

Talent Mindset

The Business Owner's Guide to
Building Bench Strength

By Stacy Feiner, PsyD
with
Kristen Hampshire

Feiner Consulting, LLC
Cleveland, Ohio

Selection: The Talent Deep Dive

Rigorous Selection teases out top talent and, ultimately, is a high form of risk management in the hiring process. Don't be afraid that a thorough Selection process will scare off your perfect candidate, because just the opposite is true. A rigorous Selection process will intrigue top performers and be a warning to mediocre performers. The Selection process accurately evaluates function, attitude and potential, and gets beyond a candidate's façade. It also reveals to each candidate your company's commitment to excellence and the high performance standards required of your people. Since top talent usually has choices, too, you want them to want you.

An intensive Selection process will give top performers a stage to compete and perform—and these top performers will value the investment you put into a process, because it is of critical importance to them, too. A candidate who is the right fit will opt in to this process and fully engage. After all, top talent is always eager to perform. The rigor intrigues them. The rigor shows you're truly interested. The rigor allows them the platform to showcase how they think about what they love. The rigor gives them a chance to imagine

the competition and to outperform them. They won't feel lucky to get the job; they'll know they've been selected for it. It is a tremendous opportunity to create a collaborative environment for thoughtfully interviewing candidates, and for forming a hiring committee that will conduct thorough selection discussions.

The truth is, every time you invite a candidate to interview, you should expect to be interviewed, too. Top talent is just as concerned about choosing the wrong company and derailing their upward trajectory as you are about hiring someone who won't perform to your standards or match your culture. The road goes both ways.

A thorough, deep Selection process will stop the hiring treadmill.

Maybe you're familiar with this scenario? Your company whittles down a pool of candidates to three or five prospects, all highly qualified top performers with impressive résumés and references. These individuals pass initial screening with flying colors—they've got the skills, their salary expectations are in line with yours, and their experiences reflect the type of work you'd like to see them execute at your operation. Now, it's time for Selection (at this point, any of these candidates is a shoo-in, you figure).

You conduct a few standard interviews confirming the résumé and inquiring with your favorite interview questions. Then, you hire your new employee based on the results. The system is foolproof. So it seems.

But about six months after the employee joins your team, there are some real problems. The person is not a cultural fit, and you realize this when key managers hint, during separate occasions, that the person's performance is

not meeting expectations. These are generally off-handed remarks. Or, perhaps nothing is said at all. Or HR is blamed. Then, an overall feeling of productivity malaise sets in.

What's the problem? You wonder how this person could be failing at your organization when the hiring process included screening and testing. Now begins the process of: 1) figuring out how to work with this person to change their ways; 2) moving them to another area of the organization hoping they can thrive in a different role, or; 3) figuring out how you can cut ties. Then, it's back to square one with recruiting.

Does this cycle sound familiar?

Many businesses are stuck on a hiring treadmill in part because their Selection process lacks the due diligence and deep-dive intensity it deserves. You wouldn't acquire a business or work with a vendor without doing a great deal of research, including personal conversations to ensure a proper fit. Due diligence and that deep reporting requires a significant time commitment. Sure, it is exhausting at times. The Selection process is a team approach, driven by the owner, facilitated by HR or the hiring manager, during which interviewers collect intellectual capital from candidates that is shared and compared, during committee meetings.

Talent Due Diligence

You know that talent acquisition is critical to your company's success and sustainability. Business growth is dependent on positioning people into roles where they will succeed. Right talent, right role. Going beyond that, you want the people you hire to exceed the expectations you set for them. For example, talent you hire to fulfill a vice

president of operations position should seek to surpass the job description required of that role. This should show up in the Performance Management phase, so he or she can be mobilized for succession planning, with the intention of building your organization's bench strength.

Ultimately, Talent Acquisition is three-pronged (Recruiting, Selection, Onboarding), beginning with Recruiting, which is to fill a pool of qualified candidates and screen them with unexpected and authentic exercises or surveys. In Recruiting, we illustrated how a fresh approach to recruiting will attract a stronger, more qualified pool of talent. But once you have that pool, then what? How do you dig deeper and unearth authentic responses of an engaged set of individuals who could be your next high performer, how do you make an informed hiring decision?

