

Chapter **12****Red Flags** in the Process
Cannot Be Ignored

THE TIME SPENT IN COMMUNICATING with an applicant is brief. The opportunity to observe behavior is limited to the artificial environment of the face-to-face interview and a few phone calls. A “red flag” in this context is any negative behavior, however small, that shows up prior to an offer being made.

Think of your close observation as a lens through which you as the hiring manager can augment your microcosmic view. This can help the filtering process by allowing you to see another side of the candidate more clearly. We’ll talk about tests and other screening devices later. Right now, we’ll look at red flags—both small and large—that may emerge to disqualify an applicant and how to deal with them.

- *Even a small negative issue should be examined in the decision process. For example, let’s say a candidate is*

late for the appointment. Some managers may disqualify any candidate who shows up so much as a minute late—no excuses! Tardiness is a red flag, and if it is in the context of an interview it is a very serious matter. If you do accept an excuse, it had better be a good one: “I was stuck in traffic” is not a good excuse—the candidate should have anticipated that and planned to arrive on time despite traffic. “My car was hijacked,” on the other hand, is a pretty good excuse, but only if the candidate calls to tell you right after calling the police.

- *Vague answers usually mean a cover-up.* Here the red flag is either poor memory or poor results. People do not easily forget their achievements, but they will change the subject, answer with “I don’t recall,” or be otherwise evasive when they are not proud of the truth. If you say, “Our experience shows that strong college performers seem to do better in learning technical material required in selling this product. Was your GPA high?” “How high?” the candidate might ask. “We look for at least 3.0 or the equivalent. It could be a little lower if you worked your way through college.” “Gosh, I can’t remember what mine was,” the candidate says, not because he or she really doesn’t know, but because he or she really wasn’t a B student. The same thing applies to sales achievements: Anyone who has a solid record knows pretty much exactly what it was. In many occupations, competitive metrics count a great deal in job performance. Such numbers as call quantity, quality control of defect percentage, amount

of production, or other measurable results are counted to document productivity. These results are usually very well-known to those who are high achievers. The other side is that these numbers are often forgotten by those whose achievements were less admirable.

- *Good communication during the process predicts good communication after the hire.* Missed calls, excessive phone tag, and failure to call back are all signs that a person is just not as communicative as most managers expect their employees to be. Especially if the position you are hiring for is remote from the office or daily contact, you would want to make sure the person to be hired is an excellent and regular communicator. After the first interview, you might say, "After our meeting today, give me your thoughts about the job in an e-mail to me." A serious candidate will take this as an order and return a message at his or her earliest convenience. Not only can you determine interest in the job, but you can get a snapshot of future communication with that individual. A candidate who fails to pick up on the significance of your request for follow-up will likely be a non-communicator in the future.
- *Preparation for the interview is a good predictor of planning skills and style.* Ask, "So what did you do to get ready for this interview?" A good response would include coming with questions and doing at least a little research on the company. Lacking this sort of preparation, how well do you think the candidate would plan his or her work once hired? Many managers rightly expect the candidates to have been to the company

website. You will have the opportunity not only to see what their impressions are, but also to what extent they have any creative, insightful, or analytical ideas about your company. If you are interviewing for a product manager, you might be very specific in probing for the impressions one has from what he or she has seen at the site. For a finance position, ask what the person thinks of the statements available from web-based information. Stop and think: What sort of person, coming for an interview, would not do this kind of basic preparation? Someone you want on your team?

- *Even something as intangible as “energy level” can be determined* by asking the right questions and observing the candidate’s behavior. “This position involves a lot of walking and time standing. Tell me about some of your recreational activities over the past several weeks.” If a person says he or she has done nothing because there’s no time, that could mean low energy. Energetic people are usually involved in activities that require energy. Do they have to run marathons? Of course not. Even sedentary activities like playing bridge or chess, especially if it’s a regular activity, are good signs of an energetic person. Good posture, attentiveness, and a quick sense of humor are all signs of a higher energy level.
- *Try to separate hyperbole from lying.* Salespeople tend to exaggerate their successes and minimize their failures. Statements with very round numbers, such as, “I had a million-dollar increase in sales” are somewhat suspect,

whereas exact information, such as, “My increase in 2002 was \$973,000” is more likely to be accurate and can be verified with a document. If the person had one penny over a million, he or she might say, “My increase was over a million.” Is this significant? Maybe, maybe not. Look for patterns. If the same person who slightly inflated performance results also says something like, “I worked night and day for two weeks on that assignment,” you may begin to wonder where the hyperbole ends and lying begins. That’s your red flag.

- *Avoidance of specifics in recalling experience is a red flag.* Listen for answers that are generalities when you asked for specifics: “I usually try to talk to twenty or thirty clients a day” is rather vague, whereas the following is very specific: “My plan calls for seeing and or talking to thirty clients a day, and I regularly do that. My worst day was twenty-two a month ago, during a flood, but I offset that with a forty-two-call day last Thursday. I have a plan book on my computer planner to track this.”
- *Delays in accepting an offer are usually red flags.* If a person has been interviewing for several weeks and you finally make an offer, but then the candidate has to “think it over,” what does this say about commitment, interest, motivation, et cetera? Is he or she still trying to decide whether to take the job? Is he or she unhappy with the terms of the offer? Does he or she expect a counteroffer from a current employer? Of course, if a relocation is involved or if the hiring process developed suddenly and moved very rapidly, a solid candidate may indeed

need a little time to weigh the offer and everything a job change means. Considering that, remember that the most motivated and committed candidate will be ready to accept a reasonable offer (usually discussed prior to the actual offer) at the time that offer is made. Twenty-four hours is the standard for acceptance of an offer. Think about withdrawing an offer if a candidate cannot commit within that period.

- *Eliminate false red flags by probing.* Sometimes red flags are actually checkered flags—the flag of a winner—due to simple misunderstanding of facts.

Once a young man, we'll call him "Ralph," was coming to a company for a second round of interviews. The hiring manager was watching as Ralph crossed the parking lot on a cold, dark winter morning. The manager noticed the candidate made an abrupt turn and backtracked to a new Porsche 911 parked with the lights on. He saw the young man open the door and turn off the lights. Ralph then proceeded to the building for the interview. The hiring manager was colder in his attitude than he had been before. He recalled that early on Ralph had spoken of earning his way through school working nights and weekends. He said, "Ralph, tell me again about how your parents lacked money to send you to school and how you had to work hard for everything you have today."

"That's right. Sometimes I actually went without food. I worked at least forty hours a week throughout the year."

"We'll be in touch," said the manager as he closed the interview and sent Ralph on his way. "By the way, I like

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your car, had one myself—good German engineering!” Ralph grinned and said, “Yes, it is reliable!”

Ralph, the supposed fabricator, not a rich kid whose parents sent him to school or bought him that \$70,000 car, went out to the lot, got in his ten-year-old Volkswagen and drove off, never getting the job. The good Samaritan who turned out some rich guy’s Porsche lights did go on to great things, and the manager who failed to follow up on his concern missed out on an opportunity to hire a good employee.

