

25. When Building the Team—Make Interviewing a Strategy—Interview Questions Proven to Guide Sound Hiring Practices

As 2019 comes to a close, the economy in the United States is closing in on 11 consecutive years of growth which immediately followed the Financial Crisis. Companies continue to hire aggressively, and the unemployment rate has reached a 50-year low. It has never been more difficult to find qualified people to fill the 7.5 million posted job openings. The current dynamics are the polar opposite of those the country endured in 2008-2009 when available credit dried up and the demand environment disappeared with it. Companies downsized aggressively in an effort to protect their balance sheets and nearly every good company was forced to let go of countless great employees. Fear was the prevailing emotion and survival the ultimate goal. As it would turn out, there was never a better time to find good people. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins notes that the best companies “take advantage of difficult economic times to hire great people, even when they don’t have a specific job in mind” The companies that employed such a forward-thinking strategy in the depths of the Financial Crisis were able to greatly improve their teams and position themselves well for the lengthy expansion that immediately followed. Unique talent is difficult to find, but down economies have consistently produced fertile ground for the most opportunistic companies that move quickly to capitalize when A-Players become free agents.

In contrast, a flourishing economy produces jobs at a rate that tends to outpace the country’s ability to fill them with qualified candidates. This issue is magnified in those locations where innovative companies surface at an accelerate rate—Silicon Valley/San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Boston, New York, etc. So, how do the best companies consistently attract top talent even in the tightest labor markets? First and foremost, they treat their people well, but a better kept secret is the very fact that

they interview candidates most effectively. When companies are prepared with thoughtful qualifying questions and take the time to line up the most appropriate interview panel, the results tend to speak for themselves. Patrick Lencioni captures the essence of a thoughtful interviewing strategy in *The Ideal Team Player* after determining that the best employees tend to share three important qualities—they are hungry, humble, and smart with respect to social etiquette. The following interview questions from the book aim to guide companies in their search for ideal team players:

“Qualifying Humble:

1. Tell me about the most important accomplishments of your career. Look for more mentions of “we” than “I.”
2. What was the most embarrassing moment of your career? Or the biggest failure?
3. What is your greatest weakness? I really want to know what you’d like to change about yourself, or better yet, what your best friends would say you need to work on.
4. Tell me about someone who is better than you in an area that really matters to you.

Qualifying Hungry:

5. What is the hardest you’ve ever worked on something in your life?
6. Did you work hard when you were a teenager? Look for something real that indicates the person has a work ethic. A work ethic usually, but not always, gets established early in life.

Qualifying Smart:

7. How would you describe your personality?
8. What do you do that others in your personal life might find annoying?
9. What kind of people annoy you the most, and how do you deal with them?
10. Can you give me an example of how you’ve demonstrated empathy to a teammate?

Looking for Specifics:

11. Start by asking references to give you three or four adjectives to best describe the candidate.
12. Ask the candidate what others would say about them.
13. Ask for an employee self-assessment—have them evaluate themselves as an employee; ask what teammates at work would say about them”.

Finding the best person to fill a role on a team in the early days of a company entails more than simply mapping prior experience to align with a job function. Through the years, I have come to appreciate that the character of a person being considered is every bit as important as the experience and professional qualifications that person brings to the position. You simply cannot teach drive, consistency, perseverance, honesty, integrity, humility, and respect, but the best people bring those attributes to the job every single day. The startup outliers that carefully built these qualities into their DNA consistently reached heights far beyond those that fell short with this important Playbook Strategy. Not surprisingly, that success was most often built on a deliberate and thoughtful plan when it came to interviewing.

As history has and continues to show, there are many different ways for startups to achieve greatness, but a high percentage of the outliers through the years have exemplified common traits which have been captured as differentiating strategies in The Startup Playbook. While we have hailed the greatest success stories and praised the way disruptive technologies have brought simplicity to our lives, some of the greatest concepts in the world never reached escape velocity for one reason or another. For many companies it was market timing and for countless others it was a lack of execution that proved too much to overcome. Grit, focus, perseverance and desire are fundamental to the fabric

that defines the cultures that succeed. Overcoming long odds to outmaneuver established incumbents, with deep pockets in most cases, requires the stars to align on so many different levels, but the dream of being the next hot startup continues to drive entrepreneurs to commit their lives to trying. As John Wooden famously quoted, "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." When small teams cross early hurdles, their confidence grows and with that success comes conviction and a belief that anything is possible. This is not a new concept, think of the teenage hockey players that upended the Soviet Union in the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY. If the two teams had played ten games, the Soviets would have won at least nine of them, perhaps all 10. But on that day, it was the inexperienced college kids that beat the professional team from Russia to shock the world. Just two weeks earlier, the 4-time defending Olympic Champion Soviets had destroyed the USA team at Madison Square Garden by the score of 10-3. The unthinkable 4-3 semifinal victory over the Soviet Union on that fateful night of February 22, 1980 is often referred to as the Miracle On Ice. It continues to serve as an inspiration to so many even to this day, nearly 39 years later and certainly will continue to do so for decades to come. In much the same way, young companies gather momentum to take on much larger and established rivals fueled by the possibilities of becoming the next Apple, Intel, Cisco, Facebook, Uber or AirBnB. Some are just getting started in garages around the world and it is my hope that they can leverage this Playbook to help navigate their respective journeys!

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." -Margaret Mead