



5 Proven Tips to Ace a Key Senior Hire the First Time

- Steve Sanduski: My guest today is Craig Coleman. Craig, welcome to the show.
- Craig Coleman: Thanks, Steve. It's a real pleasure to be here.
- Steve Sanduski: We're excited to have you here, and we've got another great topic here on the podcast. Today we want to talk about how to get it right when making a senior hire. As we all know, having the right people on the team is absolutely critical, job one, to building a successful company. This is certainly an important topic. I'm excited to be sharing with it. Let me start with that broad question. How do we get it right when making a senior hire?
- Craig Coleman: Sure. Look, what I would say is, and like you said, Steve, is first and foremost an entrepreneur has got to have a powerful vision and a commitment. After that, the people you hire in these senior roles, they're the ones that are going to have the biggest impact on whether you succeed and fail. To me, it's all about having a methodical and an intentional process to try to be successful the first time.
- Steve Sanduski: When you talk about this vision, the entrepreneur, the founder of the company, they've got a vision. Then when they're trying to make this hire, so we've got a candidate that we're talking to, how can you tell as the founder, the CEO, maybe what kind of questions can you ask or how can you discern through this interview process that the person you're interviewing will actually share your vision for your company?
- Craig Coleman: What I always found is that there's a point in the interview where you really want to share that vision with the candidate. As an entrepreneur, as the CEO, presumably, you're the most passionate person delivering that vision. To me, I was always looking for the response in the candidate. Does it look like it's getting them excited? It's not just their physical cues, but then what are they saying verbally? Does it really sound like something they want to be on board with? At the end of the day, as you know, you're presenting this vision. You're

just telling by the reaction if you're enrolling folks and if they're getting excited. That's always been to me the real test of whether the vision could be shared with the potential candidate.

Steve Sanduski: We also talk a lot about the importance of a cultural fit. Certainly, being in alignment with the vision is one piece of that, but what are some other things that you can look at and maybe questions that you can ask of this candidate to try and understand whether they're going to be a cultural fit for your organization?

Craig Coleman: That's a great question. I think it's important to say at the outset that the cultural fit is really non-negotiable. I can't say enough. Don't sacrifice a cultural fit just because you think that the skills that the candidate are super strong. You just end up with a talented person in your organization who's just upsetting the apple cart and has to go. What I do for the culture fit and would recommend is when you're going through that interview process, and you've narrowed down your finalists, I think it's important to have the candidate interview with other members of your senior team. Have them talk to the candidate about the job that you need the candidate to do and how he's planning to get that job done. Also, this is a way to get your team's assessment of whether they feel like this candidate is the right fit for your culture and your company, whether they think the candidate can succeed there. You're ultimately getting the team's buy-in in your hiring decision.

I think making sure that the candidate meets and spends time with your senior team is a big way to check for culture fit. I also really do recommend the assessment tools. The personality assessment tools can be a great way to see how this candidate is going to fit in with your team.

Steve Sanduski: Do you have a particular assessment tool that you usually use?

Craig Coleman: I really recommend the talent insights profile. That's the one that we used at my company for all of our sales hires, for all of our senior hires. It's based on the DiSC assessment methodology. It tells you how the candidate approaches challenges. It tells you the style that they use to influence people. It tells you the pace at which they're comfortable working and also how they handle rules and procedures. It gives you this both when the candidate is in a normal context and also when they're under pressure. It also tells you what motivates the candidate. This is a statistically validated assessment tool. It's really valuable to have that information on the candidate in advance.

Steve Sanduski: Then how much weight do you place on that talent insights profile? You say you get this typically ahead of time, prior to meeting with them. Is it used as a tool to basically confirm what you're hearing and seeing in the face-to-face conversation? Could it be a deal breaker? How much weight is actually placed on this talent insights profile?

Craig Coleman: Let me back up and say one thing. I don't typically get it necessarily ahead of time in the interview. I'll get it during the interview. Having that knowledge as you continue through the hiring process is really what I'm talking about. In terms of the weight, I would never use it as the sole basis for a hiring decision. I don't think it's really necessarily there for a go or no-go decision. Rather, it's really there to understand the candidate's strengths and weaknesses. It gives you a sense of how you can work most effectively with the candidate and how your team can work most effectively with the candidate.

