Informational Interview

Chief Public Civil Rights

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JWMI 521

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Introduction

On October 30, 2018, I Tyvonia Ward, conducted an interview with the Chief Public Civil Rights Division within the Office of Human Capital Management (HCM), Department of Interior (DOI). The selected individual is an attorney advisor and a senior official within the Department of Interior. He leads a team of four and oversees the department-wide program to ensure that all individuals regardless of their race, color, sex (sexual orientation or gender identity), age, disability, etc. have full, uninhibited access to America’s public lands, programs, and services funded by the DOI. Where there is an allegation of impropriety on behalf of a DOI employee or its partners, the Chief of Public Civil Rights and his team work to investigate, address and or correct the identified problem.

I chose this individual to interview because his line of work and mine are similar in that we both have a vested interest in ensuring all parties have equal access to the rights and privileges the DOI has to offer. His position has visibility on access to and from the public whereas my job focuses on the DOI employees and applicants for employment.

Questions

The questions chosen for the interview were 1. What two or three key competencies do you seek in job candidates? Why are these competencies at the top of your list? 2. When would you hire externally and when would you promote internally to fill gaps in your team? 3. How useful are references to you in assessing job candidates? 4. When onboarding a new employee, what is your expectation as it relates to the selectee’s ability to “hit the ground running?” Based on your experience, how successful has this approach been for you as a senior leader in the agency? 4. As you are aware, some Federal Agencies utilize the four to five-tier approach to rating employee performance, and that the rating occurs on an annual basis with at least one mid-term review. Based on your experience, do you believe the current performance management process is effective in sustaining quality talent? Below is a summarization of the responses from the Chief of Public Civil Rights to each of the questions.

**Question one** sought to understand the competencies the Chief thought were pertinent when selecting candidates to fill his vacant positions. It was a question provided by JWMI as an option to consider. The Chief provided three competencies he believed were essential for a candidate to possess; humility, integrity, and excellent communication (both written and oral communication).

*Humility* was his first response as he believed, an individual who is teachable, flexible, adaptable, and capable of learning must first be humble. He also stated that every candidate in consideration has some capability and or abilities that the individual can pride themselves and articulate how they’re the right person for the job. It’s the candidate who shows humility that demonstrates to him that they can grow, help the organization, be empathetic and receive feedback in the appropriate context.

The second competency was *integrity*. The Chief expressed that it is difficult to believe that an untruthful person is someone who can be relied upon or considered a valued member of the team, and therefore seeks candidates who have a high degree of integrity. The third and final competency is *communication*, both verbal and written communication. The Chief conveyed the ability to communicate tactfully, and having an understanding of knowing when and how to guard their words and actions is essential to building creditability in the organization.

**Question two** sought to ascertain when the leader thought was the best time to hire external or to promote from within the organization. Essentially, he responded that he preferred to hire externally versus internally as someone new to the organization can add considerable value to the organization versus someone who was already on board. He thought an external candidate could add to the dynamic of the organization better than an existing employee who was up for consideration for the same vacant position.

**Question three** asked how useful the leader thought checking references were when considering a candidate. He did not see much value in it as he believed one good reference could tell the good and bad about the candidate and if you found a manager that wanted to get rid of an employee (for whatever reason), he or she may give a good reference as not to impede the selection of the person under consideration.

**Question four** sought to determine how important the Chief of Public Civil Rights thought possessing the skills necessary to “hit the ground running” was when considering a candidate to fill his vacant position. Surprisingly, he was flexible and thought every candidate, even the most talented, needed a period of adjustment. He felt it was important for the individual to take his or her time to learn the environment and culture so he or she could know where to begin to add the most value to the organization.

Lastly, **question five** inquired as to how effective he believed the tiered performance rating process was in sustaining quality talent. His response was a pleasant surprise and somewhat in line with our reading for week five. He too believed that regardless of the system used, every employee needed a committed leader who will continually assess the employee’s capabilities year-round, coach, mentor, and develop where necessary to obtain the quality products or services required for mission success. He also conveyed that having the right performance measures is critical to incentivizing the employee to excel.

Reflection

The element of the interview that was most surprising to me was the Chief's response to external hiring versus internal promoting. He believed that hiring externally was better for an organization than growing and promoting from within. Although the process of continually hiring from within without ever considering external candidates tends to perpetuate the “like me” syndrome, his belief that external hiring was better caught me off guard. I believe that it's our job as leaders to develop our employees for career advancement opportunities and into critical roles within the organization. We go through great strides to improve and reward high performers and having an external only mindset is counter-productive or adversely impacting the organization's retention efforts to retain top performers.

In the same vein, his practice of giving new employees time to learn and grow in the organization before expecting them to take on the assignment with gusto is something that I have to practice within my areas of responsibility. Too many times than I can count, I have hired employees with the mindset of onboarding them in a “hit the ground running” perspective. It has worked to some extent because we were able to achieve impossible goals, yet in some cases, it caused employee burnout or unexpected turnover more times than desired. I’ve learned from our interview that it is possible to be flexible and allow the employee time to learn and grow which I will implement during my future new hires.

Conclusion

Performance reviews are more than a rating assigned to an employee; it’s a tool to develop the quality resource needed to fulfill our mission objectives. When used as an instrument for development we can achieve insurmountable goals and objectives. When used as an end of year rating, we miss the opportunity to impact change in real time. The Chief of Public Civil Rights understood and utilized the performance management structure to get the performance he needed out of his employees. He used it as Jennifer Carpenter suggested in our week five expert practice videos, early and often to recognize people for the job they're doing well and correct less than desirable performance as its occurring versus after it has occurred.

Lastly, onboarding is as communicated in our reading this week, an opportunity to build engagement and capitalize on a good hire. The Chief of Public Civil Rights understood and conveyed that allowing the new hire time to understand their new role, interact with managers, their team, and employees within the organization, and learn the culture, was an excellent tool to help the employee assimilate and to contribute value to the organizations’ overall success.

References

JWMI Week 2 Lecture “Onboarding and Development”

JWMI Week 5 Expert Practice Videos. Jennifer Carpenter “Performance Management.”