The Selection process is your due diligence. Selection involves all of the touchpoints: initial screening; in-depth, structured interviews to gain insight into a person's business acumen; deep-dive interviews, during which conversations focus on leadership, problem solving, self-confidence and emotional intelligence, and selection tools that assess a candidate's personality and preferences, while gauging aptitude and potential. It is a series of touchpoints that progresses from preliminary to scripted to engaged. Each one of these touchpoints helps you to know and to understand the candidate, and helps the candidate to know and understand you, the role and the company.

Implementing a system for Selection is critical to the Talent Acquisition process. Here, a CEO lays out some of the company's inherent hiring challenges by sharing the personnel treadmill that was resulting because of recruiting, selecting and onboarding people who were not a cultural fit:

Hiring people for a growing company is arguably the most critical thing we do. Where we were missing the ball was finding candidates that fit into our culture. We weren't aligning our hiring with our culture, and we intuitively knew it and felt it. We did not have a model for screening candidates—we did not have a structure, a repeatable process for filtering candidates.

Employees' skills were there, their aptitude was strong, but the leadership style and work ethic were not. The internal pool of talent was empty come promotion time. Ideally you want to nurture a valuable workforce so 60 to 70 percent of recruiting efforts happen from within the organization. You want to hire from your own talent pool rather than hitting the streets time and again. You want to depend on the people you already have to grow with the company. This is not possible if the people you bring on in the first place are just filling openings.

Why are business owners more willing to pay external recruiters a third of base to fill a position, but so unwilling to invest in developing existing talent? I am not saying these two opportunities are mutually exclusive. But I believe that business owners aren't aware of this contradiction.

This particular company was prepared to make a decision between two candidates who had been vetted through interviews. It turns out, neither candidate was hired. And, we turned the company's hiring process upside down in a way that now allows the organization to select people who will excel in its culture.

I realized that what we had been doing throughout my entire career was inherently the problem—our approach to hiring and interviewing was just wrong.

By definition, it was not going to achieve the real goal, which is to know and understand the person, and to understand whether they fit into the role in the company, into our culture. None of that was really happening. If a candidate felt good, seemed right and had the appropriate background, we hired the person right away. It was a crap-shoot approach.

I understood our problem. I had people in my organization who were holding back our growth. You hit certain cycles in the life of your company where it becomes abundantly clear that some of the people in the organization are not a fit, and at the same time that the organization is not where you want it to be. I recognized that clearly.

Selection is critical to a company's ability to grow and prosper. It's an intense, important process of gathering intelligence before you make the serious investment in a person. Selection is tied to the financial success of a company because we need people who elevate our organization, who help grow it. People power our businesses, from a financial and organizational perspective. There is a direct people and profit connection.

Authentic Touchpoints

Selection with a Strategic Talent Management mindset challenges you to rethink the way you interview candidates. It forces you to dig deeper and find out what makes each final candidate tick. Business owners need to find out about how candidates respond in any situation so they can be sure individuals being considered for employment will thrive in the culture and, ideally, exceed job expectations. As owners,

you want your employees to take your business to a higher level. Why should we expect anything less?

Many companies act on impulse after a fairly lightweight interview process—maybe a phone conversation followed by an in-person interview. So, the owner signals the green light: the candidate feels right and the hire is made. There is no rigorous screening process during recruiting or online surveys that produce writing samples that really peel away the top layers. The approach is: meets general qualifications, can hold a conversation, has a résumé that seems to prove experience, passes the background check, done. Recruiting focuses on whittling a candidate pool down to a short list, figuring in the job description, budget and any deal-breakers—will the person relocate to your city? Does the candidate hold a certain degree or have specific certifications or experience? Will the candidate show up on time?

Then the interview happens and bare minimum questions are lobbed to the candidate. Again, it's like theater: the actors play their parts. You ask about the candidate's weaknesses; the candidate answers by turning their sore points into positives. You want to know why the person desires to work at your company, and the individual provides something about what they read on your website—polished yet perfunctory—and you check off that question as done.

If your interview process is so predictable that candidates can be coached in advance on how to answer the questions, the talent pool is way too shallow.

