

# How to Hire the Right Person

By Michael F. Doody, Senior Vice President and Karen E. Otto, Vice President

**T**he person you chose to fill a key leadership position in your organization, the one who seemed to exhibit all of the characteristics and qualities you were seeking — poise, intelligence and textbook experience — failed. What looked like a perfect placement became an obvious mistake.

## So, what went wrong?

Many factors contribute to an unsuccessful hire — not the least of which is the time commitment spent on the front-end of the search. Recruiting for a high-level executive position can be one of the most challenging, time-consuming, exhilarating and disruptive processes a healthcare organization can face.

In his book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't*, author Jim Collins says, “If you want to be a great company, the single biggest limitation on your ability to grow is the ability to get and hang on to enough of the right people. If I were running a company today, I would have one priority above all others: to acquire the best people I could.”

## Who's going to argue with that?

Yet, how can you better ensure that your next executive hire is the right choice? The answer lies in recognizing the difference between *great* candidates and selecting the *right* person for your organization.

## Where to start

When a key executive leaves your organization, your initial thoughts may go from “How can I replace this important person,” to “How quickly can I get this position filled?”

Before jumping head first into the search, set aside time to think about and assess your organization's culture. Does it reflect what is written on the “plaque” on your wall? How is the culture — how are the values really played out in *your* behaviors?

Finding someone who will fill your leadership void and be a “good fit” for the organization begins with a critical examination of your organization's values, culture, history and traditions — regardless of whether you use an outside search firm or conduct the search internally.

## How well do you know your organization?

You're well respected, successful and have been with your organization a long time, but ask yourself — “How well do I really know my organization?”

- How would you define your organization's culture?
- How do your organization's mission and values define/influence the culture? How well do you adhere to them?
- Are there important traditions that have been passed down through the years? How do they influence behavior within your organization?
- What's unique about your organization and how has that contributed to your growth and development?
- Does your leadership have diversity of thought?

*Witt/Kieffer consultants regularly prepare articles and presentations on leadership recruitment and retention, development and mentoring, as well as governing board challenges.*

*This is one in a series of articles available through Witt/Kieffer at 630/990.1370 or at [www.wittkieffer.com](http://www.wittkieffer.com).*

You may think these questions seem somewhat simplistic. Yet concerning yourself with your organization's traditions, history and culture does matter — if you want someone who will “fit in” or “adapt” to your organization's unique personality.

Each question reveals a facet of your organization's character — the good and the bad.

- How would you describe your hospital or health system to someone else?
- What are its quirks?
- What makes you feel good about working there?
- Who succeeds in your organization...who doesn't...and why?

### **A question of “fit”**

Answers to these tough questions are indispensable. They not only offer insight into the uniqueness of your organization's values, but are essential when evaluating a candidate's “organizational fit.”

- Will this candidate internalize your mission and live your values?
- Does he/she respect the entrepreneurial spirit that built the organization?
- Knowing your history, will he/she be able to cultivate relationships with community leaders?
- Is this a person who can work with your board, medical staff and other executives?
- Can he/she be a role model to your staff?
- Does he/she have the personality to become the “face” of the organization?

Answers to these questions will help you differentiate candidates while also offering a glimpse into each individual's integrity, ethics and maturity.

### **Job essentials**

Evaluating your organization's personality provides one element necessary for finding the right person. Next you'll need to establish the job essentials.

Sounds like simple logic, yet it's not uncommon for organizations to overlook the main focus of the job. What's the most critical component required for the position? Do you need a financial turnaround? If so, seek out candidates who have demonstrated success with financial turnarounds. If creating and implementing new programs is your central need, find individuals who have proven experience developing and implementing new programs.

### **Creating a wish list?**

Once you've established the job requirements, decide which attributes, traits, abilities, etc. are essential in a candidate. Which are desirable, but not as critical?

- How would you describe the ideal candidate's leadership style?
- Does that style “fit” with your organization?
- Are you seeking a person who brings diversity of thought to your organization or someone who brings consensus?
- Is public speaking a key aspect of the job?
- Do you need someone who can energize others?
- Do you want a strong implementer or a “big thinker?”
- Does your organization desire diverse representation in your leadership?

## **Experience vs. potential**

Another difficult question is whether you want someone who possesses great promise or a tested portfolio. What's the advantage of one over the other?

Potential can scare off hiring executives, especially those who don't like surprises. Yet, a candidate with great potential may bring qualities a veteran candidate may not. For example, you have a candidate with years of experience and a proven track record, with significant accomplishments. Your other candidate has less experience, but strong interpersonal skills, creative energy and the capability to think globally — qualities you envision as crucial in developing new organizational initiatives. Either candidate could be an excellent choice, but if you choose "potential," be sure to provide the support necessary for the "potential" to develop.

Discuss the alternatives with your search and board committees. Listen to their thoughts and concerns and try to reach consensus on the attributes your organization must have in a candidate. Be flexible. If you are too rigid, you risk narrowing your pool of candidates.

