Can You Interview for Integrity?

Yes, and you don't need a lie detector to do it.

By William C. Byham

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After a thorough search for a new employee, one candidate has risen to the top, and he has the look of a winner. Impeccable résumé. Extensive relevant experience. Great interpersonal skills. Plenty of energy and enthusiasm. Great new ideas he's eager to set in motion.

So you hire him. And it turns out to be one of the biggest mistakes you've ever made.

That glowing individual, so impressive sitting across the conference-room table, lies to clients and misrepresents your products. He can't satisfactorily explain the irregularities in his expense reports. He backstabs co-workers and takes credit for work he didn't do.

You have to let him go. But in his wake the questions remain: How were we so misled and so wrong? Why couldn't we have seen what kind of person we were really hiring?

Scenarios like this one are all too familiar, perhaps painfully so. But in light of the numerous examples of illegal and unethical behavior that have garnered headlines in recent months and years, managers are more interested than ever in making sure that they hire people, for positions at all organizational levels, who are trustworthy and share the organization's ethical values.

But despite their interest in doing a better job of hiring for honesty and integrity, too many managers continue to believe that their hands are tied. This is a mistake: They can screen for integrity and ethical behavior when selecting new employees. It might be as simple as doing background checks and checking references-steps that many organizations had tended to skip in recent years but are resurrecting. Then there is the often-overlooked yet substantial information on ethical behavior that managers can obtain during the interviewing process-by having properly trained interviewers seek examples of how candidates have handled ethical situations in the past, and by having everyone who interviews a candidate share, cross-check, and evaluate the information.

"Doesn't Everyone Do It?"

Some people are understandably skeptical that dishonest and unethical individuals can be ferreted out simply by asking them questions about their past behavior. After all, won't a dishonest or unethical person just lie, anyway? Psychology suggests that the answer is no, they won't. People with low integrity tend to think that everybody else has the same degree or an even lower degree of integrity than they do; they readily admit to integrity lapses because they think that their behavior is normal and assume that the interviewer feels the same way.

I have seen this theory borne out many times in my own interviewing experiences and in those of others. On one occasion, I interviewed a prominent politician's administrative assistant who bragged about how she helped her boss pad his expense account. Another time, a candidate I interviewed for a sales position told me how he had obtained "gold status" on a major airline by taking needless flights-paid for out of his employer's travel budget.

The real key to effectively interviewing for integrity is seeking multiple examples of behaviors and asking probing follow-up questions that reveal the thinking behind the behaviors described. While integrity-focused questions need be only a small part of the
total interview, any ethical issues that arise must be explored fully so that the examples can be accurately evaluated and the best hiring decision reached.

**Timing Is Everything**

It is important to incorporate integrity questions into an interview — and equally important to know when to ask those questions. Interviewers are wise to save sensitive ethical questions for late in the interview, after rapport has been developed. And, of course, as with all interview questions, once you have asked an ethical question, remember to listen and respond with empathy.

Empathy does not mean acceptance or agreement — it means understanding. You can be empathetic with a person who is telling you about an unethical behavior, without having to bend or sacrifice your own ethical standards, by reflecting the interviewee's feelings (“So you felt really good after the presentation,” or “So you had second thoughts after the sales call”). And by showing empathy, you can keep the individual talking, providing other examples of behavior that will foster your understanding.

The recent bad behavior of high-profile executives has been nothing short of alarming. But it’s an alarm that conscientious managers needed to hear — and to heed. Organizations must have leaders and associates who will share and live their ethical values, and extra care must be taken to ensure that these individuals are the ones who are brought into the organization — and promoted.

**The Top 11**

The first step in an interviewing process to screen for honesty and integrity is for interviewers to ask the right questions. These questions need to be geared toward gathering information on past behaviors that illustrate whether a candidate's own ethical values are compatible with those of the organization.

Following is a list of questions, any of which could be incorporated into an interview to elicit examples of a candidate's past ethical behavior and to reveal insights about the candidate's honesty and integrity. While I’ve included 11 questions, most interview situations will dictate using only two or three such questions to obtain examples of past ethical behavior.

