

Hiring for Attitude: Research & Tools to Skyrocket Your Success Rate

by Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ



According to a groundbreaking study by Leadership IQ, 46% of newly hired employees will fail within 18 months, while only 19% will achieve unequivocal success.

But contrary to popular belief, technical skills are not the primary reason why new hires fail; instead, poor interpersonal skills dominate the list, flaws which many of their managers admit were overlooked during the interview process.

The study (reported in *Fortune* and *Forbes*) found that **26%** of new hires fail because they can't accept feedback, **23%** because they're unable to understand and manage emotions, **17%** because they lack the necessary motivation to excel, **15%** because they have the wrong temperament for the job, and only **11%** because they lack the necessary technical skills.

The three-year study by Leadership IQ, a global leadership training and research company, compiled these results after studying 5,247 hiring managers from 312 public, private, business and healthcare organizations. Collectively, these managers hired more than 20,000 employees during the study period.

While the failure rate for new hires is distressing, it should not be surprising: 82% of managers reported that in hindsight, their interview process with these employees elicited subtle clues that they would be headed for trouble. But during the interviews, managers were too focused on other issues, too pressed for time, or lacked confidence in their interviewing abilities to heed the warning signs.

The typical interview process fixates on ensuring that new hires are technically competent. But coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament are much more predictive of a new hires' success or failure. Do technical skills really matter if the employee isn't open to improving, alienates their coworkers, lacks drive and has the wrong personality for the job?

The 5 Biggest Reasons Why New Hires Fail

The study tracked the success and failure of new hires and interviewed managers about their hiring tactics and new hires' performance, personality and potential. Upon completing the 5,247 interviews, Leadership IQ compiled, categorized and distilled the top five reasons why new hires failed (i.e., were

Coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament are more predictive of a new hires' success or failure than technical skills are.

terminated, left under pressure, received disciplinary action or significantly negative performance reviews). The following are the top areas of failure, matched with the percentage of respondents.

- **Coachability (26%):** The ability to accept and implement feedback from bosses, colleagues, customers and others.
- **Emotional Intelligence (23%):** The ability to understand and manage one's own emotions, and accurately assess others' emotions.
- **Motivation (17%):** Sufficient drive to achieve one's full potential and excel in the job.
- **Temperament (15%):** Attitude and personality suited to the particular job and work environment.
- **Technical Competence (11%):** Functional or technical skills required to do the job.

Only 11% of new hires fail for lack of technical competence.

In addition, the study found no significant difference in failure rates across different interviewing approaches (e.g., behavioral, chronological, case study, etc.). However, 812 managers experienced significantly greater hiring success than their peers. What differentiated their interviewing approach was their emphasis on interpersonal and motivational issues.

Why Typical Interviews Don't Reveal Attitude

Highly perceptive and psychologically savvy interviewers can assess employees' likely performance on all of these issues. But the majority of managers lack both the training to accurately read and assess candidates, and the confidence to act even when their assessments are correct.

Hiring failures can be prevented. If managers focus more of their interviewing energy on candidates' coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament, they will see vast improvements in their hiring success. Technical competence remains the most popular subject of interviews because it's easy to assess. But while technical competence is easy to assess, it's a lousy predictor of whether a newly hired employee will succeed or fail.

The financial cost of hiring failures, coupled with the opportunity cost of not hiring high performers, can be millions of dollars, even for small companies. And the human cost can be even worse. If a hospital hires a nurse that won't accept feedback and alienates pharmacists and physicians, the result could be a medical error. This one bad hiring decision could cost a patient their life.

2 Quick Tests to Discover the Attitudes You Want

Hiring for attitude doesn't mean looking for every terrific attitude under the sun. The goal is to determine the key attitudes that matter most to your customers and that bring the greatest benefit to your organization. The following two tests are designed to help you identify the attitudes you need.

Remember, there's no such thing as the "perfect" candidate just as there's no universal "right attitudes"; there are only the attitudes that are right for *your* organization. So the more honest you are in your responses, the closer you'll be to finding the talent you want. For accurate results, you must take both tests.

Test #1: Finding Your High-Performer Attitudes

The best place to go for this is to your current high performers. Think about the people that are an absolute pleasure to be around and who make your job more enjoyable and easier to do. These are the folks you would clone if you could because they bring such a high level of benefit to the organization.

Now ask yourself: *What are the distinguishing attitudinal characteristics that make these people such a joy to work with?*

Examples of your responses might include:

- They take ownership of problems
- They're highly collaborative
- They aren't afraid to make mistakes
- They meet commitments
- They're empathetic towards customers' and colleagues' needs

There are no universal "right attitudes"; there are only the attitudes that are right for your organization.

Your attitudes will be unique to your organization and should not exceed 10 items.

