

How to interview like a three-year-old

Finding and retaining talent is a challenge all businesses face. When it comes to interviewing, I have three rules:

- don't let your head talk you into or out of something that your gut doesn't agree with,
- don't let fear or desperation talk you into a mediocre hire, and
- dig for the deep answers.

If you want to know if someone is going to be a good fit, put down the resume. Skill is on the resume, talent is in the person. Push past the canned responses to the canned questions.

Having a standard set of prepared questions is a great way to break the ice, keep you on track, and to be sure that you've asked all the critical questions. But you have to go deeper if you want to discover the real person behind the resume and rehearsed answers.

At three years old, my daughter taught me the best trick in my interviewing tool belt. It's a series of questions that will get to the core of anything. It starts with "why?" and then cycles to "what does that mean?" and back to "why" until you have distilled the answer to its very essence. Let me give you an example.

Q: Why are you interested in this position?

A: I think I can grow with this company.

If I stop here, it's because I've begun to make some assumptions. Maybe I'm assuming the candidate wants to put down roots. Maybe I think of grow as "more money" or "rising through the ranks" and so I begin to draw conclusions that may or may not be accurate.

Now here's that same situation employing my daughter's "why/what does that mean" technique.

Q: Why are you interested in this position?

A: I think I can grow with this company?

Q: What does "grow" mean to you?

A: There will be opportunities for advancement.

Q: Why is advancement important to you?

A: Well, I guess I want to know that I won't be doing the same thing year after year. I like to set things up and once they are running smoothly, then I want to move on to the next challenge.

Ah-ha! So the candidate defines “grow” as taking on new challenges, mastering them, building something great that can be maintained, and then moving to the next challenge. Well, that’s a much different picture than the one I might have painted without digging deeper.

Not only have you revealed something deeper about the candidate, but you’ve also discovered another area where you can ask follow-up questions that will reveal even more.

So if you want to find talent, put down the resume and become as curious as a three-year-old exploring her world. The “why/what does that mean” technique will take some time to master, but I think you’ll find that the results are well worth your efforts.

Sidebar:

Leading ideas on . . . Interviewing

Do the unexpected

Candidates are expecting certain questions (e.g., strengths/weaknesses). When you ask the unexpected, you can get unexpected results. Questions like “When are you tempted to lie?” or “What are your pet peeves?” will often cause the candidate’s polished demeanor to crack and allow you to see the real person inside.

Hire for attitude

We all too often hire for skill and end up firing for attitude. Make sure that your interview questions uncover issues of attitude and that you don’t dismiss any warning bells simply because the skills are impressive.

Beware the textbook answers

If what I hear from a candidate is that their weakness is perfectionism, but they’ve cured it and they work equally well in teams and solo, then I know that I’m looking at the textbook and not the person. Do everything possible to find the real person beneath the textbook answers.

Is the answer in the question?

Make sure you aren’t “leading the witness” in how you ask the question or in your non-verbal cues. Candidates want to tell you what they think you want to hear. But what you want is to get at what is true.

Lead ‘em down the wrong road

Try suggesting the wrong answer in your question and see what happens. They’ll either reveal they are not the right fit or you’ll get to see how they get themselves out of a sticky situation!