I’ve also given examples of good and questionable answers that candidates might give to these questions. The "rightness" or the "wrongness" of the answers is up to the interviewer's judgment. As such, it's important to train interviewers to follow up answers with more questions to pin down behavior and the thinking behind the behavior, to ask for additional examples, and to have a systematic integration of data so that multiple interpretations of the answers can be obtained and discussed.

1. "We are often confronted with the dilemma of having to choose between what is right and what is best for the company. Give at least two examples of situations in which you faced this dilemma and how you handled them."

**Good answer:** Once, we discovered a technical defect in a product after it had been shipped and used by a client. The client did not notice the defect. We debated whether to tell the client and admit we had made a stupid error, or just let things go because the client seemed to be using the product with no problem. We decided to tell the client and replace the product at no cost.

**Questionable answer:** We discovered that our sales clerks were making errors in charging for certain combinations of products and that the errors were almost always in favor of the company. In no way were the clerks encouraged or trained to make these errors. We also learned that, with training, the errors could be eliminated, but the training would be fairly expensive. I decided not to institute the training.
2. "How would you describe the ethics of your company? In which areas do you feel comfortable and uncomfortable with them? Why?"

**Good answer:** My company is extremely ethical, and I've never, ever run into a situation in which I disagreed with a decision made because of ethics. In fact, we bend over backward in the treatment of our customers—such as taking back out-of-date products and providing free service past warranty, whenever there is any question about our products and services.

**Questionable answer:** I'm not sure what the ethics of our company are. People seem to do what's necessary to get the job done.

3. "Give me an example of an ethical decision you have had to make on the job. What factors did you consider in reaching this decision?"

**Good answer:** We had a customer return a large shipment. While technically it was in the second quarter, it would have been very easy to move the revenue hit to the third quarter. Including it in the second quarter meant that we would not meet sales expectations. To me, it was a matter of borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, and we probably wouldn't meet our expectations the next quarter. Anyway, I felt that it was better to take the bad results when you were supposed to, rather than cook the books.

**Questionable answer:** I've never really had to make a tough decision regarding ethics.

4. "Have you ever observed someone stretching the rules at work? What did you do about it?"

**Good answer:** One of my fellow executives took a company car to use for a weekend vacation. I spoke to him, and he agreed that it was not right and that he would not do it again.

**Questionable answer:** Everybody stretches the rules sometimes.

5. "Have you ever had to bend the rules or exaggerate a little bit when trying to make a sale?"

**Good answer:** My experience is that when salespeople misrepresent products and services, customers buy less from them. Having credibility with customers brings in better long-term sales. For example, when I was selling servers, we had a proprietary server and operating system. The client asked me why my machine was really worth the higher cost. I listed the advantages and disadvantages, which indicated for him that the cheaper solution would work. I lost that sale but came back to win a much larger sale six months later.

**Questionable answer:** Sometimes when selling to a doctor, the doctor will state that he's heard that one of my products is effective against a certain disease. I listen and nod my head and say, "Interesting." I don't correct him even though I know that the drug is not recommended for that purpose. I'm not saying that it does work the way he thinks it does; I'm just not disagreeing with the doctor. You can't give advice to physicians.

6. "Have you ever been in a situation in which you had to make something seem better than it really was?"

**Good answer:** That's a big temptation in the high-tech field, particularly with new products. Often you know that there are errors in the program and that there are going to be some problems—what do you do? I try to be as honest as I can and give people realistic expectations.

**Questionable answer:** Our product has a very long sales cycle, and very often when we come out with a new release, it's not really done. It's "vaporware." We talk about it and sell it as if it were really done, with the expectation that by the time we make the sale and the client gets ready to have it installed, it will be ready. Most of the time we meet the client's deadlines, but we've had some really embarrassing situations when we didn't.
7. "Tell me about an instance when you’ve had to go against company guidelines or procedures in order to get something done."

