

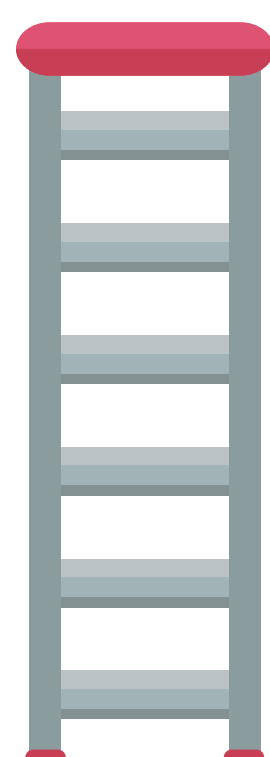


Identifying Leaders and Talent

Dear Social Work Practitioners,

Identifying and deploying leaders has been a recurring topic in the social sector. This is not surprising, given that our sector relies heavily on people such as social workers, counsellors, and therapists, to serve the vulnerable and needy. Yet, some of the more rigorous recruitment practices used in the private sector are not practiced in the social sector. This could be due to the cost involved in conducting certain private sector recruitment exercises such as situational tests and assessment models to evaluate a potential employee's capabilities. Some social service agencies may also have particular preferences and methods used in identifying potential employees and are less open to try other recruitment methods.



 Organisations will often say that they are looking for talent that will take the agency to the next level. However, it is not always clear what type of talent the organisation is looking for, or what the "next level" will look like. One way of defining talent would be to refer to people who have the necessary skills and abilities to excel in their individual positions and are capable of bringing the agency to a higher level. People with this talent of bringing organisational transformation are exceptional and hard to find. It requires a combination of factors - knowing where to look, openness on the part of the organisation, and sometimes, sheer circumstantial luck.

Rethinking "talent" matters

When we think about finding talent, we may think that "talented" individuals need to be found externally. This overlooks the possibility of finding talent from within the organisation, which is probably not the usual method to search for talent. We need to rethink the way we view talent and how talent can be sourced. For example, we often use resumes to assess an individual's abilities and experience, before considering employment. However, can we forecast one's future successes based on the person's past and current attributes? How do we know if these attributes are genuine? We need to avoid over-relying on an individual's past qualifications to predict his or her future success in a new work and operating environment. Resumes can be impressive but they are not foolproof in identifying the right type of employee for the agency.



Well planned and executed interviews incorporating situational assessments should therefore be used to gauge a candidate's potential. These forms of assessments require candidates to immediately respond to various situations that they cannot predict. This is befitting of the reality of our current operating environment - volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Trained and experienced interviewers are also important. They take on the crucially important role of reading and assessing candidates as well as making the final decision on who to take in. This is increasingly critical as candidates today receive more training and preparation for job interviews and are better able to "market" their capabilities at a level higher than what it really is.

Finding Talent Within the Organisation

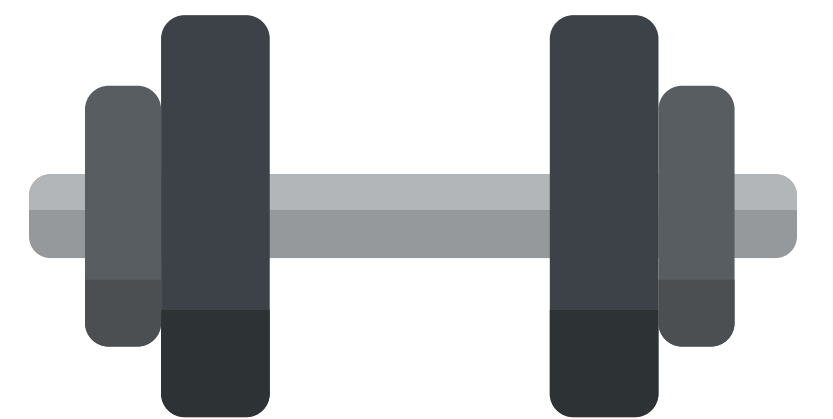
A good place to start searching for talent is to look within your organisation. There is often talent within the organisation that can be nurtured to take on bigger roles and duties. Human and resource development strategies, which have become more readily available in today's context, can be used to develop budding talent. Identifying talent and potential leaders from within can work to the advantage or disadvantage of the candidate and organisation. The organisation would have a good grasp of the candidate's personal attributes and more importantly, values, and whether these are in line with the new job position. On the other hand, the character and short comings of the individual would be known to the organisation. These are things that cannot be anticipated when an organisation hires externally.