The more interactions an owner has with candidates, the richer the Acquisition process. Every touchpoint peels away a layer. The more leaders engage candidates in “off-road” scenarios—that is, engagements that happen beyond

the conference room—the more likely they are to uncover the real essence of individuals vying for that open position.

In the Selection process, rethink the place and time, and the questions posed during interviews.

Structured interviews extract historical data, real-life experiences and specific types of situations and circumstances, as well as the candidate's ability to self-evaluate, learn from mistakes and assert successes. Behavioral-based questions are introduced in order to go beyond the bullets on a résumé, to narrate the résumé, verify accuracy of the résumé, assess for depth of experience. These questions are formatted in a way that require the candidate to recount experiences chronologically, provide answers systematically and offer a self-evaluation. At the same time, this structured approach helps interviewers to take good notes that can be compared, apples to apples, with others on the hiring committee. And these questions can be assigned in advance to each interview so there are no overlaps and redundancies with the questions the interviewers ask.

Outcome goal: Select the top talent/best fit

Mindset: Create an experience that is respectful and positive for every candidate regardless of hiring decision.

It's a Two-Way Street

- Engage candidates so they can perform well. You will have multiple touchpoints so candidates have a chance to perform well over time, which indicates consistency and reliability.
- Make sure your company puts its best foot forward. Your ability to demonstrate consistency between your behaviors and your company's culture starts now.

Part HR : Part Marketing

- Prepare the hiring committee so no two interviews are asking overlapping questions.
- Create a respectful and positive experience that compels candidates to share their experience with your company to those outside your company.
- Let candidates know what to expect as follow up to each step of the selection process. Leaving candidates hanging is a sign that you are underperforming.

Set the Tone

- Introduce yourself, describe your role, how you interact with the position being filled. Share something about yourself that is relatable. Be approachable.
- Confirm the time allotted and how many questions you might ask, and suggest they describe what they've done as well as how they think through situations.
- Leave time for the candidate to ask questions. Be transparent and open.

It's A Team Sport

- Each interviewer should obtain high-quality information to share with the hiring committee.
- Sharing quality information transforms data into intellectual capital, which is critical for making accurate hiring decisions.

Figure 8: Selection Touchpoints

These are the instructions the interview provides to prepare the candidate for the questions.

Describe the Situation or Task:

- Based on the question asked, describe a situation that you were in or that required your attention. Please reference a specific event or situation, not a general description of what you would do or would have done.

Describe the Action You Took:

- Continuing from the situation, describe the action you took, the impact you had, the judgments you made, the thinking you applied.

Describe the Results You Achieved:

- Continuing from the actions you took, describe the outcome. What happened? How did the event conclude? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?

Sample Competency-Based Interview Questions (CBIQs): You can certainly develop your own questions. Keep in mind, you need to set up the question so it can be answered with the formula: Situation, Action, Outcome

- 1. Accomplishments:*** The standard you set is also a message you send, too.
- 2. Decision Making:*** Describe a time you had to make an unpopular decision. How was it received? How did you handle it?
- 3. Delegating:*** We cannot do everything ourselves. Give me an example of a time when you needed to delegate a task. Who did you delegate to, and was that determined?

4. **Goal Setting:** What important goals did you have in your last job? Exactly what were they, and what were your results?
5. **Initiative:** Tell me about times when you seized the opportunities, grabbed something and ran with it yourself.
6. **Managing Others:** Describe a time you managed an unreliable and inconsistent employee (or highly emotional or volatile employee)?
7. **Motivating Others:** Give an example of a time when your communication skills were powerful enough to influence the way others thought or acted, even in a very difficult situation.
8. **Overcoming Adversity:** Describe a time when you were not very satisfied or pleased with your performance. What did you do about it?
9. **Self Awareness:** Describe a time when you have been disappointed by your own behavior.

Focus on truly getting to know the candidates and what makes them tick. Play a board game. Discuss a thought leadership video (such as a TED talk). Email the candidate an article and invite an e-mail discussion, casually. Share some news and ask: What do you think about this? Invite them to dinner. Invite their spouse, too. Consider sharing one of your own interests with the candidate—art, music, sports, fine dining, whatever that may be. Remember, this candidate could become part of an inner circle of trust at your company. As the business owner, you deserve and need to know what makes this person tick. Selection should reveal candidates' true colors.

