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Asking the Right Questions

By answering unexpected questions, candidates disclose unanticipated insights.

Regular readers of the Sunday edition of *The New York Times* are likely familiar with the column “The Corner Office,” written by Adam Bryant, who asks notable CEOs a series of similar questions. The queries frequently include, “What were your early years like?” “Any leadership roles for you early on?” “What are some things you’ve learned about leading and managing people?” and “What kind of career advice do you give to new college grads?”

Over the years, the most intriguing answers for me have been those in response to the dual questions “How do you hire?” and “What questions do you ask?”

Supplementing Standard Questions With Unpredictable Ones

Every ACHE member has been a candidate for a number of positions and has no doubt prepared for predictable interview questions, such as: What are your most significant strengths? What are your major weaknesses? How would you describe your leadership style? What is most important to you in a job? What are your career goals? Where would you like to be in five years?

Important but less frequently asked questions can provide insight into a candidate’s ethical values and sensitivities. These questions will help determine whether the candidate’s moral compass will be compatible with an organization’s culture and the senior management staff.

Every healthcare manager and executive knows that employing the best and the brightest and then giving them the opportunity and freedom to excel are undeniable keys to one’s own success as a leader.

Insights can be acquired by raising a variety of topics. For instance, what do you like most/least in your current position? Give me examples of two or three management mistakes you have made, and share what you learned from them. How many people have you discharged in the past three years, and in retrospect, did you take action later than you should have, or perhaps too soon? Please elaborate. Can you describe a couple of ethical dilemmas you have

encountered and how you dealt with them? As you reflect on your work experience to date, what has made you angry in the past? How did you address these issues?

Some Atypical Questions Posed by Company CEOs

The executives interviewed by Bryant offer several provocative questions. For example, Mike Tuchen, CEO, Talend, a software vendor, asks, “What’s the hardest problem you’ve ever solved; why was it hard?”

Drew Houston, CEO, Dropbox, wants to know, “What have you learned in the last year? And if you were able to sit yourself down 10 years ago, what advice would you give your younger self?”

Kathy Giusti, founder, Multiple Myeloma Foundation, asks, “What do you want me to know about you that’s not on this résumé?”

Jessica Herrin, founder and CEO, Stella and Dot Family Brands, asks, “What do you want to be known for; what mark do you want to leave?” A favorite question is, “Tell me the things that you didn’t like about your last job.” She added, “When you learn the situations and issues that lead to candidates’ dissatisfaction, you can make a relatively accurate judgment about whether they will be able to work in your culture.”

Herrin emphasized, “You want to employ optimistic people who are problem solvers, not problem spotters; it’s easy for most leadership applicants to analyze what’s wrong, but if you come in and say, ‘I have an idea; here’s something we can do,’

she has demonstrated an ability to give you energy rather than take energy from you.”

Lloyd Carney, CEO, Brocade, says, “I always ask about the thing you’re most proud of and the thing you’re least proud of, and sometimes it could be a four-part question, because they’ll give something personal and professional for each of them. I’m listening for whether they talk about their accomplishments with ‘I, I, I,’ or what their team was able to do.”

Lori Dickerson Fouché, CEO, Prudential Group Insurance, wants to know, “What kind of cultures do you like to work in? Where do you

excel? How do you excel? If you find yourself in situations where they’re not going the way you want them to, what do you do?”

Saundra Pelletier, chief executive, WomanCare Global, always asks, “If money, time and talent were no object, and you could be anything at all, what would you be? It’s amazing what people will say. I ask about how they act under pressure: Tell me about a stressful situation and give me as many details as you’re willing to share. How people behave under real heat tells you a lot about character. I want to know how they’re going to fit in our culture. Humility, humor and not taking yourself too seriously are important to me.

People who take themselves too seriously are so boring.”

Tim Bucher, CEO, Zing Systems, offers this line of questioning: “You’ve done a lot of things in your life. When you think back on the time that you were the most excited about what you were doing, you couldn’t wait to get out of bed and you couldn’t shut off at night, what were you doing and why? What I’m really looking for is what makes them tick. The worst answer you can give me is, ‘I don’t know.’”

Perhaps the most intriguing responses were shared by Stewart Butterfield, cofounder and chief executive, Slack, a communications company.

He says, “I used to always ask three short questions—one math, one geography and one history. I didn’t expect people to get the answers right, but I just want them to be curious about the world. The first [was] what’s three times 17? Then name three countries in Africa. You’d be astonished by the number of people who can’t do that. [The third question was] what century was the French Revolution in, give or take 200 years? I don’t do that anymore, but I do ask everyone what they want to be when they grow up. Good answers are usually about areas in which they want to grow, things they want to learn, things that they feel like they haven’t had a chance to accomplish yet but want to accomplish. A

very short answer to that question would be automatically bad.”

Asking Productive Interview Questions

All these questions had the same purpose—to determine if these individuals would be a good organizational fit, if their work ethic would match, and if their skill set and values would align with the company’s culture. The CEOs knew that their company could not continue to be successful if they did not give the highest priority to making prudent human capital decisions.

The financial and nonfinancial costs of making a poor hiring decision are always higher than expected; once

leaders understand that fact, taking the time to hire well is an obvious necessity. As in other fields, every healthcare manager and executive knows that employing the best and the brightest and then giving them the opportunity and freedom to excel are undeniable keys to one’s own success as a leader. ▲

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