

JOHN'S DESK

Before You Hire

21 Questions Every Business Owner Should Answer

The expensive hiring mistakes rarely begin with the candidate. They begin with a question the business never stopped to ask.

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BEFORE THE FIRST INTERVIEW

Hiring starts long before you meet a candidate.

Most hiring advice begins too late. It starts with job descriptions, interview questions, sourcing channels, and offers. Those things matter. But they cannot rescue a decision built on a false assumption.

A business feels pressure. Someone leaves. Growth accelerates. Customers complain. The owner is pulled back into work they thought they had escaped. 'We need to hire' becomes the answer before anyone has agreed on the problem.

That is where expensive mistakes begin. The company searches for a person when it needs clearer ownership. It replaces an employee when the system made success unlikely. It hires for responsibilities no one has translated into outcomes. It wins a candidate and loses them during the first 90 days because the business was never ready to let them lead.

The 21 questions in this guide are not a checklist to complete. They are seven decisions to work through with your leadership team before urgency narrows your thinking.

Better people decisions build better businesses. But the better decision is not always to hire.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Take one decision at a time. Write down where the leadership team disagrees. The disagreement is not an obstacle to the process; it is often the most valuable thing the process reveals. Do not post the role until the business can answer the questions with evidence, not confidence.

DECISION 01

Stop. Why Are You Really Hiring?

Can I tell you what I have seen happen over and over again? An owner calls and says, 'John, I need another operations person.' I ask why. The answer is usually some version of, 'Everybody is buried.' So we start pulling the work apart. One manager is assigning everything. Another keeps changing the priorities. The owner jumps in whenever a customer gets loud.

Three people are doing pieces of the same job, and nobody is sure who gets the final say. They do not have a headcount problem. They have a clarity problem. Another employee would not fix that. The new person would simply become the fourth person caught in it. This is the moment when hiring feels productive because it is easier than admitting the way the work is organized no longer works.

Here is the test I use. Ask each leader in the room why the company needs this person, and do not let them hear one another's answers first.

You may get three completely different jobs. Sales thinks the hire will fix follow-up.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Pressure is real. That does not mean the answer is another person. Before you open a job, name the problem without using the words 'busy,' 'overwhelmed,' or 'need help.' If you cannot do that, you are not ready to hire.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- Why are we really hiring?
- Are we growing, or have we simply allowed busy to become normal?
- What would we fix first if hiring were not an option?

MY TAKE

A new employee will not fix a problem you are unwilling to name. They will inherit it.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE Finish this sentence with your leadership team: 'We are hiring because _____ is keeping us from _____. ' If the answers are different, stop. That disagreement is the work.

DECISION 02

Waiting Is a Decision.

I have watched owners leave a key seat open because waiting looked cheaper. The salary stayed in the bank, so the vacancy did not feel expensive. Meanwhile, the owner was back in the weeds. A dependable employee was quietly doing two jobs. Customer calls took longer to return. Projects that mattered kept moving to next week.

Nobody put those costs on a spreadsheet because they did not arrive as an invoice. But the business was paying every day. Then, after months of strain, the company rushed. The person they hired was not the right person. They were simply the first person who made the pain stop. That is the part owners miss: waiting too long does not only cost money. It changes the quality of the decision you make next.

I also ask owners to look at what the vacancy is teaching the team. If your strongest employee keeps absorbing abandoned work, you are not only risking burnout.

You are teaching that competence is rewarded with more weight and no finish line. If the owner keeps stepping in, the company is learning that every important problem still belongs at the top.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

You are never choosing between hiring and spending nothing. You are choosing which cost you are willing to carry: the open seat, the wrong person, or the right investment made at the right time.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- What is this empty seat costing us every week?
- Who is paying the price even though it is not showing up on payroll?
- If we wait another 60 days, will we make a better decision or a more desperate one?

MY TAKE

An empty seat is not free. The bill is just scattered across the business.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE For one week, track every hour, delay, customer issue, and missed opportunity connected to the vacancy. Then compare that number with the cost of acting.

DECISION 03

Do Not Replace the Person. Fix the Job.

Someone leaves and the first instinct is predictable: pull out the old job description and get it posted. I understand the urgency. I also think it is one of the easiest ways to repeat a mistake. I worked with a company that wanted to replace a leader who had struggled. On paper, the job looked fine. In reality, the person was accountable for results but needed the owner's approval for every meaningful decision.

