

Don't Hire Squirrels To Be Your Top Dogs

*People are not your most important asset. The right people are.
Jim Collins, Good To Great*

By
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Bad hiring decisions cost organizations, both in dollars and lost opportunities. But getting the right people in the right places doing the right thing is not easy. It requires painstaking efforts and objective information. Mergers, acquisitions, downsizing, and growth all require an unprecedented need for information about how to hire top performers and a framework for assessing the competencies required to lead people during extraordinary times. Therefore, hiring the right people involves more than guesswork and subjectivity. The formula is simple but not easy: know what a squirrel is and set a trap to catch them.

“Russian Doll” management, the phenomenon by which managers repeatedly hire and promote miniature versions of themselves, will not take organizations where they need to go. Instead, diversity of thought and creativity will be required to offer the ingenious solutions to tomorrow’s complicated problems. Finding these superlative leaders of tomorrow requires hiring the best and brightest people *now*. However, many organizations continue to hire squirrels instead.

What is a Squirrel?

Simply put, a squirrel is a creature that does not belong in your organization. It is a creature that, no matter how much you try, will for now and always be a squirrel. You can't fix squirrels. Trying to do so is a little like marrying a person and hoping you can change him or her. It just doesn't happen. Squirrels are uncooperative, aggressive, destructive creatures that will cost you company significant sums of money. In fact, some researchers estimate that a squirrely hire can cost your company up to four times that person's yearly salary. So, if you are hiring someone for a position that earns \$100,000 a year, you are quickly facing the loss of a million dollars of damage if that person doesn't

work out. Clearly, organizations want to avoid hiring squirrels, but how can you tell a squirrel from a non-squirrel?

Set the Squirrel Trap

The first step in setting the squirrel trap is to put the person at ease. One of the things I do before an interview is the same thing that most interviewers do. I look at the resume. But in addition to looking for the usual things like experience and education, I search for something that we have in common. If the person has lived in a part of the world that I have, I make note of that; if we went to the same school, I remember that. I look for any shared experience that we might have. Whatever the hook, I use it to make the person feel more comfortable. Then, before starting the questions, I refer to the thing we have in common, often by making a joke about it.

Joking and using appropriate humor are ways to encourage others to lower their guard. For instance, I usually start by offering candidates something to drink: “Water? Do you want that on the rocks?” “Coffee? Leaded or unleaded?” “A coke? Want rum with that?” It’s not hilarious stuff, but it does serve the purpose. It causes a smile or laugh, and the ice is broken.

The second phase of trap setting is to interview smarter. There are volumes of books written on the subject of good interviewing techniques, but here are a few that you may not have considered

- Ask why they left their last job. This is not revolutionary. Most seasoned interviewers make this a part of their protocol. The *words* of the candidate’s answer are not as critical as the nonverbal responses, however. The candidate will have rehearsed a good reason for leaving: The position was eliminated; opportunities for growth were minimized; a merger caused redundancy in positions. All of these are valid reasons for leaving, but you have to be sure the answer is true. Instead of looking at your notes or reading from a resume, look at the person’s eyes when you ask this one. Is the person looking you in the eye? Did the eyes dart left or right? Any facial touching? Fidgeting? Touching other objects? All can be an indication that the person is not telling the truth.
- Ask why they want to work in your organization. This one will show whether they have done their homework. If they are just looking for a job, that will show too.

- Give hypothetical scenarios and ask what they would do in each. No one can prepare for these kinds of questions, so you will get a glimpse of the thinking patterns of the individual. Most interviewers already do this one, but examining your scenarios and asking yourself whether they really get to the heart of what you're trying to discover can help you improve the value of the questions.
- Finally, ask about their areas for improvement. Everyone asks this one, so applicants anticipate it and prepare the malarkey responses. But you can push back and catch them off guard when they answer, "I expect too much from myself." By saying, "Oh come on. Every applicant since the Pharaoh hired pyramid workers has used that one. What's a real one? What would your direct reports tell me? What would your boss tell me?" If, after some serious probing on your part, the person still can't come up with any areas for improvement, the person is either unconscious or seriously dedicated to impression management.

