

“Reading” Character in the Interview

Character Matters

Character is a set of general guidelines, mostly unconscious, for how to conduct oneself in the circumstances of life. It guides our behavior in the roles we play: son or daughter, sibling, spouse, parent, wage-earner, neighbor, citizen, etc. Character’s over-riding mandate is to “do the right thing,” to be “a good person.” In business, character matters because we strive to hire, and to develop, good people.

Character Is Not Personality

Personality is made up of a set of preferences that guide behavior. Character, on the other hand, is the moral compass that guides how a person uses his or her personality preferences. We can measure personality preferences, but it is difficult to evaluate a person’s character in the absence of examples of his or her real-life behavior.

Character Is Like Beauty

Everyone has their own definition of beauty and it can vary widely from one person to the next. And so it is with character. For example, a person speaks out against his group’s decision to take a course of action that is morally a grey area. One person sees this as an example of character (“He stood up for what is right”) while to another it looks like self-serving behavior (“Going along with the group would have meant extra work for him. He’s just lazy.”)

Misleading Signs of Character in the Interview

Hearing the candidate say the “right” thing in the interview doesn’t mean that you can count on seeing the expected character-driven behavior if the person is hired. Desire for the job drives the candidate’s motivation to be on his or her best behavior. And best behavior can look like good character.

But there is a big difference between being on one’s best behavior for thirty or forty minutes in the interview and letting “choose the difficult right over the easy wrong” guide your daily activities. One will help the candidate make a good impression in the interview; the other will help the employee make a good impression over time.

As a result, making a good impression in the interview, while desirable, does not necessarily indicate a candidate’s good character and should be taken with a “trust, but verify” dose of skepticism. What, then, can be done in the interview to get a “read” on a candidate’s character?

Identify Aspects of Character Required by the Position

Begin by identifying which aspects of character are most important for the duties and responsibilities of the position in question. For any position, some aspects of character will be more important than others. For example, honesty, persistence and fairness are aspects of character that are important for most management positions. While there are other aspects of character that would also be useful for a manager, the time constraints of the interview suggest that you focus on the most important ones for the position in question.

Look at Behavior in the Interview

The next step is to look for indicators of character you are interested in, not just in the interview, but in the selection process as well. Some examples of behavior that might give you insight into a candidate's character:

- Does the candidate's stated work experience, educational achievement and military record (if any) check out (and yes, you should verify these claims as they are frequently "fudged" on resumes and application forms.) If not, can the candidate explain discrepancies in a satisfactory way? Answers to these questions can give you an idea of the value the candidate places on honesty.
- If the candidate is not contacted within a week after the interview, does the candidate send a follow-up letter, text or make a phone call? The candidate's follow-through, or lack of it, can give you an idea of the value he or she places on persistence.
- Does the candidate treat, with respect and courtesy, receptionists or other employees who are not a part of the selection process? This can give you an idea of the value the candidate places on treating others fairly.

One of your most valuable interview tools is the open-ended question. As you prepare for the interview, think of one or two hypothetical questions that address aspects of the job that may "test" a person's character. Present these questions to the candidate and ask what he or she would do in that situation and why?

A Word of Caution

Beware of putting too much emphasis on any one indicator of good character. The demand for good behavior in the interview, and the limited amount of available interview time, mean that the few indicators of good character that you may see will almost always be weak and only hint at the person's character.

On the other hand, given a candidate's natural desire to make a good impression, any indicators of *poor* character should be thoroughly investigated. You want to be reassured that they are not signs of behavior that could a problem later, on the job.

