

Don't Be Stupid Hire Smart

“Here we go again. Another new person. Why did he hire this person? Everybody knows he won't last. This is stupid.”

“I am not going to spend my time helping another rookie. He is on his own.”

—Conversation between two tenured employees

Meets minimum qualifications? Check.

References? Check.

Background check? Check.

Drug test? Check.

Decent interview? Check.

Hire? Not so fast, my friend.

Smart hiring is not easy hiring. Smart hiring is hiring tough.

If the best opportunity to improve a team's performance is to hire smart, why do people hire quickly and in a vacuum to fill an open position? That is pretty stupid. You never really know what you are getting until the new person is already on the team, but you can increase your chances of getting a great person if you hire smart.

The most valuable asset in your organization is having the right people on your team; everyone knows that. However, some people tend to ignore the fact that the greatest liability any team faces is having the wrong people on your team. You cannot have a strong and effective team with weak and ineffective people. In fact, there is nothing any competitor can do to hurt your team as much as your hiring the wrong person to be on your team.

Hiring easy is welcoming the first person who barely meets the minimum qualifications of your team. That sounds fine, but it is stupid to hire easy. If you hire tough, your job will be easier; if you hire easy, your job will be a lot tougher. It should be a privilege for someone to earn his or her way on to your team.

Even if your team has to cover an open position, which involves extra work for a while, they want you to hire tough. They do not want to cover for an easy hire who will drag the entire team down with them. No one wants you to hire tough more than the people already on your team.

Granted, you have a lot on your plate and hiring is just one of the many tasks you are responsible for overseeing. And, whether you admit it or not, you are probably not a great interviewer. Don't take that personally; it's not a poor reflection on you. It is simply because you do not hire a lot of people and you do not use your interviewing skills very often. If you

hire only a few people a year, you are not going to be a great interviewer. But you can have a great interview process.

Smart Hiring

The major reason for stupid hiring is lack of preparation. To hire smart, you have to prepare smart. It is not smart to begin preparing for the interview when the candidate is waiting in your lobby. How can you make a great decision if you are not adequately prepared for what you want to decide on?

Failing to prepare—winging it—is no way to treat someone who will become either your most valuable asset or your most costly liability. Instead, clearly and accurately define, in writing, the skills and attributes the perfect candidate will bring to your organization. Then, prepare every question—and your ideal answer—in advance so that you spend your time listening and evaluating rather than trying to figure out what question to ask next. Creating an interview outline will help keep you on track. Ask each candidate the same questions in the same order so you can concentrate on and evaluate their responses.

Another issue associated with stupid hiring is that you are emotionally involved. The open position is taking time and energy away from you, so you want to fill the job fast. The leader makes a subjective decision based on personality rather than an objective decision based on fact. Your emotions want the person to “fit,” even though they may not be the *right* fit. You will be far better off if you take your time and find the right person. Get someone in HR or a peer to help—they’re not faced with the same emotions you have about your openings.

Following these three rules of three will help you hire smart:

1. Interview at least three qualified candidates for every position.
2. Interview the candidates three times.
3. Have three people evaluate the candidates.

Interviewing at least three qualified candidates for every position sounds like a long process, and it is. But to hire tough and get the right person on your team, you need to have choices. If there is only one qualified person you are evaluating, you do not have a choice. Find three qualified people and make a smart choice on who would fit best with your team.

When you interview someone three times, you can make a smarter decision. Schedule the interviews at varying times of the day. If your initial interview was in the morning, interview the candidate the next time in the afternoon or evening. You'll be working with them all day, so why not see what they're like at different times of the day?

When evaluating candidates, consider talent and fit equally. The most talented person may not be the best choice if they don't fit with the talent that already exists on your team. The best information regarding fit will come from the superstars on your team, so it is smart to involve them in the process. They know the job and the culture and will have a good feel for whether the candidate will be a good fit on your team. Most of your top performers will look on their involvement as a reward and take ownership of the success of the person you hire. They will probably help in their orientation and do what they can to help them to be successful. That is a good deal for everyone. If some of your superstars are not interested in

helping in the interview process, don't force them to do it. But if they are interested in helping, they are a great source of information.

Seeing Their Best

If you hire smart, you won't "stretch" a candidate into being the person that you want them to be. If the job you are seeking to fill has been open for a while, it is natural for you to hear what you want to hear, see what you want to see, and convince yourself that you will coach the candidate to become the perfect employee—the exact awesome individual you need. Be careful; when a position that you are responsible for has been open for an extended period of time, you are vulnerable. Your stress builds and you pressure yourself. My experience has been that the longer a position is open, the better the next candidate looks. Before long, anyone who can fog a mirror is the perfect, obvious choice for your opening. Smart hiring does not work that way. If you hire candidates that are "on the fence" simply to get the job filled, you will pay the consequences later.

What you see in the candidate during the interview will not get significantly better once they are hired. Oh, they will develop more experience, but you are seeing them at their very best. During the interview, their smiles are the brightest, attitudes are can-do, personal hygiene is flawless, working hours are not an issue, and they are willing to do whatever you want them to do. When they are hired, things tend to change—at least a little.

Slow down the hiring process and hire smart. Don't hesitate to hire someone who you may perceive as being

smarter than you—that person will help everyone on your team become better.

Your team wants to work with people who show a desire to work, have a talent for doing the job, and exhibit values that fit with your corporate values. You can be the greatest leader in the world, but if you have people on your team who are not talented, you will not be successful. Hiring a warm body just to fill a position means a lot more work for everyone on your team.

Southwest Airlines follows the philosophy that it's best to “hire attitude, train skill.” Of course there are limitations—you would not want to hire a charismatic person to be a pilot if she can't fly a plane. But, if one applicant meets the minimum qualifications and has a great attitude about work and life, and another applicant has a little more experience and slightly less enthusiasm, Southwest would hire the less experienced person. Southwest believes that skills can be trained, a good attitude cannot.

The Container Store describes their hire-tough philosophy as $1=3$. They believe one great hire is equivalent to three good hires. In fact, they pay their associates almost double the average pay for the same job and have proven that $1=3$ yields a great return on their hire-tough investment.

If you hire the best people and effectively train and coach them, you won't have to hire very many. Having great people on the team is less stressful and more enjoyable for everyone. And being around great people makes you better.

It is not smart to go to all the trouble of hiring a great person and then expecting them to immediately fit right into your environment. Start them off right. Your onboarding process should go well beyond a human resources orientation and assigning a mentor. Answer the questions every new employee

wants to know: What is my role? What are your expectations? How do I fit into the big picture? How does my job matter? Answer those four questions up front and you have a good chance to watch that person grow into a great employee.

You will only be a great leader if you have great people. If a candidate's very best still leaves you "on the fence" as to whether they are the right candidate, it would be stupid to hire them. Keep looking! Never lower your standards just to fill a position! You and your team will all pay for it later.

Don't be stupid. Hire smart.

