

Curiosity Trumps Competence



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"I now consider potential to be the most important predictor of success at all levels, from junior manager to the C-Suite and the board." — Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, "21st Century Talent Spotting," Harvard Business Review, June 2014

This week I've been reading a fascinating article about the benefit of emphasizing potential over past performance when recruiting new staff. Why have we focused on competency—a term that really refers to past performance—as the go-to differentiator in staff screening? In "[21st Century Talent Spotting](#)," Fernández-Aráoz asserts that the era of competency-driven talent spotting, which began more than 40 years ago, should end.

One possible reason for the default preference for past performance may be the innate sense that past performance is tangible, while potential is immeasurable. For example, we can query a candidate, or her references, for specific examples of how she handled everything from tight deadlines to cantankerous customers. These examples affirm our belief that our candidate, facing similar challenges in the future, is competent.

Yet our entities exist in a world of unending uncertainty, nearly constant change, and growing complexity. Is past performance the best predictor of future success in an entity that has to keep moving faster and faster to keep pace with change? And is measuring potential really out of reach for a leader seeking to hire the best?

Fernández-Aráoz acknowledges five hallmarks or indicators of potential as a starting point for hiring the best possible staff to lead and support your mission in the future. These hallmarks include the trait of **curiosity**, which the author defines as: "a penchant for seeking out new experiences, knowledge, and candid feedback and an openness to learning and change."

More so than any other trait discussed in this provocative article, the hallmark of curiosity resonated with me. Few public entities can spare the necessary investment in payroll, benefits, training and office space for a new hire whose stellar performance is fading history. Today's ambitious entities need to fill every precious opening with:

- Voracious learners who see on the job learning as energizing and personally fulfilling
- Team players ready to put well-worn routines in the rear view mirror and focus on "what's next"
- Confident leaders who appreciate what they know... as much as what they don't know
- Mission-focused people who embrace change and the necessary uncertainty that forms the backdrop for

any worthwhile cause, activity or service

So how can you tell if a candidate you've just met—or a current employee—has potential? Fernández-Aráoz advises readers to mine a candidate's personal and professional history, but look for signs of potential rather than competence. "Conduct in-depth interviews or career discussions, and do thorough reference checks to uncover stories that demonstrate whether the person has (or lacks) these qualities. For instance, to assess curiosity, don't just ask, 'Are you curious?' Instead, look for signs that the person believes in self-improvement, truly enjoys learning, and is able to recalibrate after missteps."

What interview questions might be helpful to discover evidence of curiosity? The author suggests:

- How do you invite input from others on your team?
- What do you do to broaden your thinking, experience, or personal development?
- What steps do you take to seek out the unknown?

If you're not learning, you're losing.

A desire to learn, grow, and achieve is necessary for public entity staff and leaders to propel their missions and programs. If you're not curious, you're probably not learning. And if you're not learning, your professional and/or personal growth is being stunted. In his book, "The Hard Thing About Hard Things," venture capitalist Ben Horowitz writes that "being too busy to train is the moral equivalent of being too hungry to eat." Research on job dissatisfaction and turnover tells us that one of the top reasons people leave a job is because they have limited training or development opportunities—essentially, they aren't learning.

With these lessons in mind, I hope you'll consider rekindling your curiosity by attending one of our conferences this year, or encouraging peers and direct reports to attend the events you'll miss. Whether you're a veteran leader seeking high level content, a generalist or risk specialist looking for networking and learning opportunities, or a new risk leader, for the first time in our history, I can honestly say we have a conference for everyone!

Whether the discussion is taking place at the lunch table or in the board room, leaders of organizations across the extraordinarily diverse spectrum of the charitable sector must be curious learners. And in our experience, the most vulnerable organizations are led by teams who believe they know it all and have little to learn.

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