Steve Sanduski: Now you also talked a minute here ago about how you will have this candidate interview with various people on your leadership team. Now do you leave it up to each of those people to handle the interview process the way they want, or do you have more of a structure where you say Mike, you're going to be the bad cop? You're going to talk about these things. Joe, you're going to be the good cop. You're going to talk about this. Pat over here is going to talk about a cultural fit. Do each of them have defined roles? Do you each ask similar questions to see if there's congruence in their answers, or how do you handle the multiple people doing the interviews?

Craig Coleman: That's a great question. I don't divide and conquer in the way you were asking. What we do have or what I did have with my team was the question we would always ask, and it's the same question I'm asking in the interview. You start out by defining success, what this candidate needs to achieve and the time in which they need to achieve it. You define the context in what they're working, the resources that they're going to have available to them, budget, people and infrastructure. Then you want to hear the candidate talk about how they're going to be able to accomplish that objective. When I had my senior team interviewing a candidate everyone would follow that process in asking that question. Beyond that everybody had their different ways of teasing out cultural fits. I think it was important to let people take different approaches. Then where you really are getting that consensus is when you huddle back up, and you compare notes.

Steve Sanduski: Now have you found some other questions that have been really insightful when you're asking these questions of the potential candidates, these interview questions? Do you have maybe a bank of questions that you tend to draw from that you could share?

Craig Coleman: I'm always asking them why they do what they do, why they are in that particular field and getting a sense of their passion for that field. I'm always asking what they're looking for in their next opportunity and really want to get a sense of that before we get into too many specifics about the job at hand. To me, what's most important is really, again, basically defining what success is going to be in this position and defining the tools they're going to have at their disposal and then asking them how they would go about getting that done. That, to me, is what makes the interview process so valuable. I also feel like it's what makes multiple interviews, meaning interviewing multiple candidates also

valuable because it's like you're getting four or five, six different opinions from someone with expertise. You're getting six different opinions on how they would essentially achieve what you want to achieve in your business.

Steve Sanduski: Then how about background checks. You're done the interview process and things are looking good. I'm assuming you do some kind of background check. If so, can you describe that, and how do you ensure that when you're getting a background check that people are giving you real insightful information as opposed to just saying something nice because they don't want to get sued?

Craig Coleman: Sure. First of all, we'll do the background that's about a criminal history. That will be with an agency. It's a pretty standard process of database crosschecks and the like. In terms of checking their references, I'm really, of course, looking for congruence with what I've found in that candidate, whatever I've arrived, determined is making that candidate an attractive hire. One of the things I'm always trying to do in that reference call is first of all frame the discussion in a way that really encourages the reference to be candid. For instance, I may say, Candidate X is super talented, but I really want to make sure he or she is the right fit for our organization, or it's going to be really disruptive for him or her. It's going to be really disruptive for us as a company, so just trying to tee it up so that a overly glowing reference isn't going to be in the candidate's best interest.

Another way to go at that, Steve, is if you can use your network to get backdoor, back channel references on a candidate, that's always extremely helpful. I do think it's important to try to get to someone who the candidate has reported to directly, something that's going to parallel the same hierarchy you're going to have in your company. Getting to that person and getting their feedback is what I think is most important.

Steve Sanduski: Craig, you've been a founder. You've been a CEO, and now you are coaching other founders and CEOs. In your vast experience in working with other successful entrepreneurs and CEOs have you noticed some characteristics, some common characteristics of these folks that you think leads to their success? Then when you're in this interview process are you able to may tease those out and see if the candidate that you're talking to actually exhibits maybe one, or two, or three of these characteristics that you have found to be common among other successful leaders?

Craig Coleman: That's a great question. What I would say is what I'm really looking for is a strong results orientation. I want to see that on the resume, and I want to hear that in the interview. When I've seen the folks that are successful in these senior positions and CEO, it's that results orientation that really differentiates them. A senior person should be able to connect the dots in terms of their experience to what they accomplished in a quantifiable way and how that then impacted the overall organization. If they're not connecting those dots on their resume or in their conversation, then they're clearly not connecting them in their mind. That,

to me, is a real red flag. You want the person with that really strong results orientation.

The other thing I'm actually listening to or listening for is a little bit of humility, which may seem maybe a little bit paradoxical, but a little bit of humility in there because there's going to be ... In any of these positions there's going to be some risks. There's going to be some trial and error. There's got to be an openness to new ideas and input. I'm looking for someone who can talk about their experience and their accomplishments in a way that doesn't give the message that they think they know everything but that they feel that they got there because of their results orientation and because of their openness to fresh ideas and their incorporation of feedback and the like. I think those are two really key components that you want to see in a successful candidate.

