



THE ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE VICE PRESIDENT, HUMAN RESOURCES

According to the Vice President, Human Resources

During the interview process of a recent search for a Vice President, Human Resources (on behalf of one of our Ottawa-area hi-tech clients), we asked the question: “What are five essential attributes you would look for in a V.P.H.R.?” A total of 18 different attributes were mentioned, the top ten most frequent responses being (in order):

1. The ability to build strong, enduring relationships.
2. Strong communication skills.
3. A strategic/business vision.
4. A strong and credible H.R. generalist background.
5. Leadership qualities.
6. Personal integrity/high ethical standards.
7. Teamwork at all levels.
8. Negotiating/influencing skills.
9. Ability to balance strategic with operational issues.
10. Sense of humour.

What does this tell us about the H.R. function in today’s organizations, and indeed the qualities that are required to be successful at this job?

First and foremost, it emphasizes the business focus of H.R. rather than the traditional, more functionally-oriented H.R. focus. One of the first questions we are asked by candidates when recruiting for senior H.R. positions is “Does the V.P.H.R. have a seat at the Management table?” If not, the majority of first-rate candidates will immediately lose interest. We’ve come a long way, haven’t we?

Second, the list emphasizes that most companies are “walking the talk” with respect to their mission and culture statements. Inherent in the critical success factors of a V.P.H.R., are a high degree of personal ethics, trust and relationship building, in addition to a total commitment to teamwork.

Third, it emphasizes that to be a successful senior H.R. practitioner, you must bring to the management table a high degree of personal maturity and professional well-roundedness in addition to the basic functional knowledge inherent in the H.R. function.

Last, and thank goodness, a sense of humour came out in the top ten list. Without it, work would be a pretty scary place to be, and with the stresses inherent in most work cultures of today, a sense of humour is one of the best tools to combat stress. More importantly, everyone in the company looks to H.R. to see how to behave; if H.R. is having fun while working hard, so will everyone else.

Incidentally, our best candidate's top five attributes were all in the top ten list, and of course he was able to provide concrete examples of where he had displayed these characteristics in his present and previous jobs. We didn't know how the top ten list would look during the course of our interviews, as we only collated the answers once the search had been completed. However, it was reassuring that when we compared the list of answers with our short-list Candidate Comparison chart, there was a high degree of correlation.

Two other interview questions were very telling. These were "Have you ever been responsible for guarding a culture (and how did you do it)?" and "What should be the primary deliverables of the H.R. function (and how do you measure them)?" There was a general consensus on these questions from the top candidates, but for some of the less experienced candidates those questions in particular became the principal "deal breakers". As with all predictive interview questions, in the absence of firsthand experience in a specific area, it is impossible to give credible, real-life examples.

All searches in the H.R. field are especially interesting, particularly for a 3rd-party recruiter, as we know that our interview and selection techniques are being scrutinized by fellow professionals. At the V.P. level, another interesting dimension exists, outside of the H.R. functional area, which is the strategic and business role. Increasingly, progressive companies look to H.R. for vision and direction. And, as a cost centre, H.R. must justify its existence with metric evidence of return on investment (ROI). This dimension in today's hectic and demanding business environment is often the one critical factor which differentiates well qualified from not-quite-qualified candidates.

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