



First Impressions: Suspending Judgment for Smarter Hiring by Laura Gassner Otting

You never get a second chance to make a good first impression. We've all had the mantra drilled into our heads by bosses, parents, teachers and colleagues. As interviewees, we whispered it to ourselves in preparation. I've even had a search committee member or six or seven repeat it to me as an excuse to rule out a potential candidate that just didn't strike their fancy.

First impressions tell us things like preparation, confidence, comfort level and even grooming habits; some of these are important, but none are quite central to determining whether a candidate will successfully perform the tasks and duties we expect from the hire. The most difficult task of the interviewer is to avoid making and solidifying a first impression.

SUSPEND JUDGMENT FOR AS LONG AS YOU CAN

Most interviews are scheduled to last for an hour or more, yet the vast majority of interviewers admit to making an impression within ten minutes of the candidate walking through the door. These interviewers immediately fall into a pattern that shifts the balance of the conversation in ways that confirm the first impression, whether or not it was correct.

For example, an interviewer who makes the first impression, "I like this person; s/he could work out quite nicely," starts chatting conversationally, asking softball questions, and worse, allows the candidate to pontificate on what they would, should, or could do if hired. The interviewer or interview committee spends more time talking than listening, and most of that talking is done in an effort to sell the candidate on the job, not screen his or her qualifications. The "yes" interview leaves the hiring manager or interviewing panel with a nice feeling about the candidate, and high hopes for the future, but no real understanding of what skills, knowledge and abilities that candidate is bringing to the job.

Worse yet, an interviewer who immediately thinks, "No way; I can't imagine s/he here," does the opposite, spending the rest of their time disengaged, or worse, tearing the candidate apart through tough questions with even tougher answers.

Remember that it takes at least ten minutes for a candidate to get past his/her nervousness, or for the interviewer or interviewing committee to establish a flow of conversation. Until then, you cannot truly get into the nitty gritty of what the candidate brings to the table.

PAST PERFORMANCE IS KEY

Past performance is the single greatest predictor of future performance. Talk is cheap, but the way a candidate represents his or herself is obviously important and instructive. Most search committees make the mistake of asking questions based on the answers they expect to get, not the other way around. Good interview questions start with a good job



description, one that outlines what the successful candidate is expected to accomplish on the job. Create a pre-determined list of questions based not on the resume of the candidate to be interviewed, but on the qualifications and track record a candidate must bring to the table in order to be successful in the position.

DETERMINING YOUR FALLIBILITY

Consider your decision-making style: do you instinctively react with your gut, or do you take longer to come to a decision? The odds are that your interviewing style mirrors your decision-making style. The more of an emotional decision maker you are, the harder you'll have to work to control your impulse to react to first impression triggers.

An interview should examine professional experience, i.e., a track record of on the job performance, as well as the personal characteristics of honesty, integrity, determination, humor and general likeability. On the job performance comes through only if you get past the first impression. Personality and character are difficult to measure, and certainly hard to pinpoint in an interview; try to rely more on reference checks for this information than the interview personality your candidate brings to your first meeting.

Holding judgment in an interview is an extremely difficult task. The following tips will increase your ability to wade past potentially incorrect first impressions and learn more about the candidate's track record:

1. Screen all candidates with a telephone interview, thereby forcing you to delay the effects of any visual first impressions.
2. Begin the interview by chatting casually; it will ease all parties.
3. Remain quiet for a few beats after the interviewee has stopped talking.
4. Interview as a committee to reduce personal dynamics.
5. Bring a list of interview questions based on the performance indicators in the job description.
6. Note the halfway mark of your scheduled time; reevaluate your impressions.
7. Assign members of the interview committee to cover different areas of the candidate's background.
8. Avoid questions that start with "What would you do if...".
9. Throw some hardball questions at likeable candidates, and softer ones at the candidates you don't like; their interview performance may be based on yours.
10. Talk less than you listen.