most unfamiliar. If you're typical, you will tend to attract and be attracted to those who reflect your own work style, personality, and approach to decision making. Often attracting those like you will work, but at other times, you'll need to act as a magnet for those who represent a different skill set or approach. For example, if you're a gregarious leader who finds discussion and conversation stimulating, you might not immediately experience a sense of connection with a reserved finance person who prefers working alone. You might also find yourself enormously impressed with a person who seems like you but who lacks some of your less obvious aptitudes. In other words, a person's behaviors and experience usually present themselves in the most obvious way—the aptitude appearing much later in the game.

Whether you're assessing the talent for hire or promotion, you'll need to carefully weigh the three constructs of talent: the aptitude to do the job, the behaviors that will ensure success in the job, and the requisite experience for success.

Aptitude involves a natural disposition or tendency toward a particular action, the readiness to learn, and the raw talent to function in the role. It involves three major

capacities: verbal ability, quantitative skills, and strategic thinking. When people evidence strong control of language through use of advanced vocabulary, well-developed writing and speaking skills, and a quickness at learning new skills from verbally presented data, you can infer robust verbal ability.

At the most basic level, quantitative skills involve the capacity to handle a budget successfully. More advanced evidence will be tied to stellar performance with profit and loss responsibilities.

Strategic thinkers understand how to separate the critical few considerations from the vast number of nonessential ones. They maintain a global perspective as they quickly get to the core of complex problems, even when they haven't encountered the predicament before. They typically multi-task effectively and keep the priorities clearly in focus. Most see the future as open and malleable, so they paint credible pictures of the future for others to understand. They usually handle change and shifting priorities well, even when they didn't welcome them.

You can often infer aptitude from candidates' track records. How quickly have they learned new, unfamiliar tasks in the past? Handled unexpected, unpleasant change? Aptitude implies that, with training and experience, this person can master the skills required to do the next job. If a person doesn't have the requisite aptitude for the job, nothing else matters. Without it, no amount of coaching, training, wishing, or hoping will make this person able to advance.

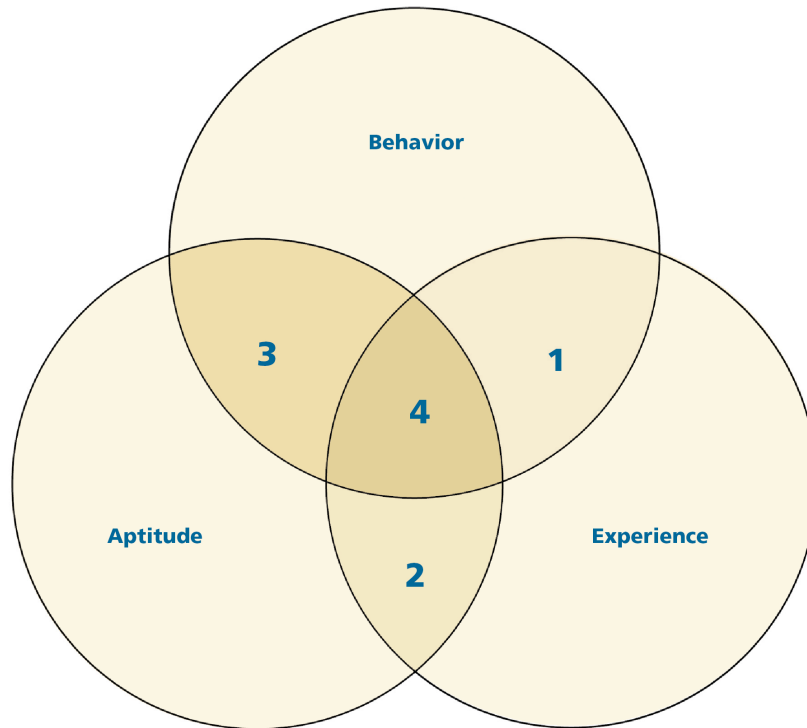
Behavior involves people's conduct—the way they present themselves, and it tends to be consistent. While some behaviors change in radically differing situations,

most are "comfort zone" behaviors, and therefore, highly repetitive. Behavior encompasses deportment, carriage and demeanor, and it reflects morals.

Experience, the most easily observed and objective aspect of talent assessment, addresses the skills the person has displayed so far. In other words the person already knows how to perform specific tasks and has demonstrated this in the past. To use a baseball metaphor, these batters have an impressive "at bat" record that demonstrates how they will likely perform in the future. However, behavior draws on *past* demonstrations of ability; it offers no guarantee of *future* performance. Many college star baseball players never make it to the minors, much less the majors. So while important, experience offers limited prophetic value. I find companies give it unfair advantage in the assessing game, however.

Here's a model that may help you see the differences:

Talent Assessment Model



1 Behavior + Experience

Don't hire or promote these individuals if you need them to progress in the organization. They lack aptitude so can never be a high potential candidate.

2 Experience + Aptitude

Hire and promote these people cautiously. They lack the behaviors that will help them move up. With coaching, however, they can often learn to change behaviors and become Fours.

3 Aptitude + Behavior

A viable candidate for hire or promotion. With enough time and the right kinds of experience, these people can become Fours.

4 Behavior + Experience + Aptitude

The ideal candidate for hire or promotion. These people have all the essentials to be the top talent in your organization.

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As you assess people, ask yourself into which section you would put them? Obviously you'll want all "4s," but you usually can't achieve that initially. Instead, you'll need to determine which of the other people you can help.

At this juncture, you might find yourself distracted by questions about a person's attitude, which this model doesn't seem to represent. People display their attitudes through their mental states, emotions, or moods. Attitude influences the way they act, feel, and think. It has to do with *desire* to do the job. When you face a situation in which you're not sure if a person lacks aptitude, requisite behaviors, or experience, or just has an attitude problem, ask yourself this question: "If this person's life depended on it, could he or she do the job?" If they have ever done it before but have quit doing it, you face an attitude problem. If they have never done anything at this level but have shown competence in similar kinds of situations, the person may just need training. But if you conclude the person would suffer dire consequences if his or her life depended on successfully completing the task, it's an aptitude problem, and there's nothing you can do to help. (There's not much you can do about a bad attitude either, but at least there's hope of an attitude change, especially if the person senses the dismal consequences).

Generally speaking, you can't coach someone to demonstrate a better attitude as evidenced by a strong achievement drive, reliability, or ethics. Similarly, you can't coach people to have more aptitude, raw talent, or intelligence. People come through the door with these on their first day, so if you notice a scarcity of any one of these, realize you'll have to live with what you see or replace the person.

If you notice your direct reports simply lack experience or certain behaviors, however, your coaching and the right kind of experience can make all the difference. If

they have trouble with people skills, presentation and writing skills, management, or technical skills, you can help them develop these. Sometimes you can provide the guidance yourself; other times you can arrange training or experiences to aid in the development. But in each case, you have every reason to be optimistic that the person will improve with the right training and experience, provided the talent to learn is there to start with.

Conclusion

No generation has ever held the corner market on talent. Certainly, circumstances coalesce in such a way to provide unique experiences for each generation, but true talent knows no age or generation. Companies have always wanted those who are honest, smart enough to do the job, and driven to do it well. As the senior leader, if you learn to assess aptitude, behavior, and experience—not generations—you'll take a critical step toward attracting and retaining the best in your industry and ensuring your success and that of those who depend on you.