

harvard



management **update**

ARTICLE REPRINT NO. U0505D

Finding the Fit Between Person and Position

by Jack MacPhail and Kenneth R. Brousseau

For a complete list of Harvard Business
School Publishing newsletters:
<http://newsletters.harvardbusinessonline.org>

For reprint and subscription information
for *Harvard Management Update*:
Call 800-988-0866 or 617-783-7500
<http://hmu.harvardbusinessonline.org>

For customized and quantity orders of reprints:
Call 617-783-7626 Fax 617-783-7658
For permission to copy or republish:
Call 617-783-7587

Finding the Fit Between Person and Position

New assessment tools can help companies achieve a more optimal match between managers' skills and job assignments

by Jack MacPhail and Kenneth R. Brousseau

MANAGING TALENT—putting the right person in the right job—will always be challenging because humans are complex and difficult to predict. What's more, in these times of continual change, the demands of any given position are themselves in near-constant flux. So how can leaders know who in the workforce will excel in a particular role?

To help clients address this pivotal issue, the leadership practice at Korn/Ferry International, the Los Angeles-based executive recruitment firm, developed a multifaceted assessment program that aims to understand and match a manager's abilities to the current and anticipated requirements of a position.

The science behind the assessment tool rests in studies led by Kenneth R. Brousseau and Michael J. Driver, coauthors, with Phillip L. Hunsaker, of *The Dynamic Decision Maker: Five Decision Styles for Executive and Business Success* (Jossey-Bass, 1993). Their research found that decision styles are determined primarily by two factors:

- 1. The amount of information used in decision making.** Some people seem to require just a small bit of information before they act, while others appear to need a thorough analysis. This difference may be described as speed and action versus analysis and thoroughness.
- 2. The number of solutions an individual considers.** Some people devise one solution and follow it through; others consider various options, sometimes following several simultaneously, then changing course as necessary. At issue here is focus and tenacity versus adaptability and innovation.

This finding led the researchers to identify four basic decision styles, shown in the diagram at left: decisive, hierarchic, flexible, and integrative. Each decision style has two expressions: a leadership style and a thinking style.

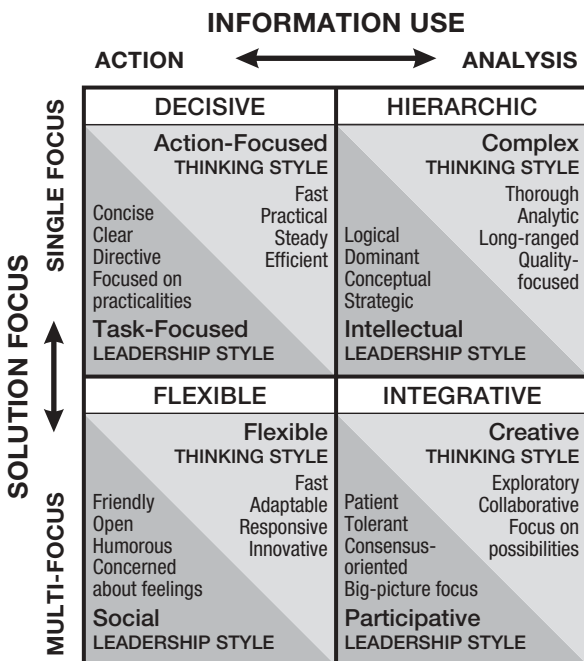
These four decision styles form the basis of our assessment tool, which evaluates leadership style, thinking style, emotional competency, and cultural fit by putting employees through several sets of self-report and scenario-based questions. For example, the assessment asks respondents to provide their level of agreement with statements such as, "In forming impressions of others, you use basically the same few, reliable categories," and "[In your career, you aspire to] influence and direct other people's activities." Answers help capture the individual's values and how she wants to be perceived (e.g., as analytical, cool and collected, thorough, creative, and/or intuitive). The responses to such statements are predictive of behavior in circumstances where someone senses the need to project an appropriate image to others.

Based on the assessment, we produce a decision-style profile for each person. Comparing these profiles with the relevant job profiles, which take account of the demands of the position and draw on a database of success profiles for people in similar positions, we can assess the fit between an individual and a particular position.

Assessment and leadership development

The value of employee assessment in selecting leaders is demonstrated in our recent work with an international specialty chemicals company based in the United States.

DECISION STYLES



Finding the Best Fit *(continued)*

With the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 placing pressure on corporate directors to safeguard the ongoing health of an organization, the company's board moved to establish a succession plan well in advance of an anticipated leadership change. The board wanted to identify who among current top staff was fit to lead a smooth transition and carry out the organization's long-term growth strategy. The assessment process we employed had six steps:

- 1. Determine job requirements.** When working with the board, we determined the key organization requirements and job demands. It's essential to design the assessment within the context of company strategy and industry forecast.
- 2. Create behavioral requirement profiles.** Understanding what the company's leadership needs were, we converted these requirements and job demands into behavioral requirements profiles based on the company's specifications and our global research on executive success profiles.
- 3. Assess leadership candidates.** The selected managers participated in an online assessment that determined whether they met the behavioral requirements demanded the jobs. Candidates also were interviewed by an industry or job-function expert and a behavioral specialist.
- 4. Match decision-style findings with job profiles.** We compared the behavioral profiles we produced for each of the executives with the job profiles we customized for the company. This helped us identify how well suited each executive was for the tasks and responsibilities of one or more of the profiled executive positions. In addition, it provided information about how each executive could better fit a particular position.
- 5. Report assessment results to the board.** The results confirmed that several individuals were, indeed, excellent C-suite candidates and that the present potential of several others fell short of the qualities needed for success. At this point, the board needed to decide whether to build the leadership team it wanted by developing internal candidates or to search elsewhere for the expertise it desired. Electing to build most of

No matter how perfect a business strategy is, it will fail without the human resources to execute it.

ASSESSMENTS FOR EVERYONE?

While much attention is paid to assessing candidates for executive posts, there's more to consider. A 2004 survey of nearly 700 senior executives conducted by the British think tank The Future Foundation notes that the trend toward decentralizing corporate decision making is pushing the responsibility for taking action downward. "This demands greater reliance on individual acts of leadership, and organizations cannot just rely on a strong or charismatic CEO," says *Getting the Edge in the New People Economy*, a report published by the organization.

Employee assessment programs, therefore, have companywide applicability. Companies can benefit from applying the assessment process to line managers who represent the "thermal" layer between the leadership and the rank and file. Because these individuals interact directly with those who "touch" the customer, their influence is exponential. When line managers are functioning well, there is a positive performance trickle-down effect.

its team from within, the board worked with us to develop a plan to coach those individuals selected for leadership. We also helped the board determine which positions might require recruitment outside the organization.

- 6. Monitor development progress.** The selected candidates' progress will be tracked to ensure that they will be prepared to assume their duties on time.

Adding science to art

Managing people is an art, one that requires attention. No matter how perfect a business strategy is, it will fail without the human resources to execute it. That's why even in such deadline-driven events as a merger or acquisition, it is worth taking at least some time to analyze the talent situation. Even a small investment of time in "people" issues is rewarded with fewer clashes, smoother outcomes, and higher productivity sooner. ♦

Jack MacPhail is the managing director of the Korn/Ferry Leadership Development Solutions practice for North America. Kenneth R. Brousseau is CEO and cofounder of Decision Dynamics, which specializes in behavior profiling and human resource systems design. They can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu.