Steve Sanduski: It's funny that you should mention humility because just today I read a quote from C.S. Lewis. He said, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less often." I think that's an important distinction there. I think it's nice that you just mentioned the importance of humility. It's not a sign of weakness. It's actually a sign of strength.

Craig Coleman: I believe it absolutely is. It's a doorway that really allows someone, I think, to pursue continuous self-improvement. If you don't have that humility, I think it can really stand in the way. The flip side of that is probably what you'd call arrogance. I think getting arrogance in a senior member of your team or in CEO, I think, is one of the worst traits you can have and one of the most destructive to an organization's overall goals.

Steve Sanduski: For sure. You also mentioned having this results orientation. Obviously, that's critical, but here's the tricky part is in the interview process how do you determine whether the results that this person says they achieved were actually generated by that person and as a direct result of that person versus maybe they were part of a team that did this, or maybe they're puffing up their role. How do you really dig down to know that this is the person who actually drove those results?

Craig Coleman: That's a great question. I'm always asking clarifying questions. We had just talked about humility, but there will be times when I say ... Somebody who is humble will often use the word we to talk about what was a group effort. I'll invite them to distinguish what they actually did versus what they delegated. I'll even say something like, don't be modest. Please tell me exactly what your role in this was and the role of others. I'm really listening and really asking those clarifying questions for exactly what you described, Steve, because a lot of times what's happening in a hiring situation, I've found, especially working with entrepreneurs, is often the candidate coming from a larger organization.

They may be coming into a smaller organization, not necessarily a tiny organization but smaller than the one from where they came. It's incredibly

important. If you need someone who's going to be rolling up their sleeves, it's incredibly important as they talk about their experience, their accomplishment, for you to differentiate, again, what they actually did versus what they delegated or what others somewhere else in the organization did. It's a really important nuance. That's a big part of the interview, is to dig into that.

Steve Sanduski: You made another really important point there when you talked about how one of the ways that we can really build our companies faster is to hire people that have been there, done that. You mentioned often times we'll be hiring people that are coming from bigger companies. They might be moving to ours, which is a smaller organization because we want someone who's already made that big leap, that's done that big jump in the size of the company. It's so critical, as you were saying, that we've got to make sure that if we're getting a big company guy or a big company gal, that this is someone who can get in the trenches and isn't some kind of prima donna that is going to where's my staff? I used to have these people that would do all this stuff for me. Why do I have to do all this stuff? It is a good strategy to get people that have been there, done it, but it's critical to identify who can actually then make that leap to the smaller organization and help take it to that big size again.

Craig Coleman: I totally agree. Really, I got two reactions. One is that goes back to the interview process. Prior to the interview you, the CEO, really defining what success is in this position, what you want this person to achieve and by when. That can be a near-term, mid-term and long-term goal and then really defining the context. Here's what you're walking into. Here are the resources you have, really framing it so that now as they talk to you about what they can do, they're working within that context. You really want to listen to what they're talking about and what they're talking about doing. It can get subtle. For instance, they may be assuming that you capture data that's going to give them a baseline that you don't capture.

If they do have some budget to make hires, they may be assuming that there's an in-house recruiter who's going to create the job description and run the ads and do the initial screening. If you don't have any head infrastructure, you've got to make sure that's clear in that interview, in that conversation, so that you understand can this person function in this smaller company environment? Then the other, I think, step to follow in terms of really trying to get to the bottom of that question is with the reference. The same thing with the reference when you're talking to that reference is look, here's what we want this person to accomplish in our organization. Here is what they're walking into in terms of the context, the resources and tools available to them. Do you think this is something they can do successfully, or have they done anything like this successfully in your organization when they reported to you? Trying to check that with the reference, I think, is the other way to try to button it up.

Steve Sanduski: I love how you framed that because as we started off a little bit earlier talking about how when you do these reference checks, if you don't do it very well,

then the person that you're trying to get the reference from, they're going to clam up. They're going to say a bunch of generic stuff that's of no value. If you frame it the way that you just did, and if I'm on the receiving end, and you're framing it that way, I feel like I'm going to be much more open because I don't feel like I'm throwing my former employee or my current employee under the bus, that I'm being honest and two professionals having a conversation. I think the way you framed that is really well and will elicit a nice response from the person you're trying to get the feedback from.