The team could go around them. Priorities changed depending on who talked to the owner last. The company believed it had hired the wrong leader. Maybe it had. But it had also built a job that made strong leadership almost impossible. Putting a better person into the same setup would not have been a solution. It would have been a more expensive rerun.

The same thing happens when a company builds a job around the person who used to hold it. Over the years, that employee collected responsibilities because they were capable, available, or simply there.

The job became a history of favors and workarounds. Then the person leaves, and the company goes looking for another human Swiss Army knife.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

A resignation gives you something rare: a clean chance to question the job itself. Do not waste it by assuming the chair is fine and only the person was wrong.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- What made the last person harder to succeed than it should have been?
- If we built this role today, what would we remove, add, or move somewhere else?
- Will this person have the authority to match the accountability we give them?

MY TAKE

Sometimes the person failed the job. Sometimes the job was built to fail the person.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE Put the old job description away. On a blank page, write the five decisions this role must own. If the owner still owns all five, you are not hiring a leader.

Stop Hiring for Tasks. Start Hiring for Outcomes.

I have read thousands of job descriptions. Most tell me everything the person will do and almost nothing about what the business needs them to change. Manage the team. Oversee operations. Build relationships. Prepare reports. Fine.

But why does the job exist? I once watched a hiring team interview several candidates for a leadership role. Every candidate could say they had managed people, handled budgets, and improved service. The team still could not decide. That was not a candidate problem. The company had never agreed on the outcome. Did it need someone to rebuild a team? Protect margin? Get the owner out of daily operations? Those are different jobs, even if the title is the same. When success is unclear, the smoothest interview usually wins.

Outcomes also change the questions you ask. Instead of 'Have you managed a team?' you can ask, 'Tell me about a team that was underperforming when you inherited it.'

What did you see first? What changed? Who did not make it? What were the numbers six months later?' Now you are not collecting claims. You are looking at judgment, sequence, courage, and results.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Responsibilities tell a person where they will spend time. Outcomes tell them why the business is willing to pay for that time. If you do not define the second one, you will hire based on familiarity and personality.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- What must be measurably better 12 months after this person starts?
- Which three outcomes matter more than the other twenty things on the job description?
- What proof would show a candidate has produced those outcomes before?

MY TAKE

If you cannot describe what winning looks like, do not blame the candidate when you both lose.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE Delete every responsibility from the job description for ten minutes. Write three sentences that begin: 'One year from now, this person will have...' Build the interview around those answers.

DECISION 05

Would You Take This Job?

Owners naturally look at a role from inside the business. They see the need, the opportunity, and the future they are trying to build. A strong candidate sees something else. They see the risk of leaving a job where they already have credibility.

They see an owner who may or may not give up control. They see a team they did not choose and problems they did not create. I have presented good opportunities that still were not recruitable. The expectations were high, the authority was fuzzy, and the reason to move came down to, 'We are a great company.' That is not enough. A candidate with options is asking a harder question: Why should I take on your problems instead of staying where I am? If your answer is a title and a paycheck, five other companies can say the same thing.

This is where honesty becomes an advantage. I have seen candidates lean into difficult roles when the owner said, plainly, 'Here is what is broken.'

Here is why I have not fixed it. Here is what you will own, and here is where I will get out of your way.' That is believable.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

The best candidate is evaluating you as seriously as you are evaluating them. A hard job can be compelling. A vague promise is not.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- **Would our best current employee honestly want this job?**
- **Why should a strong candidate choose us over five other companies calling them this month?**
- **What part of this opportunity are we tempted to soften because the truth is uncomfortable?**

MY TAKE

You are not the only one making a hiring decision. The candidate is deciding whether to hire you, too.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE Write two honest paragraphs: 'The reason to take this job is...' and 'The reason a smart person might say no is...' Use both in the search.

DECISION 06

Stop Letting the Best Interview Win.

I have sat through interview debriefs where everyone liked the candidate and nobody could explain why. One person liked the energy. Another liked the industry background. Someone else said, 'I can see them fitting in here.' Then I ask the question that changes the room: What did we actually learn that proves this person can solve the problem? Too often, the answer is not much. A polished candidate knows how to create confidence.

