

Employees for Keeps

By Cheryl Crumb

Turnover getting you down? Continually dusting off that "Help Wanted" sign in the window? How do you find and keep the top sales or service people? How can you recognize the #1 person? How can you stop hiring those guys you later fire?

Answers to these questions lie in another more fundamental question: Is your operation the organization of the past or the organization of the future?

If your organization is one of the past it means you're focused on selling products. You're hiring people at the cheapest wage you can offer, and you're asking that they just do the job ... Your personal motto is: "I just want people to do what I say." You've been successful being this way, and you think, "Why change? It's worked so far".

If your organization is one of the future, it means you're focused on helping your customers be more successful by partnering with you. You've recognized that you need employees who have not only technical competence, but who are masters of their own Self Esteem. Nathaniel Branden (The Six Pillars of Self Esteem) defines self-esteem "as the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness." He says it is confidence in the usefulness of our mind and in our ability to think. This means when we have self-esteem, we have the ability to learn, make appropriate choices and decisions, and we can master change. It's the belief that success, achievement, fulfillment are appropriate to us.

I can almost hear you saying, "All I want is a clerk during the peak season who can use the cash register and speak politely to customers." Gong: you're in the organization of the past, and you might not even know it. Look around you. What differentiates your establishment from the hundreds of others in your city? It's not your products or your services. You're all selling the same brands. It's your "service" which is the attitude and behaviour of your staff. Think of the best sale you were ever witness to. Someone probably made you feel special, took the time to really understand what you were looking for, provided you with information and options, created a unique solution package, helped you make your decision, and followed up with you after the sale.

So, I'm saying you don't want "just a

clerk" ... You want a self-manager who can create a relationship with customers, who can help customers make the best buying decision for their situation. This takes self-confidence, creativity, self-responsibility, independence, assertiveness, goal-focus, initiative, and integrity. You don't want to hire obedience, conformity and respect for authority!

So, in this series of articles we'll look at the keys to successful hiring and your role in nurturing the talent you've bought.

Hiring isn't easy. The typical "let's have a chat" (another word for an unstructured talk) provides no better decision than a coin flip. While most of us think we have faith in our intuition, consider that most "gut feel" interviewing decisions end up in the next round of want ads. Questioning that? Consider:

- How often does that horse you "really like" cross the finish line first?
- When was the last time you left Vegas a richer person?
- Your first spouse!

Interviewing is more an art than a science, but it's certainly helped by a systematic process. Whether you're hiring a senior level executive or a junior entry position, the interviewing process is composed of the same six steps:

- 1. Skill analysis** – This is taking a clear look at the job in the context of the pressures the organization is facing. It's understanding who are the customers, what role is this individual providing, what expectations do customers have, and who must this person interrelate with to delight the customer.
- 2. Competencies** – Identify the technical skills and performance competencies. It helps to make a wish list of the qualifications (including human, emotional and social) this person must possess if s/he is to capably perform the job. Put them in priority order and indicate any that are absolutely essential. Most hires that fail do so, not because of missing technical competencies, but because of missing human competencies.
- 3. Questions** – Develop questions related to each competency. There should be no questions asked of applicants that don't test the presence of a qualification. The best predictor of future performance is past performance. Therefore, ask behaviour-

oriented questions about what the applicant has done rather than theoretical questions about what they would do. Probe, probe, probe.

4. Conduct Interview – An interview is a structured conversation with the following components: establish rapport, set the agenda, collect information, describe the job and the company, invite questions and terminate the interview by setting expectations. A general rule of thumb is that an interview that takes less than 45 minutes probably won't yield enough information for you to make a good decision. Additionally, the strategy of having several people interview and evaluate applicants improves the likelihood of success.

5. Evaluate applicants – Using the identified competencies, rate each of the candidates against each of the criteria. You may use a scoring system of 1-5 or a high-medium-low designation. You may even weight higher those competencies that you value the most.

6. Make decision – Determine which applicant best meets the most important requirements of the job. Check references carefully in a structured format with previous employers. Describe the job and its challenges and probe for similarities. After reference checking, consider trainability for those factors where the candidate is low. Recognize where training is unlikely to change the individual (i.e. sensitivity, creativity). Advise all applicants of your decision.

Remember, there's a big yellow caution sign looming over all interviews. The employer's goal is three-fold: to gather predictive information (Can they? Will they?), to inform and entice the applicant, and to test chemistry (Do they fit?). The applicant's goal is three-fold: to present self favorably, to collect information about the company and the job, and to test chemistry. The process needs to allow all parties to fulfill their goals.

What's the cost of a bad hire? Lost customers, training time, morale, personal frustration, severance... and lost opportunity. You don't have to be victim to a "bad market".

In the next article we'll consider some key competencies of a customer service representative and questions associated with those behaviours.