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Smart Leaders Finding the fit

How to cover all your bases in the interview

By Brooke Bates

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Robert White and Paul Kaplan are loyal guys. They both married their high school sweethearts, for one. And White was a CPA at the firm where they met for 10 years; Kaplan, more than five.

So when they founded KW Property Management & Consulting LLC together five years ago, they knew the first trait they would look for in their employees.

"The first trait that we're looking for is loyalty," says White, the managing director. "Whoever we hire, we want to make sure that they're going to want to be with us for a long period of time."

Since then, they've pretty well figured out who they're looking for. And they've had plenty of practice, swelling to more than 400 employees.

"It's not an easy thing," says White, who led the property management firm to 2008 revenue of \$17 million. "This is not an exact science."

Smart Business spoke with White about how to interview potential employees to fit your firm.

Get involved. The way we control the hiring process is that myself and Paul both need to be notified when they're going to hire somebody. What we'll do is we'll talk to the two people that are going to be doing the interview process about a few things: What's the position for? What's the job description? In that process, we're determining is the position actually needed? Sometimes these managers will sit in with us on other interviews so they can hear our questioning and learn what we're looking for.

[Leaders] should be intimately involved in the process, especially the higher up the ladder. Ultimately, the people that you hire below you are mini-leaders; they have to get the troops below them to follow them. It's just important that you are intimately involved in that infrastructure.

Maybe if it's a huge public company that hires thousands of employees, the way you do that is through your HR department. Just be intimately involved in the internal control structure of your HR department to make sure the company's executing the way you want it executed. I would say, for a small- to medium-sized business, to be intimately involved and not just turn it over to your HR department. Actually sit in on the interviews. Meet the people before they're hired. Ask your own questions.

Interview in layers. Normally in the interview process, you have two layers of management interview the person. You have the direct manager or supervisor and then that person's manager or supervisor performing the interview. When it comes to executives in the company, then Paul and I are always involved. We'll get in the interview process and we'll ask specific questions on ... their experiences relating to banking. That's probably a third of the interview process.

A third of the interview process is we go through why are they leaving their current job or why have they been dismissed. I don't like to hear that there were disagreements with the boss. Usually what I'm focused on is that they liked the company and they've hit a ceiling as far as their career path.

In this third of the interview, we also focus on their resume and have they jumped around for a lot of jobs. We're trying to see, are these people loyal or are they changing jobs every year or two? We really focus in and drill down on the reasons why they're changing jobs. Let's say they give the answer that, 'I hit a ceiling and there's no room for growth.' Then I start probing later in the conversation. I try not to make it obvious, but I'll start



Robert White, managing director, KW Property Management & Consulting LLC

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asking, 'What's the size of the company? What was the size of the company a few years ago?' I try to see, was the company growing? Was that a true answer?

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Get personal. The third part of the interview process is what I call breaking off track. Usually, that's at the end of the interview, and it's when everybody's relaxed. You just start finding out what kind of person they are. Do they follow sports? Are they involved in hobbies? In that part of the conversation is where you get the true sense of a person, where you get to know a little bit about their personality. Usually during that I always try to explain to the person our culture as a company.

The worst question you can ask is a question that you're not allowed to ask by law. In this part, where it's kind of relaxed and we're no longer in an interview-like mindset, those are the times where you might [ask], 'Hey, are you married? Do you have kids? Where are you from?' You're technically not allowed to ask those questions, but in that type of discussion, sometimes you might accidentally say something. So you have to be very careful when you're trying to get a feeling if they'll fit into your culture or they're your kind of person.

Step out of the box. As a company, we do not have a standard list of questions. [It'd be a mistake to] do an interview out of a box, to have a list of questions that you ask everybody and always do every interview the same way. We have a core set of questions like, 'Why'd you leave your last job?' but for the most part, it's like each interview evolves.

We make the interview process with the different people individual. So I'll meet with them, the manager below me will meet with them, Paul will meet with them. After the candidates leave, we have a meeting amongst ourselves and discuss: What did you talk to them about? What were their answers? Did you like them? Somebody will bring to the table something that they learned about the candidate that maybe I didn't learn or I didn't ask about. Then I'll tell them something I learned about that they didn't learn about and we'll talk about that aspect.

At the end of the day, it's a vote. It has to be unanimous. If one person feels strongly that it's a no, we will move on to the next candidate.

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