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Interviewing: I knew in the first 2 minutes...

by Lisa F. Tourville

Management opportunities have been offered to me in every stable job I've ever had. By "stable," I exclude the stint I had folding jeans — where boredom drove me out in less than a month. It started back in high school, at McDonald's, when I was moved into management, continued on to my college-supporting restaurant job and followed me into my professional life as an actuary. Though I continue to practice honing my management skills, I know I will never be perfect.

Like the coach of a baseball team, as a manager, I've learned that my own and my team's success requires that I choose the right players. Some high paid, some low paid, some home-run hitters, and some golden-glove candidates. The right combination is the best ticket to success. And recognizing these successes — and the reason they happened — is part of the game. When things do go right, such as winning the playoffs and getting that huge 10-year guaranteed contract — or getting promoted, I think it's important to sit the players and staff down and thank them. After all, one of the most important lessons I have learned is that

As a manager, if you don't have the right people supporting you, you will not succeed.

Choosing the right people depends on how well we prepare for and implement the interviews. I've heard people say they knew in the first two minutes of an interview that the candidate was right for the job. While I'm sure there were times they were right, I'm also sure there were times they were wrong. If it were that easy, why aren't interviews scheduled for 10 minutes (allowing for the late start, of course)?

When we are promoted into management, hiring skills don't magically appear on our list of core competencies. These

are learned skills, and it is impossible to manage effectively without hiring effectively. One of my favorite books on this subject is *Hiring The Best: A*

Manager's Guide to Effective Interviewing by Martin Yate. It helped me to formulate some of the thoughts I presented in a speech at an SOA conference a few years ago on interviewing. That speech forms the basis of this article. At the back of *Hiring The Best* are comprehensive lists of questions you can use for interviewing entry-level, managerial, sales and secretarial positions. I have found these lists valuable through the years and I highly recommend them as a source for selecting interviewing questions.

Though the formula for interviewing success sounds simple, I know it is not.

1. Ask yourself the right questions.
2. Ask the candidate the right questions.
3. Listen to the answers.

Ask yourself the right questions!

Long before I ever sit down to an interview, I ask myself a series of questions. Is the department living up to my expectations? Where is the company headed? Do I need an analyst or a data-entry

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Interviewing

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clerk? Should I hire two to three entry-level people or recruit a higher level “heavy-hitter” for the same dollar?

First and foremost, develop a comprehensive job description to make sure you understand your needs. How can you find something if you don’t know what you’re looking for? List the major functional responsibilities of the vacant position and the critical skills needed to perform each function. Determine the educational background necessary to do the job. Know what depth of experience you need. Add balance to the department. Think long-term. What will their contribution be over the next five years? Think about the preferred professional and personal qualities.

Once you’ve done the posting and/or advertising, and have selected the strongest candidates, the next step is to plan the interview. For starters, choose your interview style.

- **Situational Style** interviewing is based on the theory that the closer you can get to a real work situation, the better your evaluation will be. You can use “hypotheticals” or physical examples. Tour your office; have candidates perform some aspect of the job if possible, such as analyzing a report with blatant errors.
- **Personality Profile Style** helps you find key personality traits important to the success of the job. Personality traits can be further broken into Personal, Professional, and Business categories. Personal traits, such as confidence, determination, drive, energy, interpersonal skills and motivation affect various aspects of any job. Professional traits, such as analytical ability, integrity and reliability, can reveal loyalty to a cause, person or company, and speak well of a person’s dependability and trustworthiness. Business traits, such as budgeting skills, efficiency and

prioritizing, show a person understands the ultimate goal of the company. Determine the traits that are important to you and your company and model your interview questions accordingly.

- **Stress Style** uses tough, tricky and negatively phrased questions designed to keep the candidate off balance. You can evaluate poise and quick thinking.
- **Behavioral Style** assumes that past behavior can predict future actions.

Personally, I prefer a combination of several styles. I’ll offer a few “hypotheticals”, look for key personality traits, and study behavior.

Do a little administrative preparation:

- Review the job descriptions.
- Remember what first attracted you to the company.
- Meet candidates in the lobby yourself if possible. Have other employees treat them as welcome guests.
- Make sure your appearance and that of your office tells the right story.
- Have all the relevant information about the open position (description, conditions, salary spreads, benefits, career advancement) on hand or (preferably) in your mind.

In addition to preparing your list of questions for the interview, prepare yourself.

- Consider the 80/20 rule. Limit the time you are talking. When you’re talking, the candidate is not — and you are not listening. Aim to talk 20% and listen 80% of the time.
- Try not to agree or disagree. Doing so can lead them down a path that may show what they think you want them to be, rather than who they are.
- Don’t ask too many questions at one time — you won’t get all the answers.
- Minimize the “Why’s” — they can put candidates on the defensive.
- Control the conversation. Never let flustered candidates off the hook. Tell them to take their time. If a candidate is too talkative, jump in and redirect the conversation. Keep a sequence going and stay on track.

Ask the candidate the right questions!

