



Interviewing for the Right People: Focus on Qualities

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A stack of resumes sits in front of you. You've read them and sorted them. You think you've found candidates likely to fit in your company. You want the right people in your company and the right people on your team. But – how can you decide among these applicants to find the “right” people? What do you look for in your new hires? Who do you select to staff your new project teams? Who will help you gain the innovative edge?

Dee Hock, CEO Emeritus, VISA International, describes his philosophy of hiring and promotions:

“Hire and promote first on the basis of integrity; second, motivation; third, capacity; fourth, understanding; fifth, knowledge; and last and least, experience. Without integrity, motivation is dangerous; without motivation, capacity is impotent; without capacity, understanding is limited; without understanding, knowledge is meaningless; without knowledge, experience is blind. Experience is easy to provide and quickly put to good use by people with all the other qualities.”

– Fast Company [Oct. 1996]

In addition, because we believe it's essential to stimulate creativity and tap hidden potential, we hire people who can handle non-directive leadership and who don't expect leaders to have all the answers. We want to hire people that can champion their ideas, take ownership, and live with change and uncertainty. We seek

a level of maturity and/or willingness to learn that doesn't necessarily correspond to the number of years in a job role. All these qualities fuel creativity and innovation.

Conventional interviews target knowledge and experience, but these alone won't get us the caliber of employees or staffing we want for creative projects and innovative organizations. They are the easiest to ask about (and for the interviewee to discuss), yet they are the last two qualities on Hock's list. Managers fall back on them because they don't know how to interview for characteristics harder to document on a resume. In this article, we offer interview questions to help you explore the first four of Hock's qualities—integrity, motivation, capacity, and understanding.

Interview Questions to Find the Right People

To Dee Hock's original list of qualities, we've added related qualities that clarify his descriptions. There is no real order to these questions, nor is there anything scientific about why we've put a question in one category or another. Some questions could fit more than one category. To make them most useful, think about the qualities you want. Ask the questions that strike you as interesting or that might reveal the qualities you are looking for.

Integrity: Honesty, Authentic, Reliable, Accountable, Ethical, Fair, Trustworthy

- When have you discovered that someone you worked with was untrustworthy? What did you do? (Optional: If you've never encountered an untrustworthy colleague, what do you think you would do if you did?)
- How do you demonstrate your own accountability and trustworthiness to others?
- How do you define integrity? When has your definition of integrity affected your course of action?

- How do you define honesty? When, if ever, have you been less than completely honest? Why did you choose that course? What consequences ensued?
- When do reliability and accountability come into play in your work? When have they conferred an advantage? A disadvantage?
- What next steps have you taken when you've made a mistake as a leader?
- When you've seen an employee headed toward a problem that could be avoided, what have you done?
- What is the difference in your mind between fairness, equality and equity? Describe a time when one (or all) of these was at stake for you or someone else. What did you do?
- What is the most critical ethical dilemma you've faced so far in your career? How did you know your ethics were at stake? How did you resolve it?
- How have you responded when someone asks you to do something that would compromise your values and integrity?
- How have you handled it when someone at work did or wanted to do something that was contrary to your definition of integrity?

Motivation: Attitude, Self-Awareness, Passion, Humor

- Why do you want to work here?
- What's the most fun you've ever had at work?
 - a. What were the circumstances?
 - b. Who else was involved?
 - c. *If applicable*, How have you tried to re-create that climate?
- When things go well for projects you've led, what have you done?
- Tell me about ways you have successfully taken risks in the past.

- Think about the times when you've put a lot of effort into satisfying work. What was it about you or the work that kept you going? How did your satisfaction arise?
- What are your philosophies on promotions? Evaluations? Raises?
- What's your personal mission and vision? How do you see your views fitting with our mission and vision?
- What challenges have you sought out? What challenges have you avoided? Why?
- What do you fear?
- How do you define success?
- What do you feel passionate about?

Capacity: Creativity, Talent, Potential, Intelligence, Perception,

- When did you last learn something new? What was it?
- What do you want to learn next--personally or professionally?
- What is your best tool for dealing with conflict?
- How do you gather feedback?
- What other steps do you employ for your own improvement?
- How do you deal with failure? How do you deal with the failure of others?
- What have you done that you consider truly creative?
- How often do you discuss and work with colleagues to think up new systems and styles of working?
- Have you ever tried a new way of doing things? Did you succeed?
- Tell me about one case when you tried to solve a problem with a totally different approach than is normally used. What was the result?
- Can you tell me about a situation, which you tried to solve a problem with ideas and methods that had not been tried before?

- What successful risks have you taken in the past?
- What risks have you taken that were not successful? What have you learned from these? How did these situations affect your future risk-taking?
- How do you learn best?
- What do you do best?

Understanding: Collaboration, Compassion, Curiosity, Awareness Beyond Oneself, Comprehension

- What would you describe as your best collaboration experience? How did it start? What happened? Who collaborated with you? How did it turn out? What about it would you like to replicate? What wouldn't you?
- How have you known you wanted someone on your team? Or, how have you known you wanted to partner or collaborate with someone?
- How have you passed on your experiences and knowledge to others?
- From what travel experience have you learned the most about you? Why?
- How do you define a "difficult person"?
- How can you tell if people trust you? And your organization is open?
- How have you promoted or pursued opportunities in your company/team?
- Describe a "turning point" book or event in your life. How did it shift your view?
- What stands out for you about the first job you ever had? (Or, if not the first, one of the earliest)
- What do you look for in a leader?
- How do you give someone bad news?
- If you are a team leader and someone on your team is not working up par, how do you handle it?

Interview Process

A savvy manager expands the interviewing process to include existing employees or team members. You may ask questions face-to-face, on the phone, or over the Internet; individually, as a panel, or in a large group. You'll get more information about the candidate from in-person interviews, but some situations don't allow them. Use the richest available communication medium, and interview in two or three settings. Find the format that works for you and gets results—the right people on board.

The Interview

Listen. Listen for authenticity in the candidate's answers and for any passion they may have about the topics. On which questions did they light up? Did they answer any questions with "standard" comebacks? Are they looking for you to respect them? Or like or approve of them? Listen between the lines. You can listen best when you interview the candidate in person, but good listening is also possible in other formats.

Observe the broader context. What kind of questions are they asking you? Have they, at any point, started the "dance"? Are they saying what they think you want to hear, or do you hear the ring of sincerity?

If you sense any red flags during the interview, pay attention. Red flags may come based on your previous experiences or they may tap into your intuition. If any red flag pops up, move on to another candidate. The world is full of bright, competent people who want to work with a team like yours. You don't have to settle for the person in front of you. Expediency is not the goal. Have patience. Find a right person. It is much harder to get the wrong person off the bus.

Finally, and most important, do you feel you can trust this person with all the information in your company? That they will know what to keep confidential? If not, do not hire them or put them on your team. If you can't trust someone, don't have him or her in your company.

Helping the Wrong People Move On

*"[Good to Great executives] **first** got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and **then** figured out where to drive it."*

- Jim Collins, Good to Great

But what if you get in a hurry and hire the wrong person, or you're already stuck with an employee or two that doesn't fit? Leaders face a separate challenge in dealing with the wrong people and letting (or helping) them move on. Remember Collin's warning, "You need to get the right people on the bus in the right seats, and—get the wrong people off the bus."

You can use these same questions to guide a conversation with a person who's on your team now. Understand why and how they don't fit, and, where possible, find another place where they can contribute. If that doesn't work, you still have two options. The best of the two? Help them find a new position in another company. As a last alternative, sideline them in a job where they can't do damage or sabotage the effort of others.