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Building the School of the Future

Discovery Brief 04: Strategic Leadership Selection

Over the next three years, the School District of Philadelphia and Microsoft will collaborate on the ambitious task of imagining and constructing a “School of the Future.” Bringing together the best of what industry and education have to offer, our mission is to create a living blueprint for learning environments in the 21st century.

To get there, we need to capture what we learn, outline key steps, illustrate critical insights, understand challenges, and share the solutions. Discover how we approached the selection of the school’s principal and the methodologies we’ll use throughout the hiring process for all personnel.

Employing a deliberate process.

Great leaders define, shape, and inspire the human experience. From MLK and JFK to local community activists and business entrepreneurs, our leaders propel us forward and guide our reason. In a world of ideas, we are adrift without the leaders who realize them. For this reason, effective leadership is critical to the success of any organization. But how should organizations select their leaders? How should a school built on bold new ideas in education go about finding its principal—the person who will ultimately be responsible for bringing those ideas to life?

Too often, search processes involve a limited call for applicants, straightforward reviews of resumes, a handful of interviews, and then a leap-of-faith hiring decision. But this type of selection process usually finds the leader it deserves. Avoiding such

a pitfall and finding the right leader for the right organization requires employing a deliberate process. Successful leadership selection doesn’t happen by accident or through luck. Selecting leaders with the appropriate competencies and skills requires a strategic process informed by critical thinking.

When the School of the Future set out to select its principal, the School District of Philadelphia used the opportunity to rethink its historical approach to hiring personnel. Together with Microsoft, the district articulated its hiring philosophy and laid out a process for identifying candidates with the right talents.

Behavioral Interviewing Questions Behavioral interviewing is a specific style and approach to evaluating candidates. Fueled by open-ended questions (versus questions that require a yes or no answer), behavioral interviewing illuminates a long-standing pattern of behavior and performance. This offers a richer portrait of a candidate’s ability to perform a job, because the best predictor of future performance is past performance under similar circumstances.

Within behavioral interviewing, there are five key kinds of questions.

1. **Probing questions** allow interviewers to ask for more information until the full answer emerges. Though probing questions address why, what, and how, the most important probing questions deal with why. A good example of a probing question is “Why did you solve the problem the way you did?”
2. **Situational questions** provide an opportunity to gauge a candidate’s ability to handle a situation that is similar to those they are likely to encounter in your work environment. These questions typically involve asking the candidate to solve a problem presented by the interviewer or, alternately, recount a similar challenge the candidate has faced in the past. For example, “Tell me about a time when you had to solve a very difficult problem and then walk me through how you handled it.”

Identifying success factors.

Articulating the attributes and key characteristics of the ideal candidate was our first step in the leadership selection process. Creating powerful and specific language to describe these attributes provided a vivid portrait of what we were looking for—and a vital tool for evaluating the merits of individual candidates. Ultimately, we identified seven success factors to be embodied by the School of the Future’s principal.

Critical Thinking. Someone who learns new concepts and content quickly and puts them into action. A person who is emboldened to take informed risks, seek out new challenges, and create inventive approaches to difficult problems.

Results. A person who relentlessly pursues amazing results. A candidate who stays focused despite distractions and remains passionate despite setbacks.

Customer Feedback. An individual who actively builds open and constructive feedback loops by listening, asking questions, and adapting to the needs of parents, students, and staff. Someone who gives priority to activities that deliver value to the school’s customers.

Teamwork. A candidate who works hard to achieve group goals. A respected and trusted leader who meaningfully accounts for the interests of other people and groups when making decisions or taking actions. An individual who works efficiently with others, collaborating to achieve a common purpose.

Long-Term Approach. A person with the vision to grasp the big picture. Someone who defines, communicates, and expands our understanding of what is possible and who aligns high-level strategies with the efforts and tactics needed to bring them to life over the long-term.

