

Two Common Hiring Mistakes to Avoid In Your Next Staffing Decision

Every hire is a risk. Every time I have hired someone or have been hired, there was a risk involved. Some argue that proven track records eliminate the risk, but in reality a great history only minimizes the risk. Even when hiring someone who has a proven track record, it is hard to separate the individual's performance from the organization's performance. For example, we have seen great assistant coaches hired to be head coaches with dismal results. And sometimes when the coach returns to an assistant role, he is unable to reclaim the "mojo" he once had. In those cases, clearly it was the system around him at his former school that lifted his performance above his capacity. Thus the hire was a risk, as all hires are.

The risk in hiring can be minimized, but it can't be eliminated. To help you minimize the risk in your staff hires, below are two of the most common hiring mistakes you must avoid making in church ministry.

Mistake One: Hiring the Best

Many church leaders and churches have gone down a common hiring path. They (a) identify a role they want to fill and then (b) search for the "best person" to fill the role. I have heard many senior pastors describe the desire to "hire the best and give immense amounts of freedom." One proudly told me his hiring strategy was simply to "hire thoroughbreds and let them run."

While "hiring the best" may sound wise, the practice can easily lead to disastrous division. Imagine a staff meeting where directors of student ministry, small group ministry, and children's ministry are seated around the same table. They have been recently recruited with the promise of "freedom to run." And because they are the "best," they are strong leaders with a solid track record of execution. They are able to put ministry philosophy into practice, able to implement and make "it" happen. But as they are seated around the same table, each has a different understanding of the "it" that needs to happen. They have different convictions about where the church should head and how ministry should be executed. Quickly, the strong leaders with differing philosophies of ministry will lead, as they were recruited to do, in a plethora of directions. And they will take the church with them.

Instead of seeking to hire the best leaders, **seek to hire the right leaders.** The right leaders hold deeply to the ministry philosophy of the church and the values that make her unique. With the right leaders, there is strong overlap between their personal ministry philosophy and values and that of the church. In other words, what matters to the church also matters deeply to the staff member.

Does wanting the "right" leaders mean you don't look for the "best" leaders? Absolutely not! A

team of strong leaders passionate about the same values and focused in the same direction is truly powerful. However, the "best" leader is only best for the ministry/organization if there is alignment on both philosophy and values. To check alignment around ministry philosophy, you need to know both your church's philosophy of ministry and the values that guide how you minister.

Philosophy Alignment

Your church's ministry philosophy is essentially your church's collective thinking about ministry, specifically how ministry should look in your specific context. The right leaders hold deeply to the theology and the philosophy of the church. It is a massive mistake to only hire people who ascribe to the church's doctrinal statement or creed because it is very possible to have theological alignment without philosophical alignment. And **while theological alignment is essential, alignment around ministry philosophy is equally important.**

At one church I consulted there were two staff leaders who theologically held to the same soteriology, the same view of eternal hell, and the same passion for evangelism. Yet philosophically, their view of how to lead a church to engage the culture evangelistically was diametrically opposed. They both were recruited to the same staff team on theological alignment alone, and because they were so different in philosophy and practice they were leading (even unintentionally) the church in multiple directions.

Values Alignment

Your "church values" are not what you do, but they affect everything you do. They are the **shared passions and convictions that inform your unique church culture.** For example, two churches of similar size and doctrinal positions offer "worship services" that on the surface sound the same: 30 minutes of music and 40 minutes of biblical teaching. Yet when you visit them, they are very different. Perhaps church A deeply values "authenticity," and that value manifests itself in everything from the subtle greeters to the transparency in the teaching. Church B values "hospitality," and that feels very different. It's not as if church A is not hospitable and church B is inauthentic, but the pronounced values distinctly mark the culture of each church.

Obviously you want to hire staff that hold to the actual values (values already in place) of the church. Additionally, if your church has some aspirational values (values you have identified that you long to embed in the culture but are not currently), then also look for staff who possess these values.