**Good answer:** Like any manager, I move budget money around in order to get projects done with the resources that I have been allocated—for example, by reassigning people. That’s what managers are expected to do. You can’t precisely follow detailed budget allocations that are made six or nine months in advance.

**Questionable answer:** My wife works for one of our suppliers, and I actually buy things from her. This is technically in violation of company rules, but it doesn’t hurt anything, and, frankly, it’s the best product.

8. "We’ve all done things that we regretted. Can you give me an example that falls into this category for you? How would you handle it differently today?"

**Good answer:** When I first took over my job, I let seven people go without a whole lot of knowledge about their skills and contributions. Later I found that three of them were actually outstanding employees who should not have been let go. My jumping to conclusions hurt them and the company’s operations. It took us several years to replace their knowledge of our equipment.

**Questionable answer:** I’ve never regretted anything about business. It’s a game. I play the game to win.

9. "Have you ever had anyone who worked for you do or say something that was misleading to the company or to a client? How did you handle it?"

**Good answer:** I had a salesperson misrepresent a feature of one of our products in a presentation made to a client. I knew that the feature was important to the client. I asked the salesperson to meet again with the client to correct the misrepresentation, and I made a follow-up phone call to ensure that the discussion occurred.

**Questionable answer:** I was part of a sales presentation by one of my best salespeople to a very, very big client. In the presentation, the salesperson absolutely misrepresented one of our product’s features. It was an important misrepresentation because a competitor for that business had that feature. I sat through the rest of the meeting thinking about what to do but decided that I just couldn’t let the misunderstanding stand. So after we left the presentation, I asked him to call the client and clarify the situation. I think he did, but I’m not sure.

10. "There are two philosophies about regulations and policies. One is that they are to be followed to the letter; the other is that they are just guidelines. What is your opinion?"

**Good answer:** Regulations and policies are made for important reasons. A regulation seems to me to be stronger, and I feel that I follow all regulations, such as getting reports in at a certain time and accounting for expenses in a certain way. Policies are a little bit more indefinite. They express more of a guideline and a philosophy. There are circumstances when you fall into the "gray area" when applying a policy. When I have had questions, I’ve checked with my boss.

**Questionable answer:** In order to get things done, you can’t be held back by old-fashioned policies of your organization. You have to know what’s right and do the right thing. You have to have good ethics and make decisions based on those ethics. You may have to bend the rules sometimes.

11. "Have you ever felt guilty about receiving credit for work that was mostly completed by others? If so, how did you handle it?"

**Good answer:** I frequently encounter this situation. By nature of being the boss, I get the credit for many of the things that my people do. I try my best to redirect that credit to them. For example, I insist that everyone who works on a proposal has her name on that proposal. We have celebrations when we win a contract at which we particularly point out the contributions of various people.
Questionable answer: No, I've never felt guilty. The person at the top gets credit when things go well, and he gets the blame when things go poorly. It's the nature of the job.

Interviewers should gather multiple examples from each question by employing a simple follow-up query: "Can you give me another example?" This will tell the interviewer whether the dishonest or unethical behavior was a one-time event or if there is a pattern. Also, interviewees tend to be more truthful in later examples than they are in their first example, which may be more of a PR effort.

Finally, it is vitally important for the interviewer to pin down the circumstances of the behavior so that a fair evaluation can be made. Interviewers do this by seeking the situation or task in which the behavior occurred, the actions of the individual, and the results from that action. If an interviewer doesn't have all three of these elements, it's very easy to misinterpret the response.

A candidate might relate a story in which he had to "bend the rules" on what could be put on his expense account. At first blush, this might seem like a negative behavior, but when you fully understand the circumstances-for example, "There was an opportunity to obtain some critical competitive information" and the result "that a project launch was more successful"-a different interpretation might be appropriate.

