

Competency, chemistry, commitment and passion.

Four keys to finding the right customers and business associates.

Throughout most of my career I have managed high-tech product development teams. Some of these teams I inherited and grew while others were built from the ground up. In all cases, identifying key contributors within an existing organization or from a pool of new hire candidates was a critical, high-priority task for my management teams and me. To help us in this process, I championed the assessment of individuals according to four benchmark characteristics: competency, chemistry, commitment and passion. Yep, no new words here. However, when discussing team building with other professionals, I often see a light-bulb turn on when I suggest a comprehensive use of all of these attributes. I also believe these characteristics can be useful in identifying customers, vendors and business partners with the highest chances of long-term mutual success. So let's look at each one.

Competency

This simply means does the person have the skills and relevant successful experience to perform the specific job or task in question. There are lots of articles on interviewing and performance review techniques that are applicable here. You have to decide what the important skills are for each job and devise ways to assess the individual's strengths and weaknesses in those areas. Many people put most or all of their eggs in the competency basket when deciding on long term relationships with folks. I think this can lead to disappointment when other, non-skills related issues arise. Thus...

Chemistry

Does the person fit in with and ADD to the successful dynamic of the existing team. My mother has a great recipe for a tomato based pasta sauce that she got from my Italian grandmother. There are lots of ingredients that make this recipe great. If you add an ingredient to the recipe, it may add to the greatness of the original recipe or it may RUIN it completely. The same thing can happen when selecting employees, customers, vendors and business partners. Again, you first need to be able to describe what your current culture is, including the specific characteristics that make it successful for your purposes and assess each employee, customer, etc. against these characteristics. It's important to keep some perspective here. First, just like there is more than one great tomato sauce recipe, there is no such thing as the "one" perfect culture. When assessing an individual, you may discover he or she was very successful in a prior organization or environment but that may not guarantee similar results in your culture. And vice versa. Some of the most rewarding relationships I have been part of involved adding a new team member and watching them excel in our particular culture far beyond what they had demonstrated in past teams. Second, the good chemistry that leads to great cultures requires diversity. Simply adding a bunch of oregano to tomato paste does not make a great pasta sauce. Similarly, it is seldom the case that organizations of any kind, consisting of individuals that fundamentally think and

act the same, achieve greatness. Diverse thoughts, perspectives and experiences are the spices and key ingredients that will make for an interesting and compelling environment that produces results and achieves greatness.

Suddenly I'm hungry for some spaghetti.

Commitment

I added this characteristic back in the late 90's when high tech engineers frequently jumped from one company to another in search of higher salaries and more stock options. I fundamentally don't have a problem if a person wants to do this, but for my teams, I wanted to have an explicit conversation with employees and candidates about a time-frame commitment to the project. While high tech job hopping has changed some over the years, I still think no surprises in this area is important and worthy of an open and honest up-front discussion. Now, this is very much a two-way street, because regardless of the type of endeavor; employment, customer, partner etc., everyone involved is investing in the success of the relationship, trying to optimize the value they achieve. So, for example, in the case of a new employee, he or she must commit to contribute their best for a rough duration of time and the employer must commit to providing an environment of opportunity and growth that makes the new person's time commitment valuable. Ultimately, life goes on and the parties will part ways. But if this can happen roughly along the lines and in the time-frame initially discussed at the start of the relationship, a great deal of mutual trust and respect is accrued that benefits everyone.

Passion

I am one of those that believe life is short, so we should all try to make a difference while we're here. This is probably because I grew up in the late 60's and early 70's when there was a common mantra of "if you aren't part of the solution then you're part of the problem". Since we spend a large part of our short lives in our careers, we should not squander that opportunity to have an impact in some way. In my work I have always found opportunities to accomplish one or more of the following goals:

- Fix something that is broken.
- Improve something that is not broken.
- Make something possible that was previously impossible.

If you can make any one of these happen, someone or some group of people will benefit. I think that's very cool and find it to be a tremendous personal motivator. I look for the same passion from my fellow employees, customers, business partners etc.

Once again, the concepts of competency, chemistry, commitment and passion aren't new or revolutionary. Many folks may already use all of these characteristics in the molding and development of their professional relationships. But I've met enough people who are energized when discussing this that I find it worthwhile to keep talking about it. Who knows, maybe someone will read this and fix something that's broken. Or perhaps improve something that's not broken. Or...