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Righteous!

Building your firm with the right people in the right seats



Cooper

By Miles B. Cooper

The lawyer sat contemplating the right people, right seats concept. This was articulated by Jim Collins in *Good to Great*. Collins defines right people as folks who share a company's core values and expand the company's values-based culture. He defines right seat as a situation where a person's role matches their greatest skills and passions. The lawyer sat with the concept because the firm committed to 100% right people, right seats, an evolution requiring continuous consideration as neither people nor positions remain static.

Valuable lesson

Without firmly defined core values, one cannot determine whether a firm has the right people in the right seats. Fortunately, defining core values is a straightforward exercise that can be done in as little as a couple hours. It is an investment that will profoundly improve a firm's trajectory, satisfaction, and client results. If you have not done this yet, follow the road map in *Value Proposition*, Plaintiff Magazine, September 2021. (https://plaintiffmagazine.com/recent-issues/item/value-proposition). We ask that you pause here, pull up the calendar, and schedule two hours within the next month with whomever you consider to be your firm leadership to complete this exercise. You will not be sorry.

Right right

After formally defining core values, interesting things happen. Frequently, people whose values don't align with the firm's will leave. They sense they are not a right fit. That doesn't make them bad. Firm cultures vary, and folks who struggle in one firm can soar when they find the place with aligned values. Consciously considering right placement is essential. That's where a tool like the Entrepreneurial Operating System's People Analyzer™ helps. List the firm values and evaluate whether someone falls below (-), meets (+/-) or exceeds (+) each value. To the extent one has a leadership team, manager, or human resources person, each person should independently perform this exercise and then discuss the results.

Danny Meyer, Shake Shack founder and restaurant entrepreneur, says, "The culture you have in your organization is the sum of all the wanted behaviors that you celebrate minus all the unwanted behaviors that you tolerate." Wrong people, even productive ones, negatively impact the firm. This means those with minuses will be happier elsewhere. Their departure will also benefit the firm. If a person receives minuses in values alignment, one has no choice but to move the person along. While hard in the moment, it is essential to take this step for the person and for the firm.

As a younger lawyer, unconsciously incompetent about right person, I employed someone for a year and a half who was not a right fit. At the time, I felt this was kinder than letting the person go, not recognizing the toxicity created by mismatched values. Failing to proactively move someone along who does not fit because one doesn't want to hurt their feelings is the quintessential slow removal of a bandaid. One will end up at the same point – separation – only via a torturous and unproductive path.

Once right person, i.e., cultural fit, is determined, one still has to make sure that right person is in a right seat. This involves evaluating whether the person gets it, wants it, and has the capacity for the position filled. This is a yes/no analysis. If there are any nos, that person is likely in the wrong seat. The choice here with a cultural fit is to decide whether the person can be coached up, put into a different role, or needs to be moved out of the firm.

Using the people analyzer tool regularly helps an organization achieve its people strategy. People's values typically don't change, but they can outgrow their roles as their skills develop. Helping them achieve their professional objectives requires recognizing this as it happens and providing opportunities.

Puzzling

Some of the biggest challenges come from identifying people who are frustratingly close but ultimately not right fit. Shake Shack's Danny Meyer uses a wonderful jigsaw puzzle analogy. When building a puzzle, one sometimes grabs a piece that seems to fit but isn't the right piece. The longer one determinedly tamps the piece in, the more the cardboard frays on the piece and pieces around it. Recognizing the so-close person, one then must determine whether that is a right person who might work well elsewhere in the organization or whether it is a wrong person who will be happier somewhere else. With right person, the doubt test is useful. When there is doubt, there is no doubt. The person must go.

Outro

Back to our lawyer contemplating right people, right seats. The lawyer wished it was possible to go back and redo some past employee interactions with this knowledge. The lawyer also knew that things happen for a reason. Here, that reason must be to crystallize the lesson and remain committed to it, even when the short-term conversations can be challenging. For those interested in this topic, the Tim Ferris Show #665 with Danny Meyer is excellent (https://tim.blog/2023/04/06/danny-meyer/) as is Jim Collins's *Good to Great*.

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