



Reference Checks: Questions to Ask by Laura Gassner Otting

(This article is reprinted with the permission of www.ExecSearches.com, for whom it was originally written.)

As discussed in “Hiring a Track Record: More Informative Reference Checks” a few extra hours spent referencing final candidates will yield a smarter hire. Not only do the additional facts make your search committee more informed and thus better equipped to make an extremely important decision, but they will give you information that may help your hire succeed in his or her new position after they come on board. The following questions should shed new light on your candidate pool.

Establishing the Context

- How long and in what capacity have you know the candidate?
- What were the job functions and did he/she perform them effectively?
- What was the reference’s relationship to the candidate business, personal, or both?
- Was there a reporting relationship? Was the reference a superior, peer, or a subordinate?
- What was the nature of their last contact? When was it?
- What was the reference’s title and responsibilities at the time the two worked together and the reference’s current title, if different?
- What were the beginning and ending employment dates for this individual? What was this individual’s beginning and ending salary?
- What positions did the individual hold?
- What was it like to work in the organization? How was the culture? What were the unique dynamics?

Questions to Ask the Boss or Board Members

- If reference was a boss, what kind of an employee was the candidate? How did he or she perform? What was it like to manager him/her?
- How did this individual’s performance compare to other employees with similar job duties?
- Describe the individual’s ability to attract and counsel top talent. How much direction/oversight does the candidate need?
- Does s/he know when to seek guidance?
- Describe a situation when you had to give the candidate bad news or disagree with his or her ideas. How does s/he respond to criticism?
- Have you ever given the candidate responsibility for something that was not done well?
- Has s/he ever successfully changed your mind?
- How does s/he handle new challenges of any sort?



Questions to Ask Peers

- Did this individual get along well with management and peers?
- How would you describe the individual's overall performance?
- What kind of job is best suited for this individual's abilities?
- Describe an issue in which you had to negotiate with the candidate.
- Describe a time when you changed the candidate's mind or the candidate changed yours.
- Does the candidate respect institutional boundaries or politics?
- What do/did you count on the candidate for?
- How sensitive is s/he to people from another culture?
- Describe a situation where you and the candidate disagreed? What happened? How was it resolved?
- What happens when the candidate doesn't get his or her way?
- How would you rate the candidate's interpersonal skills?

Questions to Ask Subordinates

- How would you describe his/her management skills?
- How does s/he motivate people?
- How much direction/oversight does the candidate provide?
- How would you describe the individual's leadership, managerial or supervisory skills?
- What types of people work well with the candidate? What types of people do not?
- How would s/he go about conveying to subordinates who's in charge, especially in a setting where there's been a lot of turnover and change?
- How does the candidate deliver bad news?
- What sort of people does the candidate hire? Rate of success?
- How comfortable is s/he working in a diverse environment?
- Has the candidate ever fired anyone? How was that handled?
- What is his or her willingness to go to bat for people?
- How would subordinates rank his or her fairness as a boss?
- Give an example of how s/he handled a difficult, sensitive, people problem.

Gravity, Eagerness and Brains

- What motivates the candidates?
- How would you describe him/her as a person?
- Did the individual make sound and timely decisions?
- How determined is the candidate to get to "yes"?
- How do you rate the individual's ability to plan short-term? Long-term?
- Did the individual plan, administer and make budget well?
- Describe a situation in which the candidate had to use political skills. How well did the individual manage crisis, pressure or stress?
- Does the individual communicate well orally and in writing?



- Give an example of the candidate's creativity.
- Did the individual demonstrate honesty and integrity?
- How would you describe the individual's overall performance?
- Would you feel comfortable having this candidate make presentations to your board, funders, political officials, and the media?
- How tenacious is s/he? How stubborn?
- How would you describe the individual's technical skills?
- Was this individual a motivated self- starter?
- What do you think is important to the candidate? In his/her career? In life overall?
- How has the candidate changed the role from predecessors?
- Describe the most controversial issue in which you have seen the candidate?
- What are his or her hobbies, interests?

Fleshing Out Strengths

- What are his/her principal strengths for this position?
- What specific areas of his/her background would you recommend that the screening committee explore in more depth?
- Did this individual earn promotions?
- What kind of job is best suited for this individual's abilities?
- Do you personally like the candidate?
- What has s/he learned from you?
- How would you describe the candidate's values and ethics?
- What have been the candidate's greatest contributions to the organization?

Identifying Weaknesses or Challenges

- What are his/her principal weaknesses for this position?
- What was the reason for separation...was it voluntary or involuntary?
- Is there any reason why your company would not rehire this individual?
- What would his/her critics say?
- What are the candidate's downsides?
- Did any personal problems affect this individual's work performance?
- Why has the candidate changed jobs in the past?
- How was the candidate different in earlier years, say from age 20-40, compared to now?
- Do his or her strengths ever cause trouble, i.e., if s/he works too hard, do they become too demanding on staff?
- Does s/he have perfectionist tendencies?
- How does s/he handle change?
- How opinionated is s/he?
- What is your overall recommendation for him or her in this particular position (1-10)? Why not a 10?
- What type of advice would you give his or her next employer to ensure success?



Last Thoughts

- Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like the screening committee to know?
- Given the position as I've described it, would you hire _____ for the position?
- Would you consider this person eligible for rehire? (If not, why??)
- Would you recommend this individual for a position at another company? Why or why not?
- Would you highly recommend this person for the position they are seeking? (Again, if not, why not??)
- Is there anything of significance you'd like to add?
- Do you know of anyone else qualified to confidentially comment about the candidate?

Illegal or Unethical Questions to Avoid

- Does the applicant have any disabilities or health problems?
- Is the applicant married or have children?
- Has the applicant made child care arrangements?
- Is the candidate married?
- Would you describe the candidate's home life as stable?