Asking candidates the right questions helps you get the answers to three very important questions. Are they *ABLE* to do the job? Are they *WILLING* to do the job? And, equally as important, will they be *MANAGEABLE* once on the job? Although the ability to do the job is critical, it shouldn’t be the only consideration when hiring! Many candidates are able to do a job but are simply not willing. Then there are those who are willing and able but are unmanageable. People with these profiles can easily be your worst nightmare and can cause morale problems throughout the entire department.

Assess Ability

Start off with easy questions to help the candidate relax. If you start with tough questions, a candidate may get defensive and may not be able to come back down. Talking about the past is less threatening for a candidate than talking about the future and will help a candidate establish a pattern of honesty.

Start out with the basics: education; start and end dates, salaries and titles; basic responsibilities; additional training courses/seminars; successes/failures; workload/time management. Salaries and titles give you a very good idea of how the candidate was valued, as well as what kind of advancement they may expect. Large jumps in earnings should be explained. (I’ve seen situations where a candidate threatened to leave, interviewed with other companies, got a big increase and stayed — but was looking to leave again. Candidates such as this could be playing games with you or could be telling you what to expect from them as employees.) Responsibilities tell you functional background as well as the candidates’ depth of understanding. Training tells you what the employer thought of the candidate as well as what training you *WON’T* need to invest in.

Inquire about candidates’ level and forms of communication. This will give you a good feel for exactly where they fit into the organization and what was expected of them. It’s not a typical line of

questioning. With what level of management do they communicate? Are they communicating meeting locations or analysis results? Are they in the same room, communicating/presenting the results or do they send out a report?

Assess Willingness

Look for people who not only want to but will get the job done, will work smoothly with the rest of the team, will encourage challenges!

Ask questions targeting self-evaluation. What are their strengths/weaknesses? How about accomplishments — not so much what the accomplishments are, but how the candidates feel about them and what they would have done differently. Compatibility — who do they work well with? Who don't they work well with? Do they prefer to work alone or in a team? They'll need to do both . . . make sure they can. Is the candidate a natural leader? A follower? Are there specific situations where the candidate had to persuade others or back down? Have candidates describe their most difficult person to work with. Is this a key person on your team?

Ask candidates to describe the work atmosphere in which they thrive. What about their decision-making ability? Get examples. Weigh the steps they took more than the decisions they made. Ask about their organizational abilities and time management skills. How do they plan projects? How do they plan their days? What types of projects do they find inspiring? How do they set goals? Were there times they failed to reach goals? Remember that ability to achieve success is based on ability to learn from failures.

How do the candidates manage stress? What were some difficult situations and what were the outcomes? What areas do they feel need development? What motivates them? If they can't think of an answer, have them describe situations/ projects in which they were highly motivated. What have they done in the way of personal growth efforts? What's their definition of success? The answers can be very telling!

Assess Manageability

Your responsibility as a manager is to get things done through others. You cannot manage successfully if your staff is unmanageable. Look for patterns.

Ask candidates how they take direction in pressure versus non-pressure situations. How about criticism and praise? Have they had disagreements with their managers? How were they handled? Was it to their satisfaction? Would it be to your satisfaction? Again, look for patterns. Could these same things cause problems for you?

Have candidates describe their best and worst managers. Is one of these you? Two of my favorite questions are. How did your boss get the best out of you? and, How did you get the best out of your boss? In answering these questions, candidates are telling you what management style works for them and whether they will support you — a strong need in today's business world.

Have candidates describe times when they had to make decisions when their boss was gone, when there was no procedure in place, and/or when they didn't agree with the procedures that were in place. Are you comfortable with the actions and the results? The same thing(s) could happen again. Question their loyalty, based not just on staying with a company, but also by doing things to protect the department and the company. Have they ever witnessed a co-worker's dishonesty? What did they do about it? Have them describe times they reached their breaking point. Did they "lose it"? How did they handle it? Look for maturity here! Ask them what kinds of rewards and recognition satisfy them? Were there times they felt they "should have been" rewarded? Can you satisfy these needs?



Listen to their answers

"To eat these things," said my uncle, "you must exercise great care. You may swallow down what's solid. BUT . . . You must spit out the air!"

- Dr. Seuss

Although Dr. Seuss was talking about popovers, it is a great fit here too. Listening is an important skill that will allow you to interpret accurately the information being given to you. Listen for your next question. Keep asking questions that keep the candidate, not you, talking. Listen for patterns. Habits are hard to break. Listen for how things are said. Tone of voice and choice of words can reveal underlying attitudes. And finally, listen for what's not being said. Candidates may be choosing their words carefully to hide something.

In your final evaluation, remember:

- Don't wear blinders. Recognize and understand what candidates are telling you.
- Missing data can throw off an equation. If there's something you forgot to ask, follow up. Don't assume the answer will simply follow the pattern of other responses.
- Compare each candidate to more than just the previous candidate. Keep a chart comparing *all* the candidates.
- Get past the personal relationships. Just because you'd get along great at a neighborhood party, you may not work together effectively.
- And finally, get past the impression of the "first two minutes." Absorb everything candidates have just told you.

While I know this is a lot to digest, the more you prepare and the more you practice, the better results you will get when interviewing. The people to hire are those who complement your existing department. They are mature and professional, are team players, are willing and able to do the job and are manageable — by you!

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