

I recently interviewed an outstanding middle market CEO candidate. Our discussion reminded me why I enjoy the search business so much. We meet so many interesting and successful people who do what they do so well. These conversations help my client, but they also teach me about myself and help me learn and grow.

This particular discussion forced reflection. How many people have I met as a search consultant? Collectively, how many people has Sockwell Partners met over the years? Considering we do 50-60 searches a year, I figure we interview roughly 300 executives a year. Over the partners' careers, we've interviewed over 4,500 people since our firm began in 1982! What have we learned and what does it mean?

Obviously, no two candidates are just alike. Some leaders are charismatic, extroverted, and big picture. Others are systematic, disciplined, and detail-focused. Some are a mix. We have learned that certain traits truly differentiate the most successful leaders from the run of the mill. At Sockwell, we look for:

- **Goal setting** – Successful leaders naturally stretch themselves and their teams. The thrill of the chase is as important as actually accomplishing the goals. Some leaders turn goal setting into a competitive endeavor. However, we do make some distinction between the two – not all successful leaders are hypercompetitive.
- **Energy level** – Individuals with a "full battery" get more accomplished in a day. They kick up ideas and turn those ideas into action. In addition, we find energy level is contagious. Co-workers feel the pace of a charged executive and tend to step up their pace to keep up.
- **Ability to deal with adversity** – Coaches talk about the importance of their teams' overcoming adversity, and we think there is truth to this. People learn most during their most trying experiences. They gain confidence and realize their limits are much broader than previously understood. Consequently, we listen carefully to candidates' stories of how they dealt with adversity, what they learned from it, and how they applied these lessons later in life.
- **Presence** – This might seem shallow. We all learned early in life not to judge a book by its cover. Nonetheless, how one carries himself/herself is very important in how they get others to follow. Successful people communicate clearly and confidently and command respect in doing so.
- **Continuous learners** – We look for candidates who have intellectual curiosity. They might be voracious readers, work with executive coaches, attend conferences, take classes, surround themselves with stimulating people, travel, etc. However they do it - people who realize they don't know it all and work to expand their knowledge base - separate themselves from the field.

Each search is unique, and each assignment requires candidates with varying experiences and skills. As a result, we devise a tailored plan to evaluate candidates who will be successful in that particular position and culture. Nonetheless, we seek candidates in every search who possess the five traits above.

Are there other traits you find particularly important? Can you learn anything about yourself in reflecting on these traits? As always, we welcome your thoughts.