

Who has a very exciting job? Mitch Kupchak, GM of the Lakers

Earlier in the NBA playoffs, the Los Angeles Lakers were swept in 4 straight games by the Dallas Mavericks. Dallas ended the opportunity for another World Champion repeat by the Lakers, and is playing the Heat in the NBA finals. Now the speculation begins for Los Angeles. Will the team be completely dismantled and rebuilt from scratch? Will it be a major overhaul, with changes to 3 or more players in the starting rotation? Or, maybe it will be less than that with perhaps only 1-2 players losing their starting jobs. What motivational, attitudinal, and behavioral changes for individual athletes will take place? What will the culture be with new coach Mike Brown? It's anybody's guess at this point.

Those of us in the world of talent management and development, and who build teams professionally, live for these opportunities. It doesn't matter if it's a typical business environment or a professional sport franchise like the Lakers. In corporate America, talent acquisition and management executives focus on getting the best people they can into the company. That's not so different from what a General Manager or VP of Football, Hockey, or Baseball Operations does. What is different is **how** people are selected for jobs vs. how athletes are drafted or traded for, in this case, by a franchise.

But I made a D in Chemistry

At last count there were 94 natural elements and 23 that are human-made. So, what's that got to do with building a team? Hey, everybody (especially coaches) uses the word Chemistry, and how important it is. What they are trying to say is that it's important for team members to get along with each other. Or is it? The Oakland A's won the World Series three years in a row in the early to mid 1970's. They fought like cats and dogs.

There are plenty of other examples of athletes not getting along with each other, but yet they performed their jobs. While harmony or chemistry is generally seen as a good thing, really, outcomes are mixed in terms of successful performance. In many instances, it is up to the coaching staff to work with this somewhat elusive enigma. That's why coaches take sport psychology classes when they are learning to be coaches, to understand the mental components of athletes. Guess what? In the corporate world, we bring in executive coaches, and in certain instances, they can help employees, managers, and executives work through disruptive obstacles. So, where am I going with this? Read on.

Really?

Values. You know, words such as honesty, respect, reliability, trust, accountability. Those kinds of words, and how the company or franchise gives meaning to them and lives up to them, separate the winners from the losers.

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Being able to trust your teammate to be at the right location on the floor for the play that has been called. Or being able to provide a deliverable on time. Knowing you can rely on someone to do their job. That's what it's all about. Wonderful. So how do I as a General Manager, VP of Hockey Operations, or senior executive in talent management determine whether a candidate for a position with my company, or an athlete that I'm going to draft or trade for, has the Values that we subscribe to?

Well, down here in Texas, we have somethin' ya'll need to know about. Repeat after me: What's in Yogurt? Culture. We talk about how important culture is, but it too is like nailing Jello to a wall. Culture is most easily defined as the personality of the franchise. Or the company, department, business unit, or group, as the case may be. It's the collective of everyone's personalities, attitudes, competencies, and yes, even their behaviors. And Values along with Chemistry are significant pieces of the Culture.

Dude, what about performance?

If you are the kind of executive (irrespective of the sport, industry, or company) who makes decisions based on results alone or past performance alone, all I can say is good luck. A good hire or draft is more than just on-court data or past achievements. That's not a best practice and for good reason. That strategy doesn't work consistently. Especially with elite athletes. Go ahead, pick your favorite "Star" athlete, from any sport. Dig around a little, and one will learn that what makes these athletes what they are is their mental toughness. The world is full of great athletes who don't have the psychological wherewithal to be successful at the elite level. Can this be measured? Yes. How?

One way is through Behavioral interviews. I'm the first to admit that interviews in and of themselves are not the panacea that we want them to be. Far from it. But it's one of the primary tools that we have to work with when selecting someone for a job. It doesn't matter if the job is that of a point guard, interior lineman, defenseman, infielder, or product manager or senior executive. Everyone gets interviewed. Did you know that an interview is a test? It sure is, if you believe in the American legal system. I wonder how the NBAPA or MLBPA feels about that? Unions *really* don't like testing of any kind, especially the old paper and pencil kinds of measures. Of course, most testing is done online these days.

Corporate America can use pre-employment testing to help make better decisions about the candidates they hire. Unions don't really like their athletes to be tested, short of the Combine in Indianapolis every year for potential NFL players. Besides, most of those Combine participants are just coming out of college, so they are used to being tested. As of this writing, the NFLPA has disbanded, but fear not, they will re-band prior to the 2011 kickoff, if there is one.

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Most hiring managers, executives, and people in general are not very good at interviewing. It's an art, it's a science, and it takes a lot of practice. There are certain methodologies that need to be employed in order to conduct a thorough behavioral interview. It needs to be quantified. It has to be converted to a useable metric. After all, if you are going to make multi-million dollar decisions on whether to trade or draft an athlete, at least know what you are getting. We see it every year, of course. Highly touted collegiate athletes in several sports are drafted in the higher rounds. They are paid millions, and in 3-4 years, they have left the league, without really having had a positive impact for the franchise. I'm excluding those who retired early due to injury of course. It happens on the corporate side too. I've seen senior executives who wrecked a company in 3-4 years, then walk away with millions in severance and equity.

How about behavioral questions that are on the topic of not only performance, but Values and Culture? Now we're talking. Want to separate yourself from the average executive? Want to be a cut above the normal franchise or business unit? Ask the right kinds of interview questions, and you dramatically increase the odds of a good hire. First of course, you need to know what your Values are, and have a defined Culture. Take charge of your Culture and have it be what you want it to be, or it may emerge as something that you don't want. And, ask some Chemistry questions too.

Are we there yet?

Isn't it worth it to learn how to conduct a great interview, and to teach your managers or assistant coaches how to interview? Multiple behavioral interviews work very well. Then score and rank order the candidates. Then pull the trigger on that trade or draft choice, knowing that you have behavioral data on your side that supports your decision. Data that goes a lot farther than "gut" feeling. And you have a lot more than performance statistics too.

These are the kinds of issues every GM or executive needs to think about when building a new team, overhauling an existing team, or strengthening a good team to get it to the next level. Beyond GM's and sport executives, those in the corporate world would be well served to look at their selection or talent processes, and think about what best practices they might be able to implement.

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Dr. Friend is available to speak at length about the following topics:

- Talent/Employment Branding, Organizational Development Strategies/Implementation
- Sourcing/Recruitment Strategies, Pre-employment testing, Behavioral Interviewing
- On-boarding, Employee Engagement
- Performance Management
- C-level Executive coaching, team building
- Leadership development
- Succession planning and Career development
- Change Management

Jed Friend holds a Ph.D. in industrial-organizational psychology from Texas A&M University, and is Vice-President of Organizational Development for Associa, an international community association management services company based in Dallas, TX. He has been a consultant to over 100 organizations, ranging from small organizations to those in the Global 50, to include several professional and Olympic sports entities. He can be reached at jfriend@associaonline.com.

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