

Get Out of the Dugout and Get in the Game: Four Tips for Great Hiring

By Rob Kramer

June 2014

It's baseball season: a chance for all teams to compete, to win, and to dream about championships. When I assumed one of my first supervisory roles I was anxious about my abilities to manage the team, and I relied heavily on the staff. My first hire? A disaster. But as time went on, and natural turnover occurred over the years, I became better and better, having far more (to use a baseball reference) "hits" than "strikeouts." Here are my top four "home run" tips:

1) Clarify expectations from the very, very beginning

A common organizational problem is underperforming employees. This breakdown often occurs because the manager was not clear on expectations from the start, which begins with the job posting. Oftentimes job descriptions only include requirements of the work (technical needs, responsibilities to perform, etc.). One key lesson I learned is to include other key requirements, including clearly articulated language on being a leader and a team player.

In all interviews, I continued to clarify both technical expectations *and* leadership and team expectations. I wanted all potential candidates to know what they were likely to do and how I expected them to behave. Once a candidate was hired, from day one, I continued clarifying the responsibilities and my expectations for both their work and their performance as a leader and teammate. I included a principle function in all work plans on "leadership and teaming." In it, I articulated the actions and behaviors I would be evaluating, and clarified what was measured for an employee to meet and exceed expectations. There would be no mystery in my performance expectations for every employee.

2) Conduct interviews that enlighten

For years I taught a class on Behavioral-Based Interviewing (BBI), a proven methodology to unearth job candidates' true behaviors. And still it took me a few strike outs, pop outs, and ground outs to recognize I needed better interviewing skills myself. BBI is based on the premise

that past behavior is the best indication of future behavior. In utilizing BBI questions, a hiring manager can more deeply understand a candidate's actual work style, decision making process, methods for handling and overcoming mistakes, managing conflict, and other nebulous topics. I strongly encourage checking into BBI before conducting your next interview. There are many resources available through a basic internet search.

3) Hire for talent and fit

It took me a while, but I eventually figured out when human resources sent me my candidate pool, they had also taken care of an important step in the hiring process: they had screened all the candidates for minimum technical qualifications required to perform the job. That discovery freed up space in the interviewing process to focus on areas other than experience. An interview trap is to ask generic questions, such as, "tell me about your experience doing..." or "how comfortable are you operating a..." Human resources had taken care of that step for me. My job became to find out who amongst the candidates has great talent, and who would fit in well with my team and in my culture.

If a candidate has talent, I can teach them almost anything. He or she will have ample opportunity to learn, grow, and be challenged. If they demonstrate "MVP" type abilities, I can groom them for promotion over time. Additionally, it is much better for morale and performance to hire someone who fits in well with the team and with your environment, rather than to force a square peg into a round hole. A great example of the latter is to hire someone with tremendous expertise or knowledge, but everyone hates working with them. As a hiring manager, don't get obscured by a player's great statistics alone, make sure they will champion your team, as well.

4) Check references. Like a fiend.

Hiring supervisors can often brush over this step, having learned that all references are glowing because the candidate pre-selected them. True, but how you "interview" the references can lead to important findings. I found it useful to use BBI questions when checking references. Be brutal in your investigation. Find out as much dirty laundry as possible. Don't let the reference off the hook. It's your team you are growing, not theirs. A few of my favorite questions to ask include, "How much change (or relief) will your organization experience if I hire this person?" "What is the worst mistake this person made, did they own it, and what did they do to fix the situation?" "What are you not telling me about this person's weaknesses?" Hiring is a competition. You want to win by recruiting the best candidate you can. The reference doesn't want to lose either, especially if they are trying to dump a bad player off their roster.

Baseball is tough. It's a long season and lots can happen. Players get injured and filling in vacated spots is crucial. Build a strong team and it will eliminate eighty percent of your leadership challenges. I wish you all the best success in filling your roster this season!

Rob Kramer is the president of Kramer Leadership, LLC; a coaching and consulting firm dedicated the success of mission-driven leaders and teams. A manager himself for fifteen years, Rob has provided executive coaching for more than a decade in a variety of business sectors, including health care and lab management. He is the author of *Stealth Coaching: Everyday Conversations for Extraordinary Results* (Dog Ear Publishing, 2013).