

“Neon Deion” Versus Culture

By George E. Gercken, Ph.D.

For the second week in a row, Deion Sanders’ football team, University of Colorado Boulder, has won resoundingly. They exceeded last year’s record, and this is just Mr. Sanders’ first year of coaching a Division 1 team. Via what is called the Transfer Portal, there are ninety new players on the team, all wanting to play for him because of his charisma. Long ago, as a winning player himself, Mr. Sanders earned the nickname “Neon Deion” for his self-presentation and showmanship. In a passing comment, “Neon Deion” recently said that talent beats culture.

Certainly, organizations spend a great deal of time working on and promoting their culture, turning out all sorts of documents to support it. But, per an even older saying from the writer Leo Rosten, “First-rate people hire first-rate people; second-rate people hire third-rate people.” What this means is that even a well-honed culture could be the equivalent of putting lipstick on a pig!

So, why would organizations not always hire the best talent? It is not because they do not want to, or at least as they state publicly. It comes down to the first filters that candidates must go through to be considered. If these filters are not managed by first-rate, driven, bright, ambitious and effortful individuals, then the spectacular candidates are weeded out, and the mediocre are passed through. That is because first-rate candidates are a threat to those who demonstrate more cautious, rigid and bureaucratic tendencies.

Do we perhaps need a hiring committee? Was it not a committee that, by looking to construct a horse, came up with a camel? A committee of the mediocre will produce an even worse hiring result because there is such a bureaucratic, safety-first quality.

The answer is employing talent to hire talent. Choose your best and brightest, the up-and-comers, to do first what “Neon Deion” did: charismatically attract talent. Then, in conjunction with these superlative employees, make a concerted effort to lure in the finest candidates and enculturate them.

Could the above approach be a bit more hit-and-miss than we would prefer? That is a possibility. Yes, when you employ a more bureaucratic filter, your hiring will be consistent, but you will overlook the candidates of extraordinary capacity.

Is “Neon Deion” assured of winning the college football championship? No, he is not. Bringing ninety new individuals into an established circumstance requires tremendous organization, commitment and effort to be successful. Mr. Sanders seems guaranteed to be the first coach to truly benefit from the Transfer Portal. His charisma, enormous success in football and baseball, and continual drive to win enable his players to pick themselves up and triumph.

The chief lesson is: Do not let your cautious bureaucrats be your filter. They seek safety in rules and find less threat in mediocrity. They will produce ever so many “reasons” why an excellent candidate “just won’t do.” That is where leadership comes in: to put the best people in place to choose the best talent, for they, themselves, are not cultural safety seekers.

And “Neon Deion” is correct: Talent does beat culture. When you put together a group of talented individuals, the culture will follow. Winners will work together to win. Talent attracts talent, just as first-rate people hire first-rate people. Conversely, even a well-honed culture cannot make up for a mediocre group of individuals. When you employ your best and brightest to hire and develop the finest new talent, a culture of success will flow from this great team.