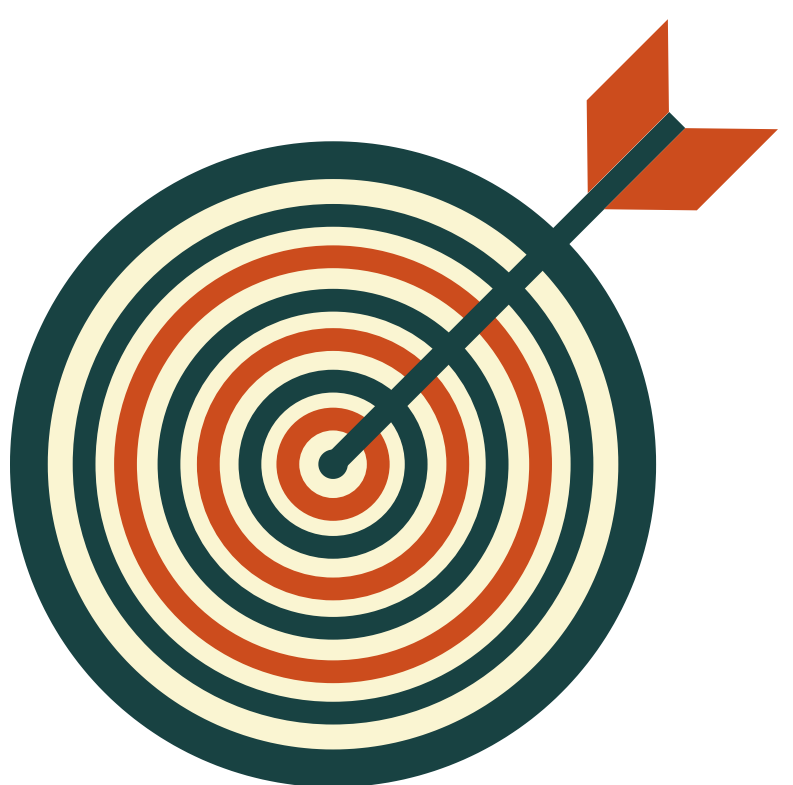
It is important to remember that even if we do compromise on an individual's experience and industry knowledge, we must not compromise on their character. An individual's values and character are crucial in determining how big and small things will be handled at work and in life. One's skills and knowledge can be trained and built up over time, but character is hard to change. This leads us to the next question: how can we determine whether these character traits are genuine?

Conducting a reference check is one useful way and can be coupled with an assessment test or asking the candidate to present on a certain topic that would showcase his or her character or value system. For candidates with past work experiences, it will be useful to look for consistent clues that contribute to the person's successes; instead of focusing on occasional flashes of brilliance during the interview.

Resilience is another virtue which is crucial for employees to have but is difficult to identify. One's resilience is often only known and tested in different contexts and situations, and over an extended period of time. These small impressions that we have of an individual over time will add up to a decisive judgment of the individual's abilities, attributes and character, as noted by George Anders in his book, "The Rare Find: Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else" (2011). A candidate's true values, attributes and thinking will only be known to the organisation when he or she starts work – that is when the real test begins.