Let's talk about making a mistake. As much as we talk about this process for trying to get the hire right, there are going to be times when we get it wrong. In your experience, either a personal experience, or maybe experience that you've had in client companies that they had prior to working with you, what are some of the biggest mistakes that you see people make when they try and make a senior hire?

Craig Coleman: The biggest mistake, and I've been guilty of it myself is a hire that with a tremendous amount of talent that just didn't fit the culture and hoping that it will work out. It really creates a problem. It's interesting. When you have somebody in your company, and I see this with clients a lot, who doesn't fit the culture, and they're creating a lot of problems amongst the management team. It can seem so obvious this person needs to be fired, but what you'll hear is the CEO will say, yeah, but this is all the things that they do so well and so forth. I think what's important to realize is that it's almost like a graph where on the y axis you have competency and on the other axis you have how much they fit the culture. The people that are low-competency and don't fit the culture, that's an easy decision. We would never find ourselves talking about that person. It's always the people who are highly competent but don't fit the culture that's the agonizing decision. Every time I've seen that, the solution has always been they have to go. The longer they stay, the more damage they do to your team.

Steve Sanduski: That is such a tricky question because we do have those folks that are in the organization that might be star performers, but they don't follow the rules. They don't attend the meetings they're supposed to attend, or they don't whatever. There could be lots of different examples there. That is a tricky question, to know when you need to let them go when they've pushed the envelope too much that it's no longer going to be a fit, and it's causing too much trouble with the rest of the folks that they have to work with.

Craig Coleman: I've seen it a whole bunch, and I can't say enough about it. This is where, I think, a CEO coach helps because you'll hear a CEO talking about this issue for so long and so often. You think, what does it tell you that we keep talking about this? What is the cost in terms of your mindset and your mental space where we're constantly concerned about this person and the effect that they're having on the team. We're dealing with fallout with other team members and so forth. I think once folks can see the totality of the negatives there they realize that maybe it's hard to quantify, but you've got to find somebody else to do that job.

You can, by the way. That's the other thing. I think it's important to have the belief that no one is bigger than the organization. If they don't fit the culture, and they go, you will find someone to replace them. Never feel that your entire organization hangs on one person.

Steve Sanduski: Any other mistakes that you see people make or maybe blind spots? I've interviewed a lot of people over the years, as you have. When you've got that person who is a great talker, great personality. Boy, they're really nice to be around. I like this person. Then they've got this high likability factor. I think often times we have this blind spot or this bias that maybe we're going to rate them a little bit higher compared to someone else who might be able to deliver the goods but might be a little rougher around the edges. Any thoughts on how we really prepare ourselves to avoid some of these potential blind spots?

Craig Coleman: I think, honestly, that talent insight assessments tools that we had talked about earlier is so valuable in this. It's exactly like you described, Steve, with the I, the influence component within the D-i-S-C, the DiSC. That I, that high I person is extremely likable and extremely charming. What you're going to want to do is look at their other behavior traits and the other three behavior categories as well as their motivators and use that to see how is this person likely to perform in the job? Keep that in mind because to your point that high I can be extremely persuasive in a candidate. Then I think I still go back to hopefully getting quality reference checks on the candidate where you can really describe what you need the candidate to do. You can also, by the way, describe the culture to the reference. This is the culture of our company. Tell me, based on what you know about the candidate, do you think they would fit in here? That's a fair question to ask.

Steve Sanduski: I think that's excellent. Craig, we're going to jump into a few rapid fire questions here. Before we do that, is there anything else that you want to add on this topic that we haven't already talked about?

Craig Coleman: Steve, all I would say is I really can't emphasize enough that the interview process ... The saying that less is more, it doesn't apply to the interviews. When you're interviewing senior people, unless their skillset is wildly off the mark, it really is like a free consultation. Another thing I would say is if you have candidates who have worked at one point for your direct competitors or do work for your direct competitors, never pass up an opportunity to interview those candidates. There's so much you can learn from those candidates. It's got nothing to do with trying to get any proprietary information. There's a tremendous amount you can learn in terms of benchmarking your own company's progress and success. I really encourage CEOs to have a positive attitude towards the interview process and not think that anyone they interview, that they don't ultimately hire, is a waste of time.

Steve Sanduski: It's like getting a free consultation.

