

Topgrading – Hiring Only the Best

Based on the work of Bradford D Smart

Top-grading - filling every role in your business with 'A' Players

'The job no leader should delegate; having the right people in the right place' (Larry Bossidy).

Having 'A' players in your team helps you to grow your business faster, to succeed further, to recruit similar 'A' players and for sure, it can make your job easier!

It can be hard to implement top-grading processes, but only because of your own limitations as a business owner (time, constraints) and whether you are prepared to put up with mediocre or poor performance from your teams and/or individuals. Often we are faced with a gap within our team and quickly fill it with someone who can seemingly do the job – it might be that we heard of someone with relevant experience that just happened to be looking for a new opportunity. Often the recruitment process is short, with no standardisation or clear process.

Bradford D Smart recommends that we determine who are the 'A' players on our existing team and focus on them during the hiring process. Ask your 'A' players to be involved in the hiring process, find out if they know other 'A' players – the chances are, they are likely to mix in similar circles to themselves.

When recruiting consider the following:

Scorecards, Adverts and Telephone Screening

- Create scorecards/checklists which clearly describe the accountabilities, KPI's, values and personality traits that an 'A' player would demonstrate, to show that they would fit into your team
- Ensure that your advert describes the 'A' player in detail by focusing on the content of your scorecard, thus helping you to attract the right calibre of candidate to your role
- When you receive the CVs, pull out only the best ones and conduct a telephone screening call with relevant applicants. Find out about their education and career history:
 - Educational grades
 - Employment for every year and month since they began working
 - Base pay and bonuses for each role
 - What they liked most and least about each role

- What they are good at and not so good at, professionally
- What their career aspirations are
- How their previous employers would rate their performance
- The aim of the process is to weed out the 'B' and 'C' players and get a shortlist of 'A' players

Top-Grading Interviews

When conducting top-grading interviews, it is recommended that you undertake two interviews on separate occasions and that these could take up to three hours each.

- The top-grading approach focuses on a CIDS format – Chronological, In, Depth, Structured - for every job the candidate had in the past, ask the following:
 - What were they hired to do?
 - What were their major achievements?
 - What failures or mistakes were made and what did they learn from them?
 - If they managed staff, what calibre were they when inherited?
 - If they managed staff, what calibre of staff did they end up with?
 - What was their boss like and how would they rate them?
 - Why did they leave each role?
- Ask questions focusing on the desired competencies for the role as outlined on the scorecard, remembering that past performance is the best predictor of future performance
 - Ask for specific examples of where they exhibited the desired competencies in their previous roles
 - Find out what they want and need from their next job
 - Where do they see themselves professionally in five or ten year's time?

Reference Checking

When it comes to reference checking, as the employer, you should choose the references that you want to check and these may not necessarily be the referees provided by the candidate. Ask the candidate to arrange telephone reference check appointments with the referees that you would like to talk with. 'A' players will not be put off by this.

Ask the referees the same top-grading questions you asked the candidate, this is key to cross checking what the candidate said (see article on interview biases).

- In what context did they work with the candidate?
- What was the candidate's role and responsibilities?
- In their opinion what were the candidate's strengths?

- What were their areas for improvement and do these correlate with the details provided by the candidate?
- How would they rate their overall performance?
- Outline your scorecard criteria for the position and find out if the referee believes that the candidate can fulfil the criteria

When you have conducted your reference checks and decided who you would like to appoint, remember to ensure that you deliver as an 'A' player employer. Look after your 'A' players, keep them engaged, coach them and grow them.