



Traits of the Key Players

Looking for the indispensables

By **David G. Jensen**
Contributing Editor

Every manager and CEO would like to hire “key players” when they go out recruiting from other organizations. If Company A decides to reach into competitive organizations to fill important positions, management only wants to identify the best. As a headhunter, the way I often hear this described is with the term “key players.” I must have heard this expression a few hundred times in my career.

But what exactly is a key player? I asked a client to define it for me on a recent search. “Every company has a handful of staff you can count on in a given area of expertise to get the job done. On my team of seven process engineers and biologists, I’ve got two or three whom I just couldn’t live without,” he said. “They are essential to my organization. And when we hire your company to recruit for us, we expect that you’ll be going into other companies and finding just that: the staff that another manager will not want to see leave. We recruit *only* key players.”

That’s a pep talk intended to send headhunters into competitive organizations to talk to their most experienced staff about making a change. But do you know what the traits are that managers are looking for when they make these hires? How does a manager determine whether a prospective employee will end up a key player in her organization?

“It’s an educated guess,” said my hiring manager client. “We judge our future employees on a series of skill areas that we’ve seen in our best people.” Learning what these areas are can only help you identify these strengths in yourself; once you’ve done that, you can integrate them into your interviewing style.

Trait #1: The Selfless Collaborator

My friend John Fetzter suggested that I bring up this trait of the key players despite the fact that it has already been written about a great deal (it can sound almost Dilbert-like to talk about the importance of teamwork). He feels that it deserves repeating because it is the single most important issue separating candidates in the recruiting process. “Teamwork,” said Dr. Fetzter, “is success trait number one. The industrial environment is less lone-wolf and competitive than the training ground of academia, and so signs of being collaborative and selfless stand out. You just can’t succeed in an industry environment without this mindset.”

As Dr. Fetzter mentioned, many research scientists have a tough time initially with teamwork, because so much of their life has involved playing the independent-researcher role while in training. You may need to make yourself more attractive to future employers by working together with other technical staff and disciplines in pursuit of a common goal — and then documenting those results on your CV. You don’t need to be a pharmaceutical project manager in order to have experience working with a

broad range of people on a team assignment.

Develop a reputation inside your company and with those people you work with as someone who fosters and initiates collaborations — and make sure this quality gets mentioned by those who will take those reference-check phone calls when you are out in the job market!

Trait #2: A Sense of Urgency

In some companies, notably the smaller, entrepreneurial firms, things happen quickly. In others, things happen very, very slowly. There are certain organizations that are known as very bureaucratic places . . . When I present candidates from those firms to my clients, I’ll typically hear something like, “Anyone working here requires a sense of urgency.” *We’re not sure about this candidate is the implication.*

Don Haut is a former scientist who transitioned to industry many years ago and then on to a senior management position. He heads strategy and business development for a division of 3M with more than \$2.4 billion in annual revenues. He is among those hiring managers who value a sense of urgency.

“Business happens 24/7/365, which means that competition happens 24/7/365, as well,” said Dr. Haut. “One way that companies win is by getting ‘there’ faster, which means that you not only have to mobilize all of the functions that support a business to move quickly, but you have to know how to decide where ‘there’ is! This creates a requirement not only for people who can act quickly, but for those who can think fast with the courage to act on their convictions. This need runs throughout an organization and is not exclusive to management.”

You may be developing a sense of urgency right now but your organizational culture may prohibit it from coming out. If this is the case, it is one of the largest frustrations you can have as an employee — one that may eventually force you into the job market to find a company that recognizes and values this trait.

Trait #3: Risk Tolerance

When I talk about this in my seminars, the audience often thinks that I am describing something exclusive to the world of biotech start-up companies. Being OK with risk, however, is in demand in all types of employers — not just firms with 10 employees but also in the large pharmaceutical and consulting companies. “A candidate needs to have demonstrated the ability to make decisions with imperfect or incomplete information. He or she must be able to embrace ambiguity and stick his or her neck out to drive to a conclusion,” wrote one of my clients in a job description.

David G. Jensen is the founder and chief executive officer of CTI Executive Search, a unit of CareerTrax Inc. (Sedona, AZ). CTI is a leading recruiting firm in the biosciences. You can reach Dave at (928) 282-5366 or via davej@commspeed.net.

Dr. Haut agreed: "Business success is often defined by comfort with ambiguity and risk — personal, organizational, and financial. This creates a disconnect for many scientists because success in academia is really more about careful, studied research. For example, almost any paper published in *Science*, *Nature*, or *Cell* elegantly delivers data that can help build toward a conclusion but generally doesn't make any firm commitments about what the data means beyond what is irrefutably obvious." In other words, risk tolerance only comes about through industry experience, and your technical training — no matter how in-depth — did not really prepare you for this.

Dr. Haut continued, "Further, great science is often defined by how one gets to the answer as much as by the answer itself, so scientists often fall in love with the process. In a business, you need to understand the process, but you end up falling in love with the answer and then take a risk based on what you think that answer

means to your business. Putting your neck on the line like this is a skill set that all employers look for in their best people."

Another important piece of risk tolerance is a candidate's degree of comfort with failure. Failure is important because it shows that you were not afraid to take chances. So companies consistently look for candidates who can be wrong and admit it. Everyone knows how to talk about successes — or they should if they're in a job search. But far fewer people are comfortable talking about failures, and fewer still know how to bring lessons and advantages back from the brink. "For my organization, a candidate needs to have comfort discussing his or her failures, and he or she needs to have real failures, not something made up for interview day. If not, that person has not taken enough risk," said Dr. Haut. "A candidate who shows excessive fear about or intolerance dealing with failure will be one who cannot act quickly," he added, tying it back to Trait #2.

Whether you like it or not, you will be

asked about your failures. So wise job applicants spend time analyzing the risks taken and the lessons learned from their failures. They get comfortable talking about the topic.

Trait #4: Strength in interpersonal relationships

Rick Leach is in business development for deCODE Genetics. I asked him about this key trait because, in his business role, interpersonal abilities make the difference between success and failure. "Scientists [and engineers] spend their lives accumulating knowledge and developing technical acumen," he said, "but working for a business requires something else entirely: people skills. Scientists often find that they must prioritize their relationship assets above their technical assets. To be valued and measured by your mastery of human relationships can be a very scary proposition for a person who has been valued and measured only by his mastery of things," said Dr. Leach

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that strong people skills are required only for businesspeople like Dr. Leach. Indeed, the key players I've met who work at the bench in industry have succeeded in great measure because they've been able to work with a broad variety of personalities, up and down the organization. This ties into the selfless collaborator role from Trait #1.

Dr. Leach agreed: "While business requires constant interpersonal engagement and does not permit one to escape to the relative sequestration of a laboratory, in every position in a company you need to leverage your human resources to achieve the broader organizational goals." He's right; my employer contacts and human resource clients over the years have always told me that their key players have solid interpersonal skills.

The War for Talent

It would be an easy mistake to assume that the long lines that form at career fairs means there are lots of top notch candidates out there looking for work. That's not the case. One other quality about these key players is that they've got an intense work ethic, and it's hard to find them through ads or job fairs.

The reality is that good recruiting is tough. "There's a war out there for the best new talent," said Dr. Haut. ■