

# Blinded by The Light (of First Impressions)

## *Hiring As A Process, Not An End In Itself*

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As of this writing, I have attended 44 Bruce Springsteen concerts. It may seem like a lot, but I feel like an underachiever compared to New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who, as of Labor Day, had attended 130 Springsteen concerts.

My first was at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in the early 70s, near where I grew up (exit 16W off the New Jersey Turnpike; #157 off the Parkway). The most recent three concerts occurred in the space of less than a week during Springsteen's three Boston shows this past summer.

Knowing what this man can do on stage, my wife and I felt an obligation – to Rock and Roll and to parenting in general – to bring our three sons (ages 24, 22, and 20) to a concert. It took some persuading, but the boys did finally agree, although somewhat reluctantly.

As my youngest summed it up on the way to the concert, “How can a rock and roll guy *your* age be any good?”

Needless to say, and once the lights went down and The Boss took the stage, it didn't take long for the boys to agree that maybe, in this one isolated case, their old man was right. The “dinosaur” with the guitar seemed to have more

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energy than anyone, onstage or off, and my sons left with a very different impression than the one they came in with.

As it turns out, my boys aren't the only ones who are easily distracted by biases and first impressions. In hiring – and, in particular, interviewing – there is also a tendency to make a quick decision, whether as a company evaluating a candidate or vice versa.

In our experience, however, this is a mistake and one which can lead to less than optimal results.

Hiring should not be a rush to “the last man standing.” Rather, it should be a *process* for



*The Boss - Roskilde Festival  
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uncovering your *right* candidate. And so with that in mind, we recommend viewing the hiring process broadly, with the overall goal of pulling the pieces together into a thread which tells an accurate story and which secures the executive you want and need.

Here are three recommendations for ensuring that your executive hiring process unfolds as productively as possible:

### **1. Consider the Context**

First impressions matter. But they are just that, first impressions – they are by no means the entire story. One mistake made or action observed during an interview should not be enough to derail the candidate. By the same token, one brilliant comment shouldn't cause you to stop the interview and hire this person on the spot.

Consider the example of Jack, who was interviewing for a position as Chief of

after group (often back to back) as they moved him through the interview process. When we followed up the next day, some of the reports came back that Jack seemed “low energy.”

Understandably so! As we explained to our client, it's unreasonable to expect a candidate to be on his “A game” every moment, from start to finish, particularly in something as intense as an all day interview process. (Even Springsteen only plays for three and a half hours.) We flew Jack up a week later for a few additional meetings on a less compact schedule, and the concern about “low energy” went away.

Similarly, we've had candidates flagged in interviews for making a single offhand comment that was interpreted differently than it was meant. A candidate for a CFO position, for example, quipped, “Finance is my hobby.” He was trying to make the point that finance was his passion; one member of the hiring team, however, took it to mean that finance was something he didn't take seriously.

So yes, intuition matters. But unlike a presidential election where every slip-up is examined under a microscope, we want to create a hiring process through which organizations take a broader view and invite deeper thought and consideration.

After all, you're hiring people, not robots. You're looking for signs that the person sitting across the table can make a significant contribution to your organization for years to come.

### **2. Consider the Marketplace**

Hiring doesn't happen in a vacuum. The requirements of the position, the job location, the nature of your compensation package, and other environmental factors all have an impact on the number and type of candidates

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Radiology with a community hospital in Boston. On the day of the interview, and to accommodate his and the client's busy schedule, he woke up at 3 am to catch a plane from his home in D.C. Knowing Jack was flying in from another city, the client was understandably interested in having him meet as many people as possible during the day.

And so they scheduled lots of meetings. Over the next eight hours, Jack met with group

available. Filling that position requires an understanding of the marketplace and a pragmatic approach to finding your ideal candidate.

For certain positions – those within a highly specialized area and/or that require an uncommon and specific set of skills – the pool of qualified people will necessarily be smaller.

Note that this does not mean *settling* on a candidate who isn't appropriate for the job at hand. It does, however, mean being realistic about who's available and being clear about what's actually required for the job. If, for example, you're interviewing a CIO who's got all the skills you need, you may have to look past his long hair, even if that is not the norm for your organization.

Keep in mind as well that in a marketplace, candidates – especially the exceptional ones – also have options. They want to make the right choice, and if they're willing to talk to you, there's a high probability that they are



investigating other job possibilities. That means you are in competition with other organizations; it's critical to remember this as the interviewing process unfolds and adjust accordingly.

Take the example of Nancy, the COO at a small academic medical center who was

looking for the next career step. Our client was a larger, more prominent academic medical center and was in the market for a new COO. We had a hunch that Nancy would be a terrific candidate for this position. But we also knew that she was in the job market and wouldn't be available for long.

We suggested that our client adjust its standard interviewing timeline and process. They agreed and got Nancy in the door quickly. As a result, her interest was piqued, and she delayed making a decision regarding other opportunities. When the process concluded, she was hired.

The marketplace is continually changing, and it's important to align your requirements, your expectations, and your process with its realities.

### **3. Consider the References**

For many search teams, references are the final step – the closure to a long process, whose purpose is to validate the conclusion that's already been reached. We believe this is short-sighted and overlooks the true value of a reference as part of the vetting process.

After all, interviews, even a series of them, are at best predictors of future behavior based on how a candidate performs during the hiring process. There's a lot to be learned from these, of course, but it make sense to augment this information early in the process with insights from people who have actually worked with the candidate over a long period.

References can be particularly useful when trying to address a specific concern or a perceived shortcoming. In these cases, we'll typically contact the reference and explain that the search team likes the candidate but that they're trying to get a better understanding around whatever the issue is.

Linda, for example, was applying for a position as CNO with a multi-hospital system. One of the senior executives on the search team thought she was too much “in the details” and was ready to dismiss her early on as unable to see the “big picture.” We suggested speaking with a CEO for whom she had previously worked and who could speak to the concerns. The CEO offered that, while she may have been nervous in the interview, she had tremendous interpersonal skills and strategic vision (and he gave examples). They brought her back in and eventually hired her.

Keep in mind here as well that the references themselves can have biases and one piece of information should not be taken as absolute. Each is just another piece of data in creating an overall picture of a candidate.

At the risk of stating the obvious, people who interview well have a tendency to rise rapidly to the top of the interview pack and vice versa. But chances are you’re looking for a contributor, not a showman; interviewing skills are not what they are being hired for. So it’s important to balance

the bias inherent in the interviewing process with measures that reveal a candidate in a different way.

Summer is long gone, as are Springsteen concerts 42, 43, and 44. But they do live on as happy – and as it relates to hiring, important – memories. It’s as easy to prejudge a candidate as it is an aging musician, and in both cases our early assessments based on the “cover of the book” can be misleading.

A better approach, we believe, is to let things unfold and withhold judgment on a candidate – whether positive or negative – as far into the process as time and circumstances permit.

Consider the context, consider the marketplace, and take full advantage of the insights that only a past job reference can accurately provide. With that perspective in hand, you’ll be well-positioned to hire the best candidate for the job.

Rock on!

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