Confidence is not evidence. The danger gets worse when the hiring team never agreed on what it was looking for. Each interviewer grades a different test, then everyone compares feelings afterward. That is not a process. It is a collection of impressions wearing business clothes.

The best interviews can actually be the most dangerous. A practiced candidate understands pacing, eye contact, stories, and how to make the room feel comfortable.

None of that is bad. But it creates a halo around everything else.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Decide what proof matters before you meet anyone. Otherwise, you will change the standard to fit the person you like most.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- What evidence must a candidate give us before we can say yes?
- Which requirement would we suddenly ignore for someone we personally liked?
- Who owns the final decision when the interview team disagrees?

MY TAKE

Chemistry can start a conversation. It should never finish the decision.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE Before the first interview, list five things the team must prove. Give each interviewer one. Ban the phrase 'good fit' unless the speaker can explain exactly what it means.

DECISION 07

The Search Is Over. The Risk Is Not.

Companies put enormous energy into finding the right person, then act as if the hard part ends when the offer is signed. I have watched strong leaders start with no clear priorities, no scheduled time with the owner, and three different versions of what they were hired to fix. Long-time employees were never told why the role existed. Decisions that supposedly belonged to the new leader kept finding their way back to the owner.

A few months later, people started asking whether the hire was working out. That is a convenient question because it puts the whole burden on the new person. The harder question is whether the business ever made room for them to succeed. Onboarding is not paperwork. It is the moment the company proves whether the opportunity it sold was real.

Before the person starts, I want the owner to answer a blunt question: what are you prepared to stop doing? If the new operations leader owns scheduling, will you stop changing the schedule directly with employees? If the new sales leader owns the pipeline, will you stop making side deals that never enter the system? If the answer is no, tell the candidate. Do not promise a seat and then keep sitting in it.

The first 30 days should remove mystery. Who has influence that does not appear on the organization chart? Which customer relationship is fragile? What promise was made to the team? Where has the company tried this before? Those are the things a new leader needs.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

You can hire the right person and still create the wrong result. The business has to change, too. Authority must move. Information must be shared. Old habits have to stop.

THREE QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE YOUR TEAM

- What does this person need to know that nobody has written down?
- Which decisions are we truly prepared to let them make without us?
- What must change in our own behavior for this hire to work?

MY TAKE

A great hire cannot succeed in a business determined to keep working exactly the way it did before they arrived.

DO THIS BEFORE YOU HIRE Build the first 30 days around access, people, and decisions - not forms. Schedule the owner meetings now. Name the decisions transferring on day one. Tell the team what is changing and why.

THE DECISION BEFORE THE SEARCH

If the team cannot agree, do not hide the disagreement inside a job posting.

A strong search does not begin when the role goes live. It begins when the leadership team can explain why the role exists, what will change because of it, what evidence matters, and what the business must do differently to make the hire successful.

THE 21-QUESTION DECISION

- 1 Why are we really hiring?
- 2 Are we growing, or have we simply allowed busy to become normal?
- 3 What would we fix first if hiring were not an option?
- 4 What is this empty seat costing us every week?
- 5 Who is paying the price even though it is not showing up on payroll?
- 6 If we wait another 60 days, will we make a better decision or a more desperate one?
- 7 What made the last person harder to succeed than it should have been?
- 8 If we built this role today, what would we remove, add, or move somewhere else?
- 9 Will this person have the authority to match the accountability we give them?
- 10 What must be measurably better 12 months after this person starts?
- 11 Which three outcomes matter more than the other twenty things on the job description?
- 12 What proof would show a candidate has produced those outcomes before?
- 13 Would our best current employee honestly want this job?
- 14 Why should a strong candidate choose us over five other companies calling them this month?
- 15 What part of this opportunity are we tempted to soften because the truth is uncomfortable?
- 16 What evidence must a candidate give us before we can say yes?
- 17 Which requirement would we suddenly ignore for someone we personally liked?
- 18 Who owns the final decision when the interview team disagrees?
- 19 What does this person need to know that nobody has written down?
- 20 Which decisions are we truly prepared to let them make without us?
- 21 What must change in our own behavior for this hire to work?

If one question exposes uncertainty, stay with it. That may be the question that saves you from solving the wrong problem with the wrong person.

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