Wisdom Wanted!

By ALAN NICOL, Executive Member, AlanNicolSolutions

I had a great conversation yesterday with a friend of mine in which I've worked with for several years. We talked about a great many things, it had been a while since we talked, but the reason for his call was this. He wanted help trying to find the right person to fill a position on his team.

His comment to me was this. "I'm tired of interviewing people who are all trying to convince me of how smart they are. I need someone who is wise, and I can't find any." To paraphrase the conversation, he means that he has interviewed a great many people who are well versed and educated in the topics of interest. Unfortunately, he has not been convinced that any of them truly understand how to apply that knowledge in a way that will help him cure his business of its ailments.

We are all familiar with the dilemma. Each of us can point to someone that has a wall of credentials and little sense for how to make any effect. Likewise, we can each point at someone with few certificates, authorizations, ribbons, belts, or stamps, that none-the-less is the first person we seek when we need a real problem solved.

So, how do we seek that real understanding that we need? How do we dig past the knowledge and identify the wisdom that enables a person to put that knowledge to work in a profound and meaningful way? I've been working on that question since my friend presented it yesterday and I'd like to share some thoughts.

We should all have, at this point, some understanding of the Contextual Interviewing method. Those of us who have interviewed for work in the last few

years are certainly familiar with it. Simply, we ask questions of prospective employees in which we ask them to describe specific situations in which they faced a problem and also ask them to describe their actions, the results, and any lessons they learned.

For example, we might ask, “Describe a time when you had to design a product solution that you didn’t think was possible. What did you do?” The questions are open-ended, and deliberately do not lead or imply a “correct” answer. It’s a great interview method. However, it’s only as revealing as the questions we ask. The trick is to ask the right questions.

To ask the right questions to investigate a person’s true understanding of a topic, we must ask a question that challenges the truth of that topic. To do that, we must challenge our own understanding. It’s time to dig deep.

Let me offer a few ideas on some of the hot topics in U.S. industry today. I’ll present the understanding that I personally perceive and seek. Please accept these as examples. It is up to you to seek out the understanding that you believe in. It may not be exactly as I see it.

You will notice a common thread in the examples below. In each case the questioned is challenged to either defend the topic or refute the topic. When you dig at a person’s beliefs, you get some insight into the depth of their understanding. Latch on to those who can truly debate the subject. Pass on those who only offer textbook definitions or dogma.

Six Sigma Example

In my experience, the truth behind Six Sigma is this. Six Sigma declares war on variation. It recognizes that we waste unnecessary, time, energy, and resources trying to control processes and outcomes that are inconsistent. The aim of Six Sigma is to create consistency and predictability. All else, including the stuff about 3 parts in a million defective, are all just tools or measures of variation and consistency.

Therefore, when interviewing people for their understanding of Six Sigma, ignore their boasts of the use of the many tools. Seek beyond the textbook definitions of “Six Sigma” and z-scores. Those don’t fundamentally matter. What they represent and mean in terms of improving performance matters. Here are some question ideas, some of which are ones my friend presented:

1. How do you decide when a problem deserves the Six Sigma approach?
2. What would you call Six Sigma if I asked you to give it a new name? Why?
3. What do you think is the future of Six Sigma? Why?
4. What do you think should be done to solve a problem that is different than how you were trained in Six Sigma? Why?
5. Do you think that 3 parts in a million defective is the right answer? Why or why not?

6. Why do you believe in Six Sigma?

Lean Example

To my way of thinking, the enemy of Lean is waste. That waste is categorized in 8-9 different forms. What is more important; that a prospective employee can quote all of the forms and various tools for attacking them, or that the person can carefully and reasonably present a plan for eliminating them?

So, let's find ways to challenge the identification of and elimination of waste. Here are some thoughts:

When you take the interviewee to lunch, ask him or her to point out the waste he or she sees in the restaurant and what could be done to eliminate it. Then, ask if it should be eliminated and why.

1. When is it a good thing to have some waste? Examples?
2. Present a real example. Ask that person to identify and discuss the waste, and a possible solution"
3. What waste definitions would you re-name? Why?
4. Would you add a waste to the classic list? Why?
5. What do you believe causes most of the waste? Why do you believe that?
6. Do you think it is possible or even right to eliminate all waste? Why or why not?
7. Do you think that eliminating waste is the best way to improve performance? Why do you think that?

Innovation or Product Development Example

In my way of thinking, innovation and product development are fundamentally problem solving. There are elements of creativity and risk management and critical thinking that are all very important.

Find ways to challenge a person to explain what really happens, inside and outside of policy and "best practice." Query their beliefs, which will reveal a great deal about their experience and how they think. Here are some thoughts:

1. What is innovation to you?
2. If I asked you to design a better pen right now, what would you need?
3. How do you know that your ideas or your designs are good? When in the design process do you decide that?
4. What is good about a phased approach to product development? What is bad? How would you fix the bad parts?
5. Tell me about your ideal design checklist? Why do you describe it as you do?
6. What do you believe is the greatest challenge to [quality, reliability, creativity, quick resolution]? What do you think is the best way to deal with the challenge?

7. If I asked you what the best way to design something is, what would you tell me?
8. What do you think is most important, creativity, quality and reliability, or cost? Why do you think that?

In each example above, we challenge the questioned to answer hard questions. They are hard because they challenge beliefs or doctrine. A person who can discuss the doctrine from a perspective of personal belief understands. A person who only recites dogma may have faith, but they won't necessarily know what to do then the problem presented is not textbook. They won't know how to tailor the topic to fit your individual business needs. Find the people who can debate at an introspective level.

Engage in the debate if you want to dig deeper. Don't hold it against the questioned if their insights or beliefs are different than yours. Instead, latch on to those rare individuals that can debate the topic at all. Once you have them identified then ask yourself if their perspective would be a beneficial element of diversity or a compliment to your own. Just because it is somewhat different, doesn't mean it is wrong, or that it can't be a good thing.

Use the same tactic for any prospective employees you are interviewing for any role or position. Just be sure that your expectations for an answer are appropriate to the position and experience level. If an assembler can talk about what works and doesn't work in terms of processing time, great! Don't expect an entry-level engineer to deeply discuss the merits of disciplined document control.

The way I like to think about personnel that I want to hire is this. I'm hiring a solution, not a resource. I want to know that the person I put in the role will be able to solve the problems of the role and execute excellently. Doing so is more about thinking and deciding and responding than it is about training and knowledge. Challenge the beliefs appropriate to the role to get an idea of how people think.

Think about the role you are looking to fill. Boil it down to core motives and beliefs. Then, ask questions that challenge those beliefs. The answers your prospective employees present will tell you volumes about their true understanding. Seek those who can debate with wisdom, regardless of perspective. Once you have them identified, then dig deeper into their beliefs and experience to determine if they fit with your own. It's the best way I know of to finds true wisdom underneath the façade of knowledge.

Stay wise, friends.

For more information, please visit www.bizwizwithin.com *[1]*

http://www.chem.info/blogs/2012/06/wisdom-wanted?qt-most_popular=0

Links:
[1] http://www.bizwizwithin.com/