First, identify your ministry philosophy and the values (both actual and aspirational) that make your church who she is. Then look for the right players. And as you do, consider carefully the second mistake.

Mistake Two: Hiring from the Inside (or Outside)

Often church leaders make a grave mistake when they hire from outside their church instead of

raising up a leader from within the body. The opposite is equally true; often church leaders hire from the inside when they should look outside the church for a new leader.

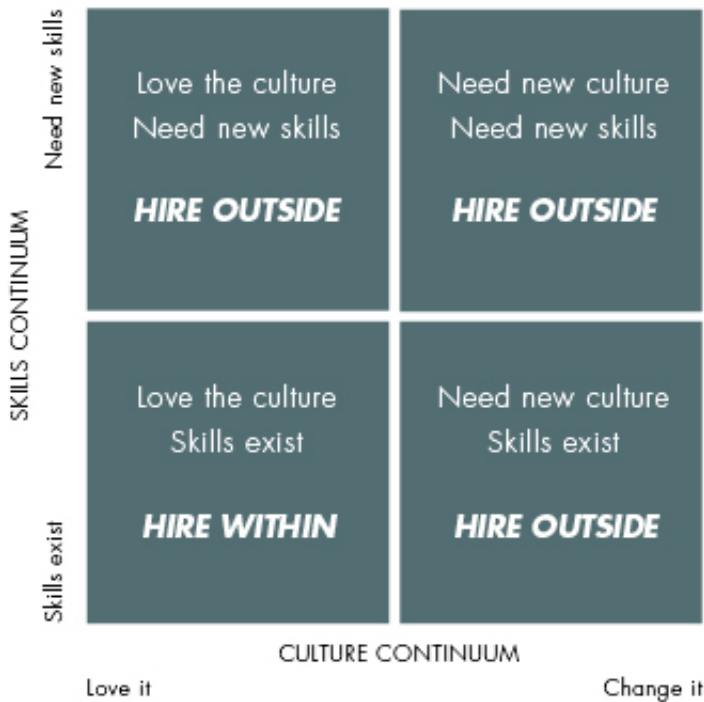
Hiring from within is **both the safe and risky option**. It is safe because you are able to observe the person's character and service before he/she even knows a staff role exists. And as an insider, the person has already committed to the ministry philosophy and values of the church. From a discipleship vantage point, hiring from within helps set a mindset and expectation that "our church raises up her own leaders." The risk is that there is still a risk, and if the new staff member doesn't work out, it will be much more painful to move an insider off the team.

Hiring from outside the church gives an **opportunity for a fresh perspective** and to acquire some leadership experience needed for the church's next season of ministry. For example, the church may be entering a season of expansion or growth and an outsider who has a track record of experience related to what a church needs could be very helpful. At the same time, an insider could be developed for the task. But in some cases, the development will fall well short of the skills that past experience provides.

So how do you know if you should hire from the inside or the outside?

I have found John Kotter's insight to be helpful. Kotter is a Harvard professor and leadership guru. He teaches that if you want to change the culture, you should hire from the outside. If you want to sustain or build upon the current culture, you should hire from within. If the culture is healthy within a particular department within your church, look first to hire from within. Only look outside if there are skills and experience needed that can't be developed within your church in a reasonable matter of time. If the culture is unhealthy or you desire to change the culture with an infusion of some new values and leadership, look to hire externally.

I have put together a simple chart (seen below) to help you think through the decision to hire from within or from the outside. I hope it serves you well. While only one box indicates you should "hire from within," some churches execute the majority of their hires from this vantage point because they possess a strong, equipping culture.



Every hire is a risk; therefore, every hire requires faith. Ultimately all of the above is mere fodder when the Lord makes it clear who the next leader should be. So while I wrote this article so that we could hone our hiring strategy, I want to listen carefully to the voice of the Lord whose foolishness is wiser than our wisdom and who, as in the case of king David, often selects leaders that we tend to consider last. For while we tend to look at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart (I Samuel 16:7).

Read more from Eric [here](#).

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