How to identify the right leaders for the right organisation and job

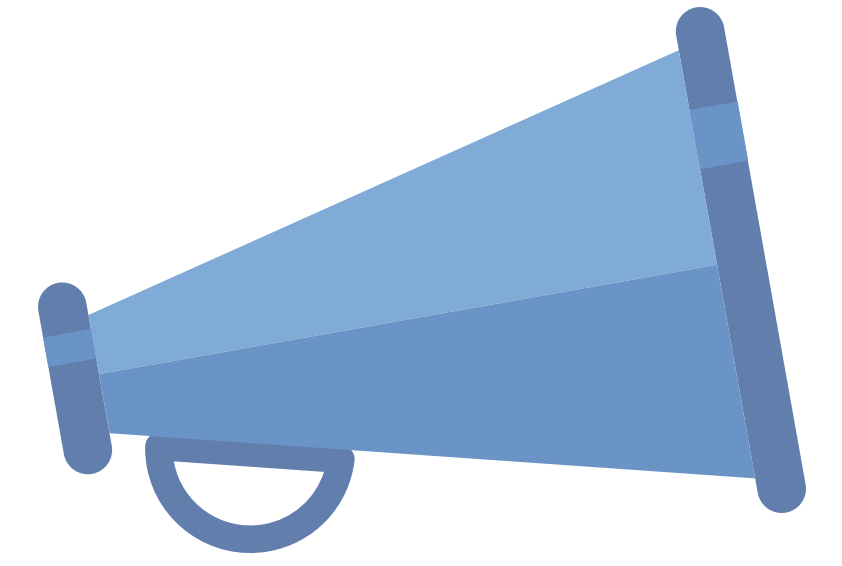


In the social sector, it would be helpful for an agency to be clear about its mission and what the agency is required to do in the immediate and near future. The agency may need to revisit its mission and update it, if necessary. When the agency mission is clear, what is required of the new leader will be clear as well, in terms of his or her knowledge and skills as well as job requirement in order to fulfil the agency's overarching goals. The process of identifying a particular leader or group of leaders then becomes more purposeful as it is tied to a bigger goal – to drive organisational goals and outcomes for the community. Board members and agency heads should also be aware of what they are looking for in an employee who can work alongside them to fulfil the organisational mission. Such complementary working relationships will allow the organisation to function well and adapt to the changing global environment.

So are there ways to pick candidates from within and outside an agency who are able to take the organisation to the next level? Are there certain traits that should be identified among potential leaders? There are many answers to these questions, but what is clear is that character, resilience and diligence are important attributes to look out for among many others, for prospective employees and leaders.

Making a good judgment call

The process of identifying the best candidate for an organisation has become more complex in relation to the varying mental models and perceptions on what talent is, or the type of leadership that is required for the future. The assessment styles and preferences of those involved in selecting candidates also impacts the way in which candidates will be chosen for the organisation. While these factors may make the selection process complex, each and every component of the selection process is important in ensuring that the right candidate is chosen for the organisation. Should the selection process be outsourced to someone else, such as a headhunter for example, certain intrinsic traits that the organisation or the selection panel is looking out for may be overlooked.



What is worth noting is that the present social service context has become increasingly unique and complex. Those involved in recruitment or identifying talent within the organisation should thus have prior working experience in the social sector, so that they would know the type of workers who can handle the current social service context.



To identify suitable and good candidates who can bring the organisation to the next level, one needs to be clear and judicious about the mission of the agency, expectations for the candidate and job scope. As team and collective leadership are important in driving social service agencies forward, it is important to be receptive to your staff's opinions on the type of employees they would like to work with and who can help the agency progress. These are crucial elements for deliberation prior to the interviews or before a headhunter is engaged. Where possible, we should keep an eye out for candidates within the agency who are capable of leading the agency and bringing it to a higher level. They should be among the natural choice of potential leaders we want to identify and deploy.

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Reference

Anders, G. (2011). *The Rare Find: Spotting Exceptional Talent Before Everyone Else*. Portfolio Penguin, Penguin Books Ltd. London, England.