# To Whom It May Concern: Going Beyond Traditional Interviewing in Hiring Executives

During the interview, the candidate said he was a consensus builder. He'd attended a training seminar on the latest management techniques used in Japan.

His answers to interview questions were peppered with all the phrases the search committee was hoping to hear — employee empowerment, leadership by example, open-door policy. The candidate was charming, multi-degreed, and told amusing stories.

The board hired him and found out he was Joseph Stalin.

What went wrong? According to Myron Beard, consulting psychologist with the Denver, Colo., office of RHR International, traditional interviewing techniques can lead a tax-exempt organization to fill top positions with employees who do not mesh with the organization's mission and culture.

Headquartered in Wood Dale, Ill., RHR International is a consulting firm of Ph.D.-level psychologists who specialize in executive assessment and organizational development.

**Traditional Interviewing**

"Typically, when organizations are looking for a candidate, they sift through a pile of resumes," Beard says. "They initially look for candidates who have particular job experiences or educational backgrounds that match what they think the job is going to require."

Then the interviews begin. In interviews for top positions, such as executive director and department manager, the candidates tend to be sophisticated and skilled at interviewing, Beard says.

As a result, he says, a traditional interview process may reveal only how well a candidate has researched the organization and prepared for the interview. It may not reveal much about the characteristics that will make or break a person's performance at the position in question.

The problem with traditional interviewing, Beard points out, stems from trying to ferret out crucial skills and characteristics by asking direct questions.

"If you ask, for example, 'What's your management style?' you're likely to get a textbook answer," he explains. "Nowadays that would include all the buzzwords like participative management, consensus building, empowerment, and leadership by example."

This tells you more about a candidate's reading habits than about his or her management style.

"What you have to do in an interview is look at the *process* as much as you look at the *content*," Beard says. "What you see in the interview is characteristic of how the person generally behaves."

But how does a search committee get beyond the content of an interview to see the process?

**Developing a Template**

The first step for organizations filling top positions, Beard says, is determining what they're looking for by developing a job "template."

"Developing a template," he explains, "means identifying the characteristics that an individual must have to be successful in a particular job as well as the characteristics that could be a person's undoing."

Often, he says, this doesn't happen. "A search committee will go through an interview process and no one will be looking for the same characteristics. There might be some loose discussion about the kind of person wanted, but the skills and characteristics are not articulated."

Beard recommends that a search committee of three or four people meet before selecting candidates to determine the skills and characteristics that will make up the template for a position.

"A template generally encompasses things like problem-solving abilities, motivational dynamics, interpersonal skill, personal insight, and leadership characteristics."

A search committee can develop a template by determining the role they want the position to play in the organization. Reviewing the skills and characteristics — both successful and not-so-successful — of those who previously held the position also helps create a template.

**Coding during Interviews**

Once a search committee has created a template, it interviews candidates.

Myron Beard is a consulting psychologist with the Denver, Colo., office of RHR International, a consulting firm specializing in executive assessment and organizational development.

During an interview, Beard says, it's important for those conducting the interview to "code" for the skills and characteristics on the template.

" 'Coding' means to take note of those things that are non-content-related characteristics," Beard says. "It's a matter of paying attention to a candidate's behavior rather than what he or she talks about."

For instance, in a recent interview Beard was trying to determine a candidate's approach to problem-solving. Rather than ask directly, "What's your problem-solving style?" Beard tried to elicit details on how the candidate solved a particular problem. In this case, the problem was unemployment, and Beard asked how the candidate was conducting his job search.

"This guy was incredible," Beard recalls. "He spent 40 hours a week and had filled a 200-page notebook. Every Thursday he took the Sunday paper from five different cities and wrote letters. Every Friday he did the same with the local paper, and on Mondays he did the trade journals. He had sent out over 500 letters and received 30 responses and 10 interviews."

"That told me much more about how he went about solving a problem than if I had asked him directly about his style."

A big part of getting beyond interview content, Beard says, is simply being conscious of one's reactions to a candidate. "Often, after a candidate has been hired but has not worked out well, the people involved in the hiring process will say, 'Come to think of it, I noticed certain signals in the interview process.' "

To avoid Monday morning quarterbacking, Beard suggests taking notes during interviews. "People are sometimes uncomfortable taking notes during interviews, but you're just not going to remember this information otherwise," he says.

Beard takes two sets of notes. On the left-hand side of a page, he makes content-oriented notes, such as a chronology of professional and educational experiences. On the right-hand side, he makes notes corresponding to the skills and characteristics from the template.

**Interview Autopsy**

After every interview, Beard recommends that the interviewing group get together and go through an "interview autopsy."

In addition to covering content-related matters, such as a candidate's skills and experiences, an autopsy reviews a candidate's processes.

"In an autopsy, group members make comments like, 'I noticed that she solved problems this way' or 'I noticed he had this kind of insight into himself,' " Beard says. "It goes back to the characteristics on the template."

But in conducting an interview autopsy, group members review more than their impressions of the candidate. They also review how well they conducted the interview.

"As a group, you say, 'Okay, what do we need to focus on with the next candidate?' " Beard says. "An interviewing group can be a self-learning group."

After filling a position, an organization should conduct follow-up. "Follow-up to hiring is two-fold," Beard says. "First, the professionals must understand why they are hired, that they provided the best fit of all the candidates according to the skills and characteristics outlined on the template."

"Second," he continues, "the search committee should reconvene in three to six months to evaluate how well the person is performing according to the template. Any area where the person is lacking becomes an area for him or her to work on."

"If the person is clearly failing," Beard says, "the group must ask, 'Okay, what did we learn from this? When we go through this process again, how can we correct it?' "

"In that way, the interviewing process is a self-correcting mechanism."