Test #2: Finding Your Low-Performer Attitudes

The only way to ensure you've got a true high performer is to make certain that person doesn't possess the low performer traits that impede success. Low performers and their negative attitudes suck the energy and enthusiasm out of everyone with whom they interact. Internally, they drag down valuable employees and make co-workers so frustrated and miserable they quit. And on the service side, customers and clients who come in contact with low performers tend to think twice before they bring their business back.

With your low-performing folks in mind, ask yourself: *What are the attitudes these folks have that make getting stuck in traffic on the way to work seem like a blessing?*

The only way to ensure you've got a true high performer is to make certain that person doesn't have any of the low performer traits that impede success.

Examples of your responses might include:

- They always find the negative
- They gossip
- They respond to feedback with an argument
- They only do the bare minimum expected of them
- They get overwhelmed by multiple demands and priorities
- They always find someone else to blame for their mistakes
- They're unwilling to leave their comfort zone

Once again, your responses will be unique to your organization and should not exceed 10 items.

Once you've got your two lists, conduct a quick assessment to make sure every point is on target. This can be done by asking yourself the following two questions about each attitude listed:

1. How does this attitude add value or competitive advantage to this organization? (If the attitude brings no benefit to the organization, it doesn't belong on the list).
2. Who cares about this attitude? (If the attitude doesn't bring benefit to your customers, it doesn't belong on the list)

Now you're ready to use key attitudinal traits to start developing your interview questions.

Interview Questions to Avoid

Before we talk about the questions you should be asking in your interviews, let's rule out a few types of questions you should avoid.

There are a lot of bad interview questions, and we are not going to do a full review of them here. A lot of questions are bad for legal reasons, and that's a different topic and something every manager should be briefed on by their HR or Legal department. Instead, I want to address the questions that interviewers ask that are useless to their hiring process. Here are some of the biggies: Tell me about yourself. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? Etc.

These are not necessarily inherently bad questions, but they are cliché, wherein lies their flaw. When you ask questions candidates are expecting, you're guaranteed to get canned, rehearsed answers that waste everyone's time. There is a book called "101 Great Answers to the Toughest Interview Questions." Every hiring manager should have a book like this on hand. If you find yourself asking questions that appear in this book, you probably want to rethink them, because you can bet your candidates have read the book, too.

Another bad question is the hypothetical question. (e.g. If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?) Now, if you knew, for example, that every high performer in your organization said cheetah and every low performer said elephant this might be a valid question. But until you know that, these are just quirky, nonsensical questions that are useless to your hiring process.

Finally, one of the most common bad question types we see is the leading question: "So listen, Mark, we have a team-friendly, family-oriented type of culture here. You are going to fit well into this culture, right?" A candidate would have to be foolish not to realize the correct answer is, "Well, yes, I am. In fact my last boss told me my best attribute was working in a team-based, family-oriented culture."

When you hint the answer, the effectiveness of your question is lost.

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How to Ask Questions That Elicit Honest Responses

So now that you know what *not* to ask, what are a few questions you can ask?

But wait, not so fast! Before we get to the questions you *can* ask, please recall the 2-part exercise from earlier. In fact, you may want to flip back to page 3 for a moment to recall your responses. They reveal the most important attitudinal characteristics for your organization (as well as the characteristics your organization should avoid).

Now that you have your list in hand, you're ready to start building your questions. And here are two questioning techniques we recommend:

The first is the tried-and-true **behavioral interviewing technique**. (e.g. "Tell me about a time when ...") This well-known question construction is designed to elicit a past situation and how your candidate reacted to it.

The second is what we call the **hanging question technique**. We find that hanging questions - while absolutely critical to your hiring process - are used less frequently because they often go against your natural instincts. Here's an example: Say that you, as the interviewer, know that low performers in your organization tend to have negative attitudes, so you want to test if a candidate displays those same negative characteristics. To do so, you will want to pinpoint a real-life scenario your candidate might encounter on the job. Common scenarios include when an employee is given an assignment they don't agree with, or when specifications for a project are changed at the last minute, or when someone is given an assignment outside of their job role. Finding a challenging situation common to *your* organization is the key to developing an effective hanging question.

Let's go with the first scenario to demonstrate: *Tell me about a time when you were given an assignment you didn't agree with.*

Examine the construction of this question carefully. You will see that it illustrates two key parts. First, you begin with the behavioral part, "Tell me about a time when ..." Then, you finish with the hanging part, "... you were given an assignment you didn't agree with."

Now, this might not seem all that challenging, but believe me it is. And here's why: When most interviews ask these kinds of questions, they instinctively

want to add six little words that torpedo their effectiveness. They say, "Tell me about a time when you were given an assignment you didn't agree with *and how did you solve it?*" Or "... *how did you react to it?*" Or "... *what did you tell your boss?*" As soon as you add the extra words, your beautifully crafted hanging question turns into a leading question and instantly loses effectiveness.

Never hint at the correct answer; always leave the question hanging out there.

The Perfect 4-Step Interview Question

As you know from the beginning of this white paper, the number one reason why new hires fail is that they are not coachable.

