

Character counts: How to hire employees of integrity

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Staffing your administration and faculty with ethical employees will build your institution's positive reputation and improve outcomes.

Warren Buffet once remarked, "In looking for people to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. And if you don't have the first, the other two will kill you."

Strong character builds strong organizations. If your leaders are trustworthy, constituents are more likely to donate, campus experience is improved, and student and employee retention goes up. Your institution thrives. Integrity yields success.

Conversely, we have all seen the repercussions of a lack of character as organizations are damaged by financial mismanagement, abuse of power, or misconduct. Personal integrity has institutional implications. Hiring employees of poor character costs an organization. When that individual is a leader, the stakes become even higher.

Character expresses itself in countless ways that impact performance, from the hours an employee puts in, to the way he or she treats coworkers, to the way he or she responds in a crisis.

You can shape the skills of an [employee](#). You cannot conjure character. Administrators must bear this in mind during the hiring process. Character should be one of the aspects that is assessed throughout the interview. It is vital that employers not only seek employees with the requisite expertise, but also evaluate applicants based on their character.

In my work in higher education, I have helped colleges with hundreds of searches. I've seen colleges ignore red flags...to their regret. I've also seen organizations thrive when they prioritize character. Here are some of the most effective ways I have found to evaluate integrity in the hiring process:

1. Notice their interactions. Evaluation of a candidate begins the moment they walk through the door. How do they treat the receptionist who greets them? Are they courteous to those they don't think can benefit them? A person of character will respect every individual they meet, regardless of position. Integrity is not a performance staged for one's own advantage, but a way of life for others' advantage.

2. Consider their descriptions. People of character treat others fairly and generously. They take responsibility for their actions and are gracious toward the actions of others. How does the interviewee talk about their coworkers? Do they cast former supervisors in a negative light? Be aware if they shift blame elsewhere or if they make a point to honor the contributions of others.

3. Examine their process. Situational interview questions allow you to explore how a candidate approaches a problem. As you scrutinize a candidate's problem-solving skills, note what their approach reveals about their character. Are they only considering expediency or do they think more holistically about the way they tackle a challenge and the implications of their actions? A person of character will approach a challenge thoughtfully and ethically.

4. Listen to their references. A candidate will always cast themselves in the best light. References are your chance to audit their account. How do their references describe them? Do they only talk about their competence and experience or do they also describe their reliability, honesty, and investment in others? Those who have worked with an individual for a sustained duration are your best window into who they really are.

Valuing character does not stop once the hiring process ends. In addition to attracting employees with character, organizations should intentionally continue to foster a culture of character in their institution. Regular recognition and ongoing mentorship programs are key avenues to highlight and instill integrity among your employees. These programs set forward examples that inspire employees to continually mature in both their skills and character.

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