For example, when I was working as an industrial/organizational psychologist at J.C. Penney, a professional acquaintance at Sears offered to share some information on his company's selection system for management trainees. He loved to eat and drink, so I took him out for a nice lunch with wine when I flew to Chicago to meet him. He gave me two suitcases of research reports that catapulted my work ahead. I didn't have to make the same mistakes that Sears had made. The meeting and lunch were certainly worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to J.C. Penney. However, my company had a very low expense cap for taking people to lunch and refused to reimburse any alcoholic beverages. With my boss's knowledge and approval, I covered the difference elsewhere on the expense form.

Once you have uncovered examples of questionable behavior, be sure to accurately report the candidate's response to the others who have interviewed the same candidate when you meet to compare notes and arrive at a hiring decision. By obtaining multiple perspectives, you can better understand the examples' importance and check your standards before arriving at a final decision. This sharing and open discussion is a crucial step, as ethical behavior is best evaluated by a consensus decision among several knowledgeable managers.

Yes, you can interview for honesty and integrity. What's more, it's critically important that you do.

**Why You Need to Read Between the Lines**

While interviews can uncover examples of a candidate's past unethical behavior or his lack of integrity, employers also are wise to closely scrutinize résumés. Studies find that 40 to 60 percent of résumés contain meaningful errors, such as dramatically inflated education, experience, or employment history.

These statistics and examples are hard to ignore, and demand that employers examine résumés with greater care.

Short of doing a background check before you interview an individual, there is little you can do about errors on résumés until you get into the interview. Then there are two things you can do.

First, look for holes, obvious or not, in the candidate's employment record and ask about those omissions.

Second, assign at least one interviewer to do a thorough review of the person's work or education record, asking questions like, "How did you get the job?" "What did you do?" "Why did you leave?" and, "How did you leave?" All dates should be verified. Often at this point an interviewee admits that perhaps the way that he presented information in the résumé is misleading: He didn't really graduate-he just attended courses; his title was sales manager but he didn't manage anybody. Often such education/job reviews are "assigned" to someone from HR and are done over the phone as part of a screening process. The interviewer covers the areas in a friendly way-"I just want to be sure that we're clear on everything so we can set you up for success if you come in for one-to-one interviews."
Sometimes dates don't line up for good reasons. For example, a candidate could show the date he received his master's degree well into the time that his résumé would indicate that he was living in another town and had a full-time job. The reason may well be that the university awards degrees only at certain times but the candidate finished his coursework for his master's degree months or even a year earlier. You should go over the dates with him and offer the chance to explain these discrepancies. Don't take action on a discrepancy without giving the candidate an opportunity to explain it.

Ultimately, recruiters and hiring managers must judge for themselves how important a particular résumé error is. But certainly the intentional deletion of critical information or inclusion of misinformation is a telling sign about what kind of person the candidate really is.

-W.C.B.

The Art of the Ego Boost
People don't want to look bad in an interview and will very naturally put their best foot forward. An effective interviewer makes the interviewee feel at ease in giving what potentially could be negative information about himself. The interviewer does this in three ways:

- Provide a rationale for talking about poor or unethical behavior prior to asking a question. For example, "Everyone in an organization breaks the rules sometime. Can you tell me about some times when you've broken the rules?" With the opening phrase, the interviewer is giving an excuse to the interviewee up-front to offer an example of negative behavior.

- Help the interviewee maintain self-esteem when the interviewee has offered a behavior about which she is embarrassed or uncertain (e.g., the interviewee admits she got in trouble for overstating a product's functionality). The interviewer should help the individual rationalize the behavior disclosed by saying something like, "We all make mistakes sometimes, and at least they provide an opportunity for learning" or, "That's a common mistake made by new people in sales." Such post-confession affirmation maintains self-esteem and keeps the individual talking and providing information that will help the evaluation of ethical behavior.

- Do not take notes on negative behaviors at the time the interviewee shares the information. If the interviewer begins to write on his notepad, it is doubtful that the candidate will continue to open up or give additional, meaningful examples. Rather, the interviewer should just remember the negative behavior and later on in the interview, when the subject is more positive, write down a few notes.

-W.C.B.