A high performance workplace is dependent upon employees who have the ability to accept and implement feedback from bosses, colleagues, customers and other key players. There is no point in investing time and energy in people who do not respond positively to feedback. That's why spotting coachability is one of the few universal goals of Leadership IQ's Hiring for Attitude methodology.

But discovering coachability during the interview process is not easy. So we developed and field-tested a four-step question technique that will allow you to easily separate candidates who are coachable from those who are not.

Step 1: Make them believe you're going to talk with their previous boss.

Begin by asking applicants for the full name of their present or most recent boss. Once you've got the name (e.g. Kate Johnson), confirm the spelling of the name; "Did she go by Kate or Katherine? And how do you spell Johnson?" In doing this, you create a situation where the applicant believes you're actually going to call their boss. And if they believe that, they're much more likely to be truthful in their responses to the hiring questions you ask. *(Please note: This whole process will not work if you don't confirm the spelling of their name. This little psychological twist is what makes this whole process so revealing.)*

Step 2: Ask them to describe their boss.

A high performance workplace is dependent upon employees who have the ability to accept and implement feedback from bosses, colleagues, customers and other key players.

A simple way to do this is to ask, “Tell me about what Kate was like as a boss.” The answer the applicant provides will give you some hints about what they’re looking for in a boss. If they answer, “Kate was very hands-on and wanted regular updates,” and they say this with a snarl, you can infer that this applicant doesn’t like that style of management. Whether their response is positive or negative, they usually won’t give you a complete response. So follow-up with questions like, “Tell me about a specific example,” or, “What was that like?” If they indicate (whether implicitly or explicitly) that they don’t respond well to micromanagers, and you’re a bit of a micromanager, ask yourself whether you could successfully manage them. If their last boss sounds like you, and they loved working for him or her, that’s a great sign.

Step 3: Ask them what their boss considered their strengths.

This is easily done by asking, “When I talk to Kate, what will she tell me are your biggest strengths?” This question has two purposes. First, before you start asking about their weaknesses, it’s nice to start with a more pleasant question. Asking about their strengths gets the candidate talking and keeps them comfortable with you.

Second, it gives you an honest look at the qualities that they like best about themselves. If they talk about being process-oriented and very detailed, and you’re looking for an out-of-the-box, big-picture thinker, you just learned something very valuable. Sometimes people ask whether this is the same as asking the candidate to describe their strengths (one of the questions we suggest you never ask). The answer is no. If you ask them to describe their strengths, you’re going to get a canned answer that reflects what they think you want to hear, not what they actually believe.

Step 4: Ask them what their boss considered their weaknesses.

Again, this can be accomplished with a question as simple as, “Now everyone has some weaknesses, so when I talk to Kate, what will she tell me yours are?” This is the most critical question, but it only works if you’ve completed the previous three steps. In fact, if you do the first three steps successfully (especially confirming the spelling of the boss’ name in Step 1), you might be shocked at the level of honesty you elicit with this last question.

You want to listen to their answer on two levels. First, you’re going to assess whether the weakness is something you can live with. If they say they were criticized for lying, or being too political, or not completing assignments on

Listen to answers on two levels. First, assess whether their weakness is something you can live with. Second, if they can’t think of a weakness, you’ve hit a warning sign that they’re not coachable.

time, then you may have uncovered that they share characteristics with your low performers.

Second, if they say they can't think of any weaknesses or "they don't know what Kate thought about them," then you've hit upon the biggest warning sign that someone is not coachable. If they didn't (or couldn't) hear the constructive feedback offered by their previous boss, what are the chances that you'll be successful giving them feedback? If someone can't hear and assimilate constructive criticism, they're not coachable. And even without formal conversations with their boss, if they can't put themselves in their boss' shoes and anticipate their assessment, they're not coachable. And if they're not coachable, they're going to be a nightmare to try and manage.

Putting It All Together

Now, before we wrap things up, we must address a question we always get after our popular "Hiring for Attitude" webinar we hold live online a few times year. (Browse our upcoming webinars here: www.leadershipiq.com/webinars). And that question is, "So where do technical skills fit into the hiring process? Do you totally ignore them?"

Technical skills are a critical element of any employee's job performance, and they absolutely must be a part of your hiring process. But skills are very easy to test. Because most organizations concentrate more on skills than they do attitude, we typically find that the organizations we work with are already sufficiently assessing technical skill levels.

So, yes, you absolutely must use skills assessments. And if you can, incorporate them before you meet face-to-face so the candidates use their time and not yours. Then, by the time you meet in person, you will have already gotten the skills assessment out of the way (thus weeding out any candidates who do not possess the necessary skills); all that's left is to assess whether they also have the right levels of coachability, emotional intelligence, temperament and motivation to fit your organization's unique culture.

If you follow all of these tips and techniques carefully, instead of having a 20% chance of hiring a high performer, you will have a 40% chance of hiring someone who will make valuable contributions to your organization.

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