Craig Coleman: It really is. Imagine you have five experts in a particular field. You get five opinions, and you get to decide. You then can sit back and say, where were they all in agreement? Where did they differ? Often times you'll get some pretty creative ideas from the candidates. I think it's hugely valuable. I wish more CEOs would have that attitude as they approach the interview process for a senior position.

Steve Sanduski: I know. That's one of the values here at CEO Coaching International, is just continuous learning, ongoing learning. We really have to ask ourselves, are we learning as fast as the world is changing? If we're not, then we're going to be left behind pretty quickly.

Craig Coleman: That's it, can't argue with that.

Steve Sanduski: Let's jump into a few rapid fire questions here. We love books around here. What is one of your favorite books?

Craig Coleman: One of my favorites is, it's not one of these how-to or blueprint books. It's Peter Thiel's Zero to One. Of course, Peter Thiel is the co-founder of PayPal and Palantir. What is amazing about this book, and it's really a series of his observations about business. His observations are so incredibly original in their thinking, at least they were to me. It's impossible to read this book and not put it down and come away with really, an inspiration to think more broadly and more creatively about your business. There's an instance in there. One of his points, he'll say, starting with a business, try to start small and build a monopoly within a smaller target market. Paradoxically, if you want to be a really big company in a big market you start small.

PayPal did exactly this. They wanted to be this payment process, this payment method of choice globally, but they couldn't start globally. It's way too expensive. You have an issue of are there enough people accepting it, enough people using it? They started small with this concentrated target market of eBay power sellers. Then after they had monopolized that particular small market, they leveraged the superior economics to go to a bigger and bigger and then ultimately global market. It's really a smart, strategic, creative thinking like that. He's got a whole series of interesting ideas and propositions in that book. That's definitely one of my favorites.

Steve Sanduski: We will link to that in the show notes. I read that book as well, and I think another example he gave along those lines is I think he may have been the first outside investor in Facebook. He was early, early in Facebook. He gave the example how we all know the story about Facebook, started at Harvard. They cornered the market at Harvard. Then they moved to other universities. Originally, you had to have a dot EDU address in order to sign up for Facebook. Then of course, they gradually opened it up. Now there's billions of people that are on it. They cornered the market for universities first. Then they went to

other schools. Then they opened it up to the general public. Now grandma and grandpa are on it.

Craig Coleman: Totally. That's really what it's all about. The value was how many people are on it already? That's my value assessment as a potential user who's going to sign up. If I define that as just the students at Harvard University rather than all college students or everyone in the US, I can really, if I in that smaller market, I can actually penetrate, get that critical mass and then get the beauty of that network effect working in my favor to grow the business.

Steve Sanduski: Right. I'm going to start a couple sentences here. Then I would like you to finish the sentence for me. The first sentence is, what I know to be true is ...

Craig Coleman: What I know to be true, I would say it this way. Sorry, Steve. Can I start that one over?

Steve Sanduski: Absolutely.

Craig Coleman: What I know to be true, Steve, is I would say the world is full of answers. There are answers and solutions out there to the challenges that you face. You just have to look for them. You have to find somebody whose experience that you can talk to, or find people that are in the business of helping people like you. Study companies or entrepreneurs that have been successful doing what you want to do or doing something analogous to what you want to do. Similarly, study the failures to really understand where they went off course. I know to be true the answers are out there. It just takes a little bit of hunger and resourcefulness to go out and find them as well as something we were talking about earlier, Steve, which is humility. You're putting yourself in a position of I need help. I don't know these answers, and I would like to ask you as someone who does know these answers. Sometimes putting yourself in that position of a little bit of humility is a challenge for folks.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. Next sentence is, the best way to accelerate personal growth is ...

Craig Coleman: I think the best way to accelerate personal growth is to be, I would say, radically open to reexamining everything you do. You're open to reexamining how you eat, how you think, how you feel. You're open to new ideas that you'll kick around, consider and maybe adopt. I think the only area that is non-negotiable would be your core values. Other than that, I think being radically open to changing your position, changing your opinion is a key to ongoing personal growth.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. Craig, I think we'll wrap it up there. I really appreciate you taking some time here to be on the podcast. You shared some great thoughts here and insights on how to make sure that we get it right when we're making a senior hire and appreciate all the great work you're doing here at CEO Coaching International.

Craig Coleman: Thanks, Steve. I really appreciate you having me on the show.

To inquire about our coaching services and programs, please call **1-866-622-9583**.

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