

A Revealing Interview Question

ThoughtLEADERS

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In the 26 years I spent at Procter & Gamble, one of my most valuable learnings was in the area of interviewing candidates for jobs. Since P&G puts big investments into the development of talent, the company was highly selective in hiring. Hence, we sought out any research we could find regarding what individual characteristics were predictive of eventual achievement of a high level position in an organization.

One particular line of questioning that I found most useful, and research suggests is very revealing as to what motivates and drives an individual to eventual success, is as follows:

"When you were young, like in your grade school or high school days, who was the person that was most influential in teaching you valuable lessons about life? What were those lessons the person taught you? What are those tapes this person put into your head that are still there today and have emerged as guiding principles for you?"

Usually the person is a parent, an influential teacher, or some other authority figure. The lessons you are looking for are basic principles that suggest a high degree of self confidence, a sense of personal responsibility, a strong drive to achieve, and solid fundamental ethics. No hint of these kinds of traits should be a red flag. The interviewer should then probe in depth the role the interviewee played in outside activities or other initiatives to see if the existence or lack of these kinds of traits, matches up with the individual's track record in achievements.

Let me give you an example. Back in 1995, when I was at Microsoft, I remember vividly interviewing a young man from University of Waterloo in Toronto who was getting a Masters degree in computer science. He was born in Poland, and sent to live with an Aunt in Toronto for high school, and he then went to Waterloo. When I

asked my favorite questions cited above, he responded immediately along the following lines: "That's easy. My Mom always reminded me: Given your humble roots, you must work harder than anyone else around you. My Father was also very clear: save for the unexpected and never do anything that would embarrass the family." In probing his background in high school and college, I found out that when he arrived in Canada from Poland in early August, to start high school in 4 weeks, he knew no English. He graduated from high school in 3 years, and during those years emerged as the captain of the tennis team, while also working 15 hours a week in a restaurant. At the restaurant he noticed how much money they were wasting because of sloppy purchasing, and he convinced the owner that he could put together a set of inventory management procedures that would cut the waste dramatically and he did. He got a scholarship to Waterloo that paid about half of the total cost. He paid the other half from his savings and from his job as a computer programmer for a local bank where he worked part time during most of his college days.

This is one person I have stayed close to over the years. He worked for Microsoft for ten years and today is the CIO of a major hardware manufacturer. I can clearly see that he is still influenced by the tapes his Mom and Dad put into his head in those early years. That is the way most people operate in life.

As we have mentioned in previous posts, talent is everything, so you need to equip yourself with a powerful arsenal of questions for identifying top candidates.

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