

# LEADERSHIP BRIEFINGS

*Taking your leadership skills to the next level*

## **Hiring for character: Rethinking which skillsets matter most**

*by David Alexander*



When résumés hit the inbox of hiring managers, they often review and make interview decisions based on the professional experience and educational background of the applicant. Those qualifications are what factor into whether the candidate will be asked to interview for the position.

The problem with this process is that résumés rarely shed light on the individual as a person, their aptitude for success and their soft skills. Employers want to uncover candidates' soft skills—recent LinkedIn data shows that 61% of professionals say soft skills are just as important as hard skills.

Gone are the days when experience was the only thing that mattered. Companies have shifted their mindset to hiring for character and nurturing professional growth. Experience can be learned and taught, while character is the cumulation of your past and a prediction of your future—at the company and in life. So it is ultimately beneficial to both the candidate and the employer to consider character in the hiring process.

Having 30 years of experience and building my company on the principle of hiring based on character, these are some of the many benefits I have noticed that have contributed to the growth and success of the organization.

### **Workplace culture**

People tend to stay with a company that has a culture that mirrors their own values. When you hire people with similar character traits, it builds a strong company culture.

I typically speak with new colleagues in their first few days to welcome them to the company and introduce myself. I speak to them about the importance of being engaged, dependable and curious—all traits that help individuals achieve success. I tell them that the most important thing they will learn is the importance of their integrity. I also let them know that my door is always open, so they know that we have a similar set of values and that we have similar character. Once you hire someone for their character, it's important to let them know that they are surrounded by other people of strong character.

## Inherent ethics

On the first day of my legal studies class in college, the professor opened the textbook to chapter 1, which was “How to be ethical.” He said something to me that day I have never forgotten: “If I have to teach you how to be ethical, you aren’t.”

The people we interview are grown adults. I know that I can’t change who people are, nor the ethical standards that have been shaped throughout their lives. An employer’s role is to make sure their people feel like they have found the right place.

## Employee retention

The top 20 executives at our company have at least 17 years of experience at the company. We work to promote 100% from within the organization. Our leaders have been with us for so many years because of the loyalty our culture fosters. This is in part because we hire the right people and let them know that they have found the right home for their career.

Hiring based on character is more in-depth and more time-consuming than traditional hiring processes, but the benefits are plentiful. We have found success in hiring based on a candidate’s character, and it has allowed for a strong company culture, fantastic staff and greater employee retention.

## How to hire for character

The first step in hiring for character is to identify which characteristics or qualities you are looking for in a candidate. Examples of some character traits that are indicative of a strong candidate are:

- 1. Stable relationships.** Is there a thread of stability in a candidate’s relationships? Do they have deep and meaningful relationships with friends, family, former professors, colleagues, etc.? You want candidates who can work well in teams and can foster lasting relationships within your organization and with clients.
- 2. Strong values.** As a company with strong values, look for candidates who also have a strong set of values that they display in their professional and personal lives. Make sure those values align with the companies to ensure the candidate will be a good fit long-term.
- 3. Confidence.** Look for someone who is confident in who they are and able to hold their own and get the job done. Self-confidence is vital in roles that require self-sufficiency and proactivity. You want someone who is confident in their ability to learn and adapt to the needs of the company.

**4. Empathy.** Being empathetic is an important trait because it helps to create a more positive and effective workplace. A workplace with empathetic individuals is one that sees less conflict and tension among employees. Empathy also allows for diverse perspectives and true understanding, which is integral to creating a high-functioning team.

Most people are relatively smart and possess the ability to learn new skills. If we hire someone with great character but little experience, we can get them on the path to growth and can teach them what they need to know. Alternatively, a person with great experience and no character is a ticking time bomb within an organization.

Beyond hiring for character, companies must also learn how to foster it. You can do this by talking about your organization's values consistently and practicing what you preach. Being transparent with your values will not only benefit your employees but will improve your company's culture—something 46% of job seekers say is important to them, according to research from Built In. Candidates are looking for companies with a positive work culture that aligns with their values, and companies are looking for candidates with good character and refined soft skills.

Determining a candidate's character takes a bit more digging but has the potential for enormously positive impacts. When a company hires for this trait, the result is a workforce that is genuinely engaged, with great synergy and high retention.

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