The Perfect Interview Question

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by Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ

Our Leadership IQ study of 20,000 new hires (reported in *Fortune* and *Forbes*) found that the number one reason why new hires fail is that they are not coachable. A high performance workplace is dependent upon employees that have the ability to accept and implement feedback from bosses, colleagues, customers and other key players. There is no point in investing time and energy in people who are not going to positively respond. Doing so is a time consuming and exhausting exercise in futility. Coachability is a universal issue, and there are four steps that will allow you to easily assess those candidates that have it, and those who do not.

Step 1: Make them believe you're going to talk with their previous boss.
Begin by asking applicants for the full name of their present or most recent boss. Once you've got the name (e.g. Kate Johnson), confirm the spelling of the name; "Did she go by Kate or Katherine? And how do you spell Johnson?" In doing this, you create a situation where the applicant believes you're actually going to call their boss. And if they believe that, they're much more likely to be truthful in their responses to the hiring questions you ask. ***Please note: This whole process will not work if you don't confirm the spelling of their name. This little psychological twist is what makes this whole process so revealing.***

Step 2: Ask them to describe their boss.
A simple way to do this is to ask, "Tell me about what Kate was like as a boss." The answer the applicant provides will give you some hints about what they're looking for in a boss. If they answer, "Kate was very hands-on and wanted regular updates," and they say this with a snarl, you can infer that this applicant doesn't like that style of management. Whether their response is positive or negative, they usually won't give you a complete response. So follow-up with questions like, "Tell me about a specific example," or, "What was that like?" If they indicate (whether implicitly or explicitly) that they don't respond well to micromanagers, and you're a bit of a micromanager, ask yourself whether you could successfully manage them. If their last boss sounds like you, and they loved working for him or her, that's a great sign.

Step 3: Ask them what their boss considered their strengths.
This is easily done by asking, "When I talk to Kate, what will she tell me are your biggest strengths?" This question has two purposes. First, before you start asking about their weaknesses, it's nice to start with a more pleasant question. Asking about their strengths gets the candidate talking and keeps them comfortable with you.

Second, it gives you an honest look at the qualities that they like best about themselves. If they talk about being process-oriented and very detailed, and you're looking for an out-of-the-box, big-picture thinker, you just learned something very valuable. Sometimes people ask whether this is the same as asking the candidate to describe their strengths (one of the questions we suggest you never ask). The answer is no. If you ask them to describe their strengths, you're going to get a canned answer that reflects what they think you want to hear, not what they actually believe.

Step 4: Ask them what their boss considered their weaknesses.
Again, this can be accomplished with a question as simple as, "Now everyone has some weaknesses, so when I talk to Kate, what will she tell me yours are?" This is the most critical question, but it only works if you've completed the previous three steps. In fact, if you do the first three steps successfully (especially confirming the spelling of the boss' name in Step 1), you might be shocked at the level of honesty you elicit with this last question.

You want to listen to their answer on two levels. First, you're going to assess whether the weakness is something you can live with. If they say they were criticized for lying, or being too political, or not completing assignments on time, then you may have uncovered that they share characteristics with your low performers.

Second, if they say they can't think of any weaknesses or "they don't know what Kate thought about them," then you've hit upon the biggest warning sign that someone is not coachable. If they didn't (or couldn't) hear the constructive feedback offered by their previous boss, what are the chances that you'll be successful giving them feedback? If someone can't hear and assimilate constructive criticism, they're not coachable. And even without formal conversations with their boss, if they can't put themselves in their boss' shoes and anticipate their assessment, they're not coachable. And if they're not coachable, they're going to be a nightmare to try and manage.

Special Report: Why New Hires Fail

WASHINGTON, D.C. – According to a new study by Leadership IQ, 46% of newly-hired employees will fail within 18 months, while only 19% will achieve unequivocal success. But contrary to popular belief, technical skills are not the primary reason why new hires fail; instead, poor interpersonal skills dominate the list, flaws which many of their managers admit were overlooked during the interview process.

The study found that 26% of new hires fail because they can't accept feedback, 23% because they're unable to understand and manage emotions, 17% because they lack the necessary motivation to excel, 15% because they have the wrong temperament for the job, and only 11% because they lack the necessary technical skills.

The three-year study by Leadership IQ, a global leadership training and research company, compiled these results after studying 5,247 hiring managers from 312 public, private, business and healthcare organizations. Collectively these managers hired more than 20,000 employees during the study period.

While the failure rate for new hires is distressing, it should not be surprising: 82% of managers reported that in hindsight, their interview process with these employees elicited subtle clues that they would be headed for trouble. But during the interviews, managers were too focused on other issues, too pressed for time, or lacked confidence in their interviewing abilities to heed the warning signs.

"The typical interview process fixates on ensuring that new hires are technically competent," explains Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ. "But coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament are much more predictive of a new hires' success or failure. Do technical skills really matter if the employee isn't open to improving, alienates their coworkers, lacks drive and has the wrong personality for the job?"

The study tracked the success and failure of new hires and interviewed managers about their hiring tactics and new hires' performance, personality and potential. Upon completing the 5,247 interviews, Leadership IQ compiled, categorized and distilled the top five reasons why new hires failed (i.e., were terminated, left under pressure, received disciplinary action or significantly negative performance reviews). The following are the top areas of failure, matched with the percentage of respondents.

- Coachability (26%): The ability to accept and implement feedback from bosses, colleagues, customers and others.
- Emotional Intelligence (23%): The ability to understand and manage one's own emotions, and accurately assess others' emotions.
- Motivation (17%): Sufficient drive to achieve one's full potential and excel in the job.
- Temperament (15%): Attitude and personality suited to the particular job and work environment.
- Technical Competence (11%): Functional or technical skills required to do the job.

In addition, the study found no significant difference in failure rates across different interviewing approaches (e.g., behavioral, chronological, case study, etc.). However, 812 managers experienced significantly more hiring success than their peers. What differentiated their interviewing approach was their emphasis on interpersonal and motivational issues.

"Highly perceptive and psychologically-savvy interviewers can assess employees' likely performance on all of these issues," explains Murphy. "But the majority of managers lack both the training to accurately read and assess candidates, and the confidence to act even when their assessments are correct."

"Hiring failures can be prevented," he notes. "If managers focus more of their interviewing energy on candidates' coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament, they will see vast improvements in their hiring success. Technical competence remains the most popular subject of interviews because it's easy to assess. But while technical competence is easy to assess, it's a lousy predictor of whether a newly-hired employee will succeed or fail."

"The financial cost of hiring failures, coupled with the opportunity cost of not hiring high performers, can be millions of dollars, even for small companies," adds Murphy. "And the human cost can be even worse. If a hospital hires a nurse that won't accept feedback and alienates pharmacists and physicians, the result could be a medical error. This one bad hiring decision could cost a patient their life."

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