

Hire Great People: Ten Simple Rules

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With small business hiring, rule number one is clear, but very counterintuitive: Don't ever, ever hire in your own image. Why not? Because from the beginning of time, bosses have been unconsciously cloning themselves, stocking the shelves with vanilla young men from impressive schools. And what has happened to executives and companies that did that? As management guru Rosabeth Kanter observed, they often sink into the soft sand of irrelevance as the rough waters of current reality wash over them.

Here are the other nine:

2. Hire for Attitude Rather than Skill

Teaching skills is a snap compared with doing attitude transplants. When looking to hire the right candidate, among the qualities you'll want most is a fierce sense of optimism.

3. Look for Renegades

One of the best interview strategies is to ask when the person has been in trouble. The obedient employee will be of limited use to you in this change-up environment.

4. Hold out for Results

Never hire someone with good potential but questionable habits, thinking you can change him or her. As in choosing mates, what you see now is what you get forever.

5. Go for a Sense of Humor

The potential hire who can't laugh easily, particularly at herself, is going to be a very dull and probably rigid employee.

6. Fill in the Blanks

Look carefully at the aggregate strengths and skill gaps of your teams in various work units, and go for the qualities and styles that are missing.

7. Test Drive

Don't be satisfied with references. Remember that many of the most glowing references are given for people others are eager to dump. Include day-long simulations as part of your interview process, or invite applicants to provide you with a portfolio of their best work.

8. Stock the Bullpen

Keep an eye out for prospects before the need arises. Don't wait until a vacancy occurs. Keep a pool of potential employees under the watchful eye of somebody who's responsible for hiring. Evaluate your recruiting team in terms of how well they keep the bullpen ready. And tell them never to turn away an interesting candidate with the line, "We don't have any positions open right now."

9. Push Harder for Diversity

Make certain you're spreading your net wide enough to find those high-potential, but different, fish who generally don't swim in the streams near you. Ask your HR group what contacts and periodicals they're using to interest potential hires. "We don't know where to find people different from us" is a costly excuse.

10. Listen

Rule one with how to interview: Most interviewers talk way too much. When a candidate finally gets to you, listen for the "story line" of his or her life, at home and at work. It's been said that being a leader is like practicing psychiatry without a license. That may be more true in hiring than in any other part of the job.

Hire power

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