Compelling Interviews: Using Scenarios to Uncover Talent and Intelligence

Finding leaders who can inspire others while effectively running a creative and profitable business can be a challenging undertaking and sometimes feels like throwing darts. It’s great when you hit the target and hire a sophisticated and talented leader, but it can be damaging when you miss the mark and your hire is unable to differentiate priorities and to make decisions that profit your business.

Look into the future

Hiring managers should develop an interview process that goes beyond past experiences and instead predicts future leadership behavior. Such an approach depends on the hiring manager’s ability to ask compelling questions. In particular, this means asking questions with scenarios that provoke a candidate to provide sophisticated answers: to show an aptitude for making decisions based on business intelligence, not just relying on past experience and knowledge.

When interviewing candidates who will be leaders in your company, ask questions and provide scenarios that have nothing to do with the candidate’s past experience. There’s a good chance you will uncover some important qualities that differentiate an exceptional leader from the others.

Scenarios can provide all the variables a leader faces when making decisions. In high-pressure environments there are the complexity of players (clients, co-workers, vendors, partners) and situations (competing demands, impending deadlines, new business initiatives). How a candidate responds to difficult situations reveals his or her ability to focus on the details necessary to make viable decisions.

A leader will show he or she understands business realities, can quickly discern priorities and is able to provide multiple options and outcomes for decisions made. By adding scenarios to the interview process, hiring managers can increase their ability to hit the mark and hire an exceptional leader.

Hiring Managers look for Seven Leadership Characteristics

When hiring high-level strategic leaders, companies want to find the candidate who will delight their firm with the skills, habits and intelligence to take their firm to the next level, whether they are looking to raise revenues, build a new practice-area, open a new office or manage a creative team.

In general there are seven characteristics of interest to a hiring manager, often summed up in an analysis of an individual’s personality and style.

- People skills – effective communication and persuasiveness
- Thinking skills – problem solving and critical thinking
- Motivation – whether interest is tilted towards being a leader or producing results
- Productivity – comfortable with details and multi-tasking and has a record of completing work
- Maturity – self-awareness, even temperament and ability to manage emotions
- Change – comfortable with change and ambiguity
- Experience – actual experience in business, industry, management, etc.
How well a candidate interviews and rates for these seven areas can define how a candidate is perceived for a leadership role. Management gurus have developed systems and philosophical approaches to help hiring managers discern leadership qualities. Most well known are Emotional Intelligence, IQ testing and personality tests.

**Executive Intelligence**

Justin Menkes recently contributed to this field by concentrating on what he calls Executive Intelligence. His best selling book on Executive Intelligence outlines a set of aptitudes that exceptional leaders share. By taking Menkes precepts and applying them to the interview process, hiring managers have an opportunity to more fully explore potential leadership qualities of their candidates.

According to Menkes, leaders can have differing (and not always warm and fuzzy) interpersonal styles, but they probably share the trait of being sharp. He believes that in many of the personality and style inventories, the distinction between knowledge and intelligence is blurred. Being knowledgeable is not necessarily the same thing as having the ability to solve problems in new situations.

Menkes bases his theory of Executive Intelligence on over eight years of research on intelligence tests and cognitive skills, plus hundreds of interviews with top CEO’s.

He sorts Executive Intelligence into four basic categories:

- Critical decision-making skills – the ability to think critically and to make viable decisions, critical business thinking is the foundation of executive intelligence
- Prioritization skills – the ability to distinguish high concerns from secondary concerns and knowing when to choose which
- Anticipation skills – ability to foresee probable effects of one’s actions
- Conflict recognition skills – the ability to recognize potential conflicts of underlying agendas

**Executive Intelligence in practice**

It is critical for a hiring manager to understand how a professional will react to or interact in new situations and, more importantly, those situations salient to the hiring client: the ability to make quick, viable decisions in a high-pressure and creative environment.

By focusing on scenarios that do not rely on past experiences, a hiring manager can begin to predict leadership qualities that go beyond the typical metrics. In any industry, when a company is interviewing top-level leadership talent, it benefits both the company and candidate to engage in interactive problem-solving scenarios to reveal the potential of a great leader.

**Interview Techniques & Scenarios**

An indicator of Executive Intelligence is the ability of a candidate to think on his or her feet while taking into consideration business priorities, potential conflicts and the effects of actions. By adding scenarios to the interview questions, a hiring manager can see a candidate’s problem-solving skills in action.

By following a few guidelines in developing scenarios, the hiring manager and other important stakeholders can design an interview experience that reflects the culture and spirit of the hiring firm. This process allows for collaboration and exploration of fit.
The following principles outlined by Menkes can guide how to frame interview questions:

- Questions should be about situations that the candidate has never confronted.
- Questions should not require specific industry experience or expertise.
- Questions don’t need to rely on single right answers – such questions don’t get at absolutes but rather the likelihood that the candidate’s critical skills will result in a desirable outcome.

The Interview Process

A leader is someone who takes charge and influences the action of others especially to move in a desired direction and to meet goals. A leader commands the respect of others and understands the value of primary and secondary priorities and which to choose in a specific context.

Typical leadership questions that get at assumptions, past experiences and business/industry knowledge include:

- What is your leadership style?
- Who, in a leadership position, do you look to as a role model and why?
- Name some of the circumstances under which a leader will fail?
- Have you failed in leadership? Explain the situation and what did you learn from this experience?

For each of these questions, a candidate will answer with past experiences, giving examples and showing how he or she resolved failure and exemplified success. The candidate will have stories to share that are real, and the answers will indicate how he or she likely will act in a similar situation in the future. This is good and valuable for your assessment of knowledge, assumptions and experiences.

But a hiring firm’s culture is not like that of a candidate’s current firm. There are business realities that are unique to every firm and challenges that are affected by internal politics and by external realities. A candidate has knowledge and can learn from past experiences. But will the candidate know what to do when confronted with new situations and the unique environment a new firm? How does the hiring manager know if the candidate has the critical skills to navigate new situations and to build a business with finesse?

Assessing Leadership Skills

One way, according to Menkes, is to ask scenario questions that rely on a candidate’s ability to think through outcomes and to show the skills necessary to lead and make decisions.

A scenario to uncover business skills not necessarily based in fact:

You’ve been asked to provide a Proposal for Services for a very large contract that represents $1 million in revenues. The potential client will not provide you with enough good information to determine if your company should compete for this initiative. Like you, the potential client is working 24/7 and is laboring under multiple deadlines. How do you get the potential client’s attention and what do you ask to decide if you should provide a proposal?

A scenario to uncover skills that rely on anticipating agendas and having the critical decision-making behaviors to make good business choices:

You are a partner in an architecture firm and currently you are leading a project that has an impending deadline for completion of Phase I. The client is high profile and one of your firm’s stars. You have a dedicated and talented team but you are under threat of losing your
lead designer to another partner who has won a new and coveted client. You know the
designer’s working style is more attuned to your partner but if you lose this designer now it
could hurt your project. Your partner needs this designer’s skills and the ease of relationship
to really show impact for this new client. Your partner comes to you for advice. What do you
say?

In these scenarios, there is no single right answer. While the candidate may review lessons learned, the
questions do not emphasize a review of past situations. The candidate does not know the players nor is
the candidate completely sure of agendas or personality types. In order to answer these questions, the
candidate will need to illustrate how he or she would act by providing the type of questions to ask and the
thinking skills to assess all the possible outcomes. The hiring manager can begin to see how this candidate
will most likely act in a complex and creative business context.

This article relies on Menkes article Hiring for Smarts in HBR (November 2005) and is slanted towards
the hiring challenges of firms in creative industries.