## **Know your timetable**

Bear in mind that your hiring deadline influences the search. Given a tight deadline, the biggest hurdle is cultivating a sufficiently large enough pool of candidates. A longer time frame allows greater flexibility for developing and vetting a candidate slate, and the opportunity to conduct an in-depth organizational evaluation. Yet even under a tight deadline, you must still apply all the concepts of "organizational fit" into your search.

## **Interviewing and assigning homework**

A common mistake during the candidate interviewing process is not seeking opportunities for peer interviewing. Consider expanding your field to include peers and even direct reports — select those who have good perception skills. Their feedback can provide a different perspective on a candidate's leadership, supervisory and people skills.

Another helpful tool is a homework-like assignment. This type of assignment gives you the chance to analyze how a candidate thinks conceptually about problems and solutions.

- Does he/she view problems globally?
- Was the response well-thought out and logical?
- Did the answer help resolve the problem and take it beyond the initial parameters requested?

When used, "homework" is usually given at the finalist level. One example would be to assign an 8-10 minute presentation on a specific strategic issue or operational challenge facing the organization. The finalist would then make his/her presentation during the next visit. An assignment like this could be used for any senior level position, but sometimes you may want to "customize" the assignment to the position. For example, developing an organizational chart complete with work flow and reporting responsibilities may be an appropriate assignment for a COO candidate.

When choosing to give an assignment make sure it's an exercise that is relevant to the position and requires the candidate to consider various aspects of the organization.

## **Leadership evaluation**

Some organizations incorporate leadership assessment/evaluation into the executive search process. These tests help gauge a candidate's leadership ability, decision-making skills, and personality strengths and weaknesses.

They also measure how well a candidate may function in various situations and predict how well an individual handles pressure. Results from these assessments can be used to further differentiate the candidates' strengths and weaknesses, but more importantly, information gathered here helps identify additional areas to probe with the candidate on his/her next visit.



**Michael F. Doody**  
Senior Vice President  
Central Region Director  
630/990.1370  
miked@wittkiewfer.com

*Michael F. Doody has more than 35 years of leadership experience in healthcare organizations and professional associations. His 15 years as a CEO give Mike significant credibility when he advises boards of directors and senior executives. His broad background and search experience provide him with a wide network of executive contacts.*



**Karen Otto**  
Vice President  
Oak Brook, IL  
630/990.1370  
kareno@wittkiewfer.com

*Karen E. Otto assists healthcare and educational clients find and attract qualified executive leadership. Since 1984 she has recruited numerous executives for hospitals, health systems, academic health science centers and universities.*

## You think you've found the right person...now what?

You've conducted a textbook search and believe you've found the right person, but as Yogi Berra once said, "It ain't over until it's over."

Although you feel comfortable about your decision, the search cannot be completed until after you've conducted a rigorous check of references. Never underestimate this important step. A candidate's past is the most accurate estimate of a person's future behavior. Listen closely to what the references say about the candidate, but also what they don't say.

Some of the questions to consider include:

- Why did the candidate leave his/her last job? Was it the boss? Was it the environment?
- What is motivating the candidate to leave his/her current organization?
- How would you rate his/her social and people skills?
- What are the candidate's values?
- Describe the organizational culture in which the candidate would best fit.
- What areas of support do you feel the candidate needs to be successful?
- How would you describe the candidate's leadership skills? Does he/she have the temperament and ability to handle pressure?
- What would you say were the candidate's major accomplishments?

In addition to questions about the candidate's values and personality, make sure to perform due diligence. Verify the candidate's credentials and accomplishments. By being thorough, you may uncover potential problems that otherwise wouldn't have been exposed.

## A two-way sell

Throughout the recruiting process both sides have been presenting the best face to the other. This recruitment dance continues until a formal offer is presented and accepted. But don't stop once the hire has been made. Continue to "sell" your organization.

Take advantage of the "honeymoon" phase to fully integrate your new colleague into the organization. Develop an orientation schedule that reinforces the message that he/she has made the right choice. Pay attention to the issues of culture and organizational personality. Show your newest colleague that what was described in the first interview is true now that he/she is a member of the team. Check in regularly, at least quarterly, until you're confident of his/her success.

Researching your "organization's personality" prior to launching an executive search, will reap benefits long after making the *right* hire.

# WITT / KIEFFER

35 Years of Executive Search Excellence

2015 Spring Road, Suite 510, Oak Brook, IL 60523

[www.wittkiewfer.com](http://www.wittkiewfer.com)

<b>Offices nationwide</b>	SCOTTSDALE, AZ 480/603.4700	IRVINE, CA 949/851.5070	BURLINGTON, MA 781/272.8899	BETHESDA, MD 301/654.5070	NEW YORK, NY 212/686.2676	DALLAS, TX 972/490.1370
	OAK BROOK, IL 630/990.1370	EMERYVILLE, CA 510/420.1370	ATLANTA, GA 404/233.1370	NANTUCKET, MA 508/228.6700	ST. LOUIS, MO 314/862.1370	NASHVILLE, TN 615/665.3388
						HOUSTON, TX 713/266.6779