Here's the Single Top Indicator of a Great Hire

As a CTO with one of the largest technology teams in Los Angeles, I do a lot of hiring. I am asked all the time what I look for in hiring talent — especially given the highly competitive technical recruiting environment. In the past, my response to "what is the ideal candidate" has typically been: I look for engineers that have or want an understanding of business. It's great to have developers understand the business needs of a technical solution. It motivates them and helps ensure they have the full picture. Plus, engineers are curious by nature, and that should be nurtured. I have loved this answer for many years, and I still do. But it's no longer the top quality I look for.

During my career, I have worked in fast paced startups, large public companies, and government. So I have seen the full spectrum of employee motivation — from "stock-optioned late night code warriors" to "out at three cube-dwelling sloths." I see all types of motivation in all organizations. Startups don't have a lock on warriors, nor are large institutions filled with sloths.

So how do you find the motivated ones?

Look for ownership. A sense of ownership is the only universal trait I have ever found in the best team members. I honestly cannot think of any other shared trait across all our best team members. If a system goes down, it hurts. If a new feature is needed, they are working 24/7 to get it done. During lunch, they are talking about their "baby" — not their child, their product. People who honestly feel that what they work on is theirs simply work harder. I would take an average engineer who feels ownership over a rock star any day. They also have the added benefit of staying with you longer, while the apathetic rock star jumps every two years.

And how do you find ownership in an interview?

We are often taught to stay away from people who say, "my, my, my." It's a sign they are not great team players. They may also have an over-inflated sense of self-worth. But in certain circumstances, it may be just what you're looking for. Ask questions about projects the candidate was on for a long time. Do you hear tedium or pride? "Did you have a difficult time handing it off and why?" You're looking for signs of emotion, not details of documentation. If they have been with a company for a long time, ask "What will be the most difficult part in leaving your current job?" Listen for the baby.

Building ownership within your team is equally important. It's difficult for leaders to give up their sense of ownership, but it's extremely important to pass it on. I have my babies for sure, but when talking about them, I refer to the people that work on the projects. I take pride in my team. I am often pushed to allow engineers to move around because they can become bored. It is true, and we do allow for this. But I am always looking for the person who wants to stay put. That's not to say people who move around don't have ownership, theirs is just short term. Be careful when you witness what would typically be considered bad behavior. Frustration and even anger may be signs of a bad apple, but they can equally be signs of your best people.

Reward ownership. You don't need to be a pre-IPO startup with options. Make ownership part of the review and compensation process. I measure it like this: If John's sense of ownership is equal to my

own, it frees me up from worrying about that product. John should be compensated for that — and down the line in similar fashion. Alternatively, if I'm concerned about a database, for example, that DBA must lack ownership and should not be compensated.

As a final note: I always edit my articles and speeches replacing the word "I" with "we." I don't think I will do that this time. Ownership.

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