When companies conduct poor interviews, then every candidate interviews poorly. That's a lot of false negatives, meaning you might be passing on the very person you should ultimately hire. You have to create a black diamond recruiting course so you can see the great performers perform. We'll talk more about this in the Selection chapter.

Ensuring True Positives

1. **Set up:** two-way street; branding; being prepared, showing you care, getting to know each other.
2. **Structured interviews:** historical, attitude and skill and business acumen; behavior-based interview questions (BBIQs); taking notes to ensure comparison can be made and intellectual capital can be used.
3. **Unstructured Interviews:** engaged, authentic, how do you think, engage in the moment and unrehearsed, share, collaborate, anticipate and conjecture (journals, real-time dilemmas, etc.).
4. **Reconvene the hiring committee for decision making:** compare notes, rigorous discussion, leave no stone unturned, challenge each other, push the envelope, take nothing at face value.
5. **Repurpose** all the information gleaned from the Selection process into an onboarding plan that will accelerate the new hire's ability to assimilate into the culture and earn credibility with the team to become efficient and productive for the long term.

Selection happens after a pool of candidates is assembled and vetted. Selection is the deep dive. This is not a transactional process. Now that you have an assembly of qualified individuals, you can uncover the layers of each

finalist to learn what makes the prospect tick. Selection in the Strategic Talent Management continuum emphasizes meaningful experiences.

What is appropriate and effective for your business depends entirely on your culture and comfort level. Here, we provide a framework, not an off-the-shelf process. That means there is work involved on the part of the owner/CEO, and some soul searching.

Set the Tone for Selection

The Selection process illustrates a day-in-the-life at the company and confirms that candidates get a clear picture of expectations. The organization and its leaders, in turn, gain a deeper perspective of the talent and potential during interviews and can make informed, high-quality, sound hiring decisions. The manner in which Selection is conducted, from the place to people involved, is highly personal and must suit a company's culture and goals. Selection ultimately sets the stage for Talent Acquisition success.

At the same time, the Selection process touches other aspects of an organization, well beyond the act of sourcing human capital. Consider marketing, for example. During Selection, a company opens its doors so people can see the inner-workings of the company, what the company stands for, what it values. The candidates who are entertained for the position open a vein. There's no type of marketing or advertising that bares your organization's soul quite like a solid Selection process.

Candidates leave the process with an impression, whether they are hired or not. They're talking about their experience interviewing with your company to other

people, too. The Selection environment plays a significant role in ensuring that an organization's brand is preserved, and perhaps elevated, during this process. Selection must be executed with integrity, respect, honesty, courage and curiosity.

There is a manner in which Selection should be conducted to assure the process's success, and to even propel your organization's brand in the process. In contrast, when companies neglect candidates for weeks at a time during the process and treat them dismissively, they are essentially tossing marketing dollars down the drain. When interviewers show up unprepared, having scanned the résumé moments before walking into the interview, and make a bad impression on candidates, you're left with damage control—spending dollars to resurrect a poor image.

A Sense of Place: Most meetings with candidates will be held at your place of business, in a conference room or office environment. This gives the candidate an opportunity to see the facility, tour it and feel it. However, do not be limited by convention. Remember, the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of each candidate and have meaningful interactions prior to a hiring decision. You're aiming for authentic experiences that will reveal a person's character and values. This process requires stepping outside of the usual mental boundaries we place on Selection, and also beyond the physical boundaries of place. You set the rules for the Selection environment.

Heavy Lifting

Interviews: Structured interviews with candidates involve key stakeholders and are generally conducted in a

traditional environment. Now that the candidate has passed the screening interview, your goal is to introduce this person to stakeholders within the organization and to begin peeling back the layers with various types of interactions that prompt the candidate to discuss personal work experiences and achievements—along with challenges and how those were mastered.

Tailor Interview Questions: The crux of an effective, tailored Selection process are meaningful interviews with candidates that reveal how they solve problems, lead a team, respond in adverse situations—how they will fit into your culture. There are various levels of questions you will ask: Preliminary (remedial) questions that are asked during Recruiting to screen candidates; structured interviews that draw out candidates' experiences; and engaged interviews that include open-ended questions that are intended to draw out impromptu, what-if thinking—analytical, anticipatory thinking.

