



AMY BC TAN
 Director
 Centre for Organisational
 Effectiveness
 Amy.Tan@COE-Partners.
 com

Games played to score talent

There are many lessons hiring managers can learn from the Youth Olympic Games.



Play it right: Having a set of basic principles and asking the right questions will help in recruiting top-notch employees, even if it is for the short-term.

There were several invaluable lessons learnt during the different phases of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in August 2010. One significant task for YOG was to recruit more than 500 staff and more than 20,000 volunteers within a time frame of less than two years before the Games started.

Background

I was appointed the director for the workforce division of YOG because the Centre for Organisational Effectiveness (COE) was its retainer consultant. It was a challenging time identifying the right staff for YOG. This was partially because YOG was not a long-term career, but merely a two-year contract. Hence, while the workforce was still paid as normal, YOG did not offer career

progression during the contract period. Even worse, the job at YOG did not offer any "excitement" or challenging work after the Games ended, aside from a few weeks of housekeeping and wrap-up work for auditing purposes.

The recruitment started from April 2008 and teams were gradually dissolved from last September to May/June this year with 31 March the last day for most.

Therefore, it became apparent that finding people with the right mindset was as important as those with the right skills.

It is not new that hiring people means evaluating, finding skills and experience that suss out their eligibility (aptitude) and their suitability (attitude) for the job.

However, it is commonly much easier to evaluate the former in detail, while neglecting the latter. Our approach to identifying

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staff who could live up to our core values involved competency-based interviewing and selection techniques.

From the beginning

The organising committee for YOG adapted the Olympic values of excellence, friendship and respect to complement its values of commitment, teamwork and integrity.

This was one of the very first tasks the committee did during focus group sessions with employees at the very early stages.

Next, we translated these values into attributes we identified as vital for fulfilling our "Singapore 2010 – Inspiring youth and creating a sporting Singapore" vision.

These attributes were flexibility, creativity, communication, decision-making, problem-solving and judgment, initiative, interpersonal skills, leadership, passion, planning and organising, reliability, tenacity, service orientation, supervising and developing others and tolerance for ambiguity.

Each employee was informed about these indicators through face-to-face communication and via email. These values and attributes also formed the set of competencies that – aside from technical and functional skills – were used to shape the organising committee.

After its completion, all recruitment was done by using our competency-based interview

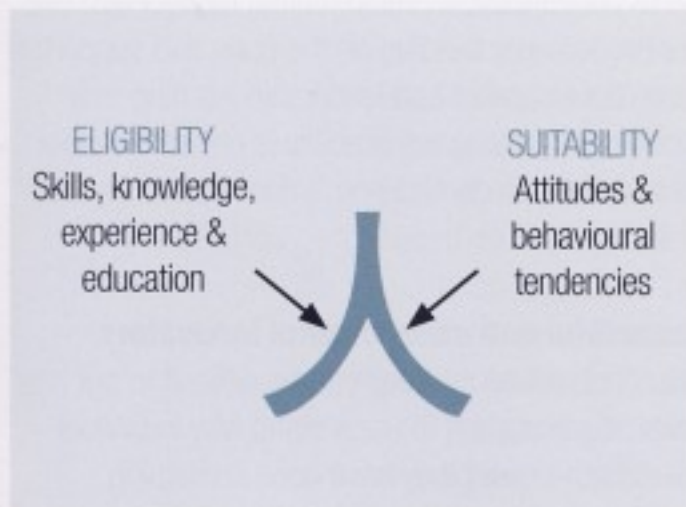


Figure one: Chinese character "Ren" shows the balance between employee eligibility and suitability.

guide. Directors and managers were trained in applying the interview guide by using the right set of questions. Before each interview, the hiring manager had to fill in job descriptions comprising of role purpose, role responsibility and essential attributes and technical competencies required for fulfilling the job.

Our guide included a comprehensive set of indicators and questions for all six values and 14 desired attributes. For example, the following indicators were used to assess commitment.

- Demonstrates physical and mental stamina to achieve results taking into account cost, time lines, impact and quality, and despite multiple demands.
- Makes the effort to deliver significant results.
- Is determined in their work and gets significant results.
- Continuously strives for improving processes and services.
- Assesses the situation and commits quickly to a course of action even in ambiguous situations or where information is incomplete.
- Makes and stands by tough decisions that embrace the mission and values of YOG even if they are unpopular or controversial.
- Is passionate about what they are doing.

The set of interview questions included:

- Tell me about a time when you had to maintain a high work-rate for an extended period. What did you do to remain productive and motivated?
- What things tend to fluster you when a deadline is near?
- We not only receive positive feedback from our superiors. Can you tell me about the last time you received negative feedback from your superior? How did this make you feel? How did you respond?
- What activities in your current role require the most effort? What do you do to maintain your effectiveness?

- Describe a time when you were under pressure to make a decision. How did you react? How did you feel?

Hiring managers were taught to ask questions according to the STAR model (figure two) during introductory and training sessions.

For example, they had to ask for situations the applicant was in where a desired behaviour was needed.

Next, they had to ask further questions about the task that had to be fulfilled, the way the task was completed (actions taken) and the results for the applicant and his organisation.

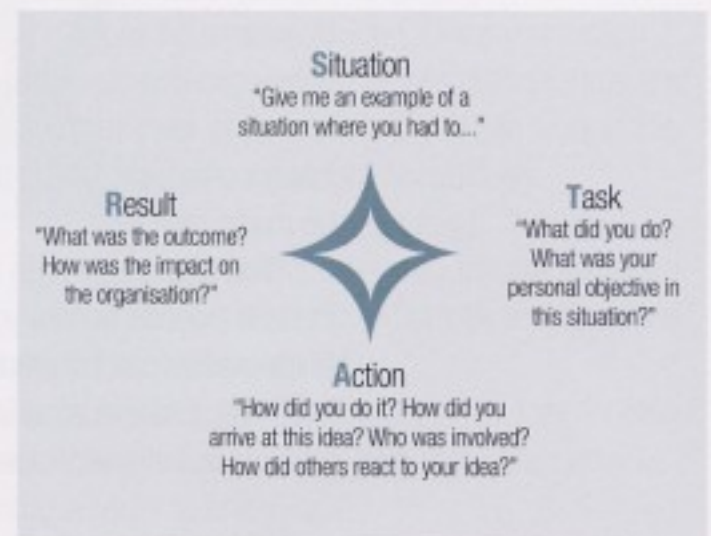


Figure two: The "star" approach for good interviews.

Conclusion

It seems like a mammoth task to build a comprehensive set of guidelines describing desired corporate values and attributes, as well as designing competency-based interview questions and training for a two-year long project.

But the quality of staff hired was significantly improved.

While some early hires turned out to be a bad fit, the people we got onboard later embodied the attitudes we were striving for.

Every organisation that is serious about portraying its own values deserves such an approach. **H**

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