Passion for Education. An individual with a demonstrated passion for creating great learning environments. A candidate with a well-versed understanding of educational theory and practice coupled with an enthusiasm for new ideas. Someone who interprets current trends in education and understands their implications for the purpose of continually improving the teaching and learning experience.

Key Learning: It’s imperative to identify the success factors that will define the ideal candidate before the selection process begins. Knowing what you’re looking for beforehand enables organizations to evaluate individual candidates against agreed-upon criteria instead of wrestling with disparate factors that emerge during interviews.

3. Scenario and role-play questions give candidates the opportunity to demonstrate essential skills and interviewers the opportunity to evaluate how a candidate thinks critically and performs under pressure. That said, the question should be sufficiently general in its context. The candidate should reveal skills that map to the job—not actually do the job during the interview. A popular example of a scenario and role-play type of question: “You are leading a year-long project. Only two months into the project, you see the work is going to take considerably longer and require additional time and materials, which will increase overall costs. How do you handle this situation?”

4. Functional and problem-solving questions are highly varied and multi-layered, and enable candidates to outline how they approach complex problems and interviewers to understand a candidate’s ability to utilize multiple strategies and create unique solutions. Functional and problem-solving questions should utilize real-world problems that relate directly to the job.

5. Self-appraisal questions provide candidates a forum for self-reflection and analysis and interviewers the chance to understand how individual candidates assess their past performance and make comparisons. “How would you have handled the conflict differently?” and “Why were you able to achieve the results you did?” are both good examples of self-appraisal questions.

Putting the process in motion.

This is a play-by-play of the search process used by the School District of Philadelphia and Microsoft to select the School of the Future's principal. The timelines are flexible, of course, but this outline is prototypical of a deliberate, strategic process.

T - 75 days: Getting the Word Out. Seventy-five days prior to the desired start date for the principal, an advertisement for the position was placed in national and local publications, including *Education Week*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as on CareerBuilder.com. The advertisement was crafted to automatically filter applicants that did not possess the necessary skills. Respondents were asked to electronically submit a response to three questions posed within the advertisement, forcing applicants to demonstrate their passion, communication skills, technological savvy, and creativity. The advertisement also pointed applicants to a URL, requiring individuals to demonstrate research skills and ability to successfully maneuver within a digital environment. Additionally, the submission requirements featured a short timeline. Successful leadership involves conviction and action, so the short timeline allowed candidates to demonstrate preparation and decisiveness.

T - 60 days: Competency Wheel Development. Competency wheels are a mainstay of successful organizations and provide a roadmap for the active nurturing of a specific kind of culture (e.g., sales-oriented, collaborative, inventive, etc.) and developing an organization's most valuable capital—talent. Microsoft employs this model and has subsequently benefited from

consistently hiring great people and having low employee turnover and renowned professional development. Together, Microsoft and the School District of Philadelphia developed a competency wheel for the School of the Future to guide the principal hiring process. [figure 1]

T - 45 days: Initial Screening. Within the search committee, four individuals were selected to pre-screen all of the submissions (resumes and requisite essays) received. This initial screening was done to eliminate candidates who did not meet the minimum requirements for the position, including appropriate certifications, experience with adolescents, and demonstrated understanding of education and passion for learning environments. As a result of the initial screening, seven candidates were identified to go on to the next stage.

T - 30 days: Community Engagement. To ensure appropriate community involvement and stakeholder buy-in, a community panel was convened to participate in the interview process. Each candidate was interviewed for an hour by the community panel. Each panel member was given a specific competency to explore with the candidates. Following the interviews, panel members ranked each candidate on a scale from 1–6, with 1 representing superior performance. Feedback from the community panel narrowed the candidate pool to three finalists.

