# TRUTH 1

## FORGET TRAITS; IT'S BEHAVIOR THAT COUNTS!

Y ou're interviewing applicants to fill a job position in your firm. What are you looking for in these applicants? If you're like many managers, you'll answer with terms such as *hardworking*, *persistent*, *confident*, and *dependable*. After all, how can you go wrong trying to hire people with traits such as these? Well, you can! The problem is that traits aren't necessarily good predictors of future job performance.

Most of us have a strong belief in the power of traits to predict behavior. We know that people behave differently in different situations, but we tend to classify people by their traits, impose judgments about those traits (being self-assured is "good"; being submissive is "bad"), and make evaluations about people based on these trait classifications. Managers often do this when they make hiring decisions or evaluate current employees. After all, if managers truly believed that situations determined behavior, they would hire people almost at random and structure the situation to fit the employee's strengths. But the employee selection process in most organizations places a great deal of emphasis on traits. We see this in the emphasis placed on how applicants perform in interviews and on tests.

During interviews, managers watch and listen to see if applicants have the "qualities" they're looking for in a "good" employee. Similarly, tests are often used to determine the degree to which an applicant has "good employee traits."

There are two problems with using traits in the hiring process. First, organizational settings are strong situations that have a large impact on employee behavior. Second, individuals are highly adaptive and personality traits change in response to organizational situations.

The effects of traits in explaining behavior is likely to be strongest in relatively weak situations and weakest in relatively strong situations. Organizational settings tend to be strong situations because they have rules and other formal regulations that define acceptable behavior and punish deviant behavior, and because they have informal norms that dictate appropriate behaviors. These formal and informal constraints minimize the effects of different personality traits. In contrast, picnics, parties, and similar informal functions are weak situations, and we'd predict that traits would be fairly strong predictors of behavior in these situations.

*The best predictor of a person's future behavior is his or her past behavior.*

While personality traits are generally stable over time, there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that an individual's traits are changed by the organization in which that individual participates. Moreover, people typically belong to

multiple organizations (for instance, community, religious, social, athletic, and political, as well as to an employer) that often include very different kinds of members, and they adapt to those different situations. The fact is that people are not prisoners of a rigid and stable personality framework. They can adjust their behavior to reflect the requirements of various situations.

If traits aren't very good for predicting future employee behavior, what should managers use? The answer is: Past behaviors! The best predictor of a person's future behavior is his or her past behavior. So when interviewing candidates, ask questions that focus on previous experiences that are relevant to the current job opening. Here's a couple of examples: "What have you done in previous jobs that demonstrates your creativity?" "On your last job, what was it that you most wanted to accomplish but didn't? Why didn't you?"