Finally, gathering more and better data can help avoid hiring squirrels. Most interviewers rely on a pre-determined process to gather data. They request a resume, conduct an interview, check with references, and have subsequent meetings with other members of the organization. However, all this is still not always enough.

The use of psychometrics, assessments that have been validated for hiring, is one way to improve your hiring practices. A well-chosen battery of tests, one that includes both intellectual measures and personality assessments, can increase the validity of your conclusions. This combination measures applicants' current intellectual resources and forecasts the kinds of decision making and problem solving they are likely to engage in. I advocate using at least two cognitive measures, one timed and one un-timed, to determine whether deadlines and pressure will affect performance. Numerical testing should be included if the position requires budget or financial decision making.

I use at least five instruments that measure different aspects of work-related personality traits. Personality assessments offer crucial information because they indicate the candidate's achievement drive, ethics, and reliability—essentials for every job in every company. They also provide information about other kinds of personality characteristics that may help or hinder the person's ability to fit in and do the job. For example, people skills are essential for individuals applying for a sales position or a job in human resources. They are not so important for solo performers like accountants and engineers who will not have direct report responsibilities. Similarly, flexibility and adaptability are important traits for someone who works in a field that changes quickly

and unexpectedly. They are not so critical for routine jobs that tend to stay the same most of the time.

All testing is not helpful, however. In fact, no testing is better than bad testing. Using only one assessment, using instruments that were never intended for making hiring decisions, and using tests that don't measure what you need not only waste time and money, this practice can put you at risk legally. Finally, having someone who had been trained in interpreting psychometrics is essential. The ability to aggregate the data from all the assessments is both a science and an art that requires years of experience to master. The money spent to hire a qualified person to interpret the data is minimal when compared to the cost of a bad new hire. Once you have all the salient data, you are ready to ask yourself the important question. Is this person a squirrel?

Ten Reasons Not to Hire Squirrels

- Not champions of innovation, squirrels are known as the “living fossils.” They haven't changed in 5 million years. What are the chances they will be able to handle expected, much less unexpected change in your company? And respond to shifting priorities? Won't happen.
- Squirrels resolve conflict by foot stomping, tail flagging, chattering, and chasing. Not many people like conflict and even fewer are good at resolving it, but squirrely responses to conflict will get you sued.
- Aggressive and uncooperative, 32% of adult males have torn ears. Do this just one time in corporate America, and you have huge problems.
- Not good team players, squirrels are asocial and solitary. If the job requires any kind of collaboration, teamwork, or coordination of effort, a squirrel is not your rodent of choice.
- When confronted with a threat, squirrels stand motionless, swallow hard, and chew fast—so much for overcoming obstacles. Most companies require more of a “can do” spirit that squirrels just don't seem to be able to embody.
- The brains of squirrels are seldom engaged. The stomach rules. Some part of the brain has to work for success in most companies. The stomach should play a much lesser role.
- Because their sweat glands are in their paws, squirrels are lousy handshakers. Will this help build rapport with clients?

- There are 1600 different species of squirrels, but they are all seed-stealing thieves. Squirrels are sometimes tough to classify by the specific genus, but they all share the characteristic of being thieves. There's no place for an employee who will have a paw in the till.
- Squirrels spend most of they day sleeping and are usually only active around lunch time.
- Although cute and furry, squirrels are gnawing beasts that destroy property and make not attempts at restitution.

Bringing the wrong people into the organization compromises the leadership pipeline that each organization needs to fuel. Often, however, a crisis causes a company to make a poor hiring decision that costs them dearly. An alternative is to hire temporary help until a high potential candidate becomes available. Hiring smart is the first step to making sure the organization has the right people coming into the organization, but it is only the first step. Developing talented individuals for progression and succession is critical for the growth and success of the company over the long term.

Conclusion

Identifying an individual's strengths and approaches to work *before* making hiring decisions will help enhance reliability and build confidence that your company is hiring the most qualified candidate. Once this step is complete, the individual's boss can map out a plan and timeline for developing skills and gaining experience that will enable the person to move forward in the organization.

Smart companies, ones that want to select and retain talent in industries that are characterized by pirating, know that they must pioneer new ways to hire smart, develop talent, and teach the non-technical aspects of leading. Remember, a squirrel is just a rat in a cuter outfit.

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