Structured questions are designed to draw out candidates' experiences. These questions give candidates little opportunity for embellishment—they provide opportunities for candidates to describe real-life situations from beginning to end, in detail. This gives an interviewer the benefit of learning how candidates view challenges, how they solve problems, and their perception of the outcomes of the situations described. These questions also help candidates recollect specific people, places and time. You can't fake that stuff! This approach helps the hiring committee gather candidates' responses in a consistent format so information can be shared during debrief meetings.

Engaged interview questions will gauge candidates' willingness to assert opinions or unique perspectives on

issues. These interviews are effectively conducted in a panel format, which will heighten the intensity and require candidates to think on their feet. You may use a case study or other material that provides a basis for speculating, anticipating, forming opinions and perspectives. This is not designed to be a test of wits, but more a framework for how this candidate engages ideas in the moment.

As candidates progress from formal to more genuine interactions during the interview process, the hiring manager reveals more about the job: how the person will be expected to lead, the strengths they must bring, and the type of talent required to round out the team and fit the culture. These interviews evolve into a conversation between candidates and interviewers/the hiring manager.

During the entire interview process, CBIQs are used to elicit responses that demonstrate a candidate has (or has not) accomplished given tasks. The interview questions should be divided among interviewers so the hiring committee gains a broad base of knowledge about each candidate. The team may agree on a set of questions that each will ask in order to compare responses given to each interviewer.

The interview questions should be divided among interviewers to the hiring committee gains a broad base of knowledge about each candidate. The team may agree on a set of questions that each will ask in order to compare responses given to each interviewer (different questions about leadership, for example).

As we have emphasized along this journey, you the owner must steer this process. Your hiring committee must collaborate to design questions that align with the skills and values you believe the candidate should have in order to be

considered for employment. You already asked preliminary questions during the recruiting phase to gauge the basic interest of the candidate. Now, follow with staged scripted questions that reveal candidates' competencies and allow you to compare them apples to apples. Engaged questions go a step further and help you observe the candidate's unique disposition, and determine whether they are a cultural fit. Finally, an exchange should occur that allows you, and the hiring committee, to mutually share conversation and discussion (and to ask each other questions). Here is where a candidate's potential is unlocked.

Once the questions are gathered, the real opportunity emerges when the team comes together to share and compare intellectual capital each interviewer collected. When the hiring team meets and thoroughly discusses a candidate with the narrative captured by each interview, the interviewer must take it deeper and evolve the candidate's initial answer into a more intellectually revealing response.

As we noted, through the Selection process, the hiring committee is extracting information and preparing notes. The time candidates spend during the interview process will mold their entire experience working at your organization. And that, too, is why Selection is a great deal more than narrowing down top talent. It is a culture-affirming, revealing process where both parties strip down to what's important, what matters, and a decision is made about whether a future stakeholder is a fit.

Selection Assessments: The intelligence gleaned from multiple interviews is verified by the results of an assessment tool or a battery of assessments, which can include a personality inventory, an aptitude test, a job-specific

assessment and a leadership test. These can be tie-breaker tools.

Assessments are most often facilitated by an external expert, who can administer, interpret and advise on selection decisions. These tools are meant to uncover and identify strengths, weaknesses, blind spots, preferences, motivators, leadership competencies and judgment. This is the type of information that is difficult to learn from interviews. The metrics derived from the assessments overlay the data extracted from the biographical materials and interviews, creating new data points. The comparisons made and the discussions that ensue further ensure a true positive and true negatives when making selection decisions.

Selection & the Talent Management Corridor

Ultimately, Selection within Strategic Talent Management is focused on building bench strength one individual at a time. A company can fully launch an effective recruiting process by engaging some of the company's stakeholders in the interview process. Panel interviews can be effective and peel back the layers of a candidate's experiences. And, unconventional touchpoints get you closer to a candidate's instinct, gut and purpose, therefore driving more-informed hiring decisions.



Talent Insight:

The best interview questions surface when the hiring committee members sit and share what they don't know, and wanted to know.

I always ask: "Why are you wondering about these topics? Ask about them directly."

Doubts and reservations about a candidate can be translated into curious questions that you ask the candidate directly.