T - 15 days: Process Training. Before conducting interviews with the three finalists, Microsoft and the School District of Philadelphia conducted a briefing with district leadership to

Leadership Selection Process Timeline





[figure 1]

Community Roles The community panel was a vital part of the leadership selection process. Because of its diverse composition, the panel brought different perspectives on specific competencies required by the position. Collectively, the panel also offered an objective outlook from outside the inner workings of the school district. A community panel offers the opportunity to evaluate candidates in ways that educators alone could not. Also, the panel essentially acts as a proxy for the community-at-large, aligning the interests of the school with the community it serves.

Stakeholder Roles	Number of Representatives	Area of Questioning
Student	2	Customer Focus
Community	4	Teamwork
Political	2	Teamwork
Educator	5	Individual Success and Long-Term Approach
Union	3	Teamwork and Results
Business	1	Results

outline the process involved in the final interview day. After receiving approval, a half-day training session was conducted with individuals who would be actively participating in the interview process. At this training session, participants were instructed on the district's hiring philosophy—hire for Philadelphia first, the job second; seek out talent and potential, not just experience; commit to diversity in the workplace; and hire the best. Participants were also briefed on the hiring methodology and the specifics of utilizing a behavioral interviewing model.

Training content will be made available at the School of the Future Web site in the late spring of 2006.

T - 0 days: Final Interview Day—"The Loop." The centerpiece of the final interview day was "The Loop." This hiring model is built around a vigorous interviewing experience wherein the candidate's ability to successfully adapt and react to the environment is part of the screening process. Here's how it

works: Each finalist completes seven interviews conducted by different people in a single day. Using a wide variety of behavioral interviewing questions, individual interviewers focus on one or two identified competencies and functional skills and bear the responsibility of assessing each candidate's ability to perform those skills. Collectively, the interviewers address all of the desired success factors comprehensively. At the end of each interview, each interviewer enters a "hire" or "no hire" decision.

The three finalists completed "The Loop" during the final interview day. At the end of the day, only one candidate completed the loop successfully—receiving 100% "hire" decisions from all interviewers. This individual then interviewed with Dr. Greg Thornton, Chief Academic Officer. Upon completion of this interview, the position was offered to the candidate and was accepted. The candidate officially started as principal of Philadelphia's School of the Future on September 1, 2005, a full year before the school's opening.

Introducing Dr. Shirley Grover

For the past 11 years, Dr. Grover served as director of the American School in Milan, Italy, a school with an international, multi-cultural student body gathered by circumstance, but united in its desire to build a community of learners capable of taking their places in a rapidly evolving world.

Before joining the American School, Dr. Grover served as Superintendent of Schools in Scarborough, ME, and had a long career as a teacher and administrator. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa, has served on the International Advisory Board for Middle States Accreditation, and has been a member of the American Association of School Administrators. Her son, Jonathan, is a freshman at Brandeis University.

"The interviewing process was similar to how I imagine the future to be: the beginning was full of possibilities, laden with many unknowns, mysteries, intriguing, and, of course, inviting of my engagement."

Dr. Shirley Grover
Principal, School of the Future



“Hiring and developing great people is the key to any organization’s success. The HR processes developed and used for the School of the Future set a strong foundation for future success.”

Mary Cullinane
U.S. Partners in Learning, Microsoft Corporation

Partners in Learning

Technology is a powerful tool that can help people, communities, and nations realize their potential. But for millions, the promise of technology is still unrealized. Microsoft Corporation has made a comprehensive commitment to digital inclusion — helping individuals, communities, and nations gain access to the technology tools, skills, and innovation they need to realize their potential in the changing economy. Microsoft's flagship digital inclusion initiative is Partners in Learning.

Despite real improvements in accessing and using information and communication technology in education, many students and teachers still lack basic access to technology and training. The result is a widening skills gap that contributes to disparities in quality of life, competitiveness, and economic development.

Part of the Microsoft® Partners in Learning initiative, the School of the Future is an important example of our commitment to addressing the digital inclusion issues facing education today by providing tools and support that enable educators and schools to deliver on the promise of technology in education.

For more information on Microsoft Partners in Learning, go to: www.microsoft.com/uspil

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