Conducting Revealing Reference Checks

Overcome useless reference checks. Get the information you need.

I discovered a creative and effective reference-checking process from Bradford Smart’s excellent hiring and high-performance manual: **Topgrading, 3rd Edition: The Proven Hiring and**

**Promoting Method That Turbocharges Company Performance.**

I’ve shared the steps recommended in this book below. They are worth the extra effort, especially when you have unanswered concerns about a candidate or if you are filling a key, high-impact position within the company.

**FIRST:**

* **Get Written Permission**—secure written permission from your candidate to talk to past managers as far back as ten years. Be ready to send this to each reference if asked for it.
* **Ask your candidate to reach out before your call** to let each of their past managers know to expect a call from you.
* If the candidate cannot share **contact information from a current manager,** make hiring contingent upon no negative surprises.

**NEXT:**

* Contact each reference:
  + Call during an off-hour. People will tend to be more relaxed and open early in the morning, late in the day, or on the weekend.
  + Promise total confidentiality.
  + Take notes.
  + Create the tone of a trusted colleague and fellow professional who knows the applicant well and is apt to manage the applicant better if (the reference) is kind enough to share some insights.
  + If you are getting a ‘whitewash,’ inquire about negatives specifically. (Use the areas of concern uncovered in the assessment and during the interviews.)

**REFERENCE CALL – SCRIPT AND QUESTIONS: Follow the script; you will be amazed at how well it works!** Be ready to take notes and to press for specifics.

*“Hello \_\_\_name of reference\_\_\_ . Thank you very much for accepting my call. As \_\_candidate’s name\_\_\_ indicated, we are considering hiring her/him for the position of \_\_\_title of position\_\_\_. I would very much appreciate your comments on their strengths and areas for improvement. I would also appreciate your wisdom and insight into how we might best manage them. Anything you share will be held in the strictest confidence.”*

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS:**

1. What would you consider are \_the candidate’s name\_ strengths, assets, and things you like and respect?

2. What are \_candidate’s name\_ shortcomings, weak points, and areas of improvement?

3. Would you please clarify what \_the candidate’s name\_ responsibilities were in the position?

4. On a scale of excellent, good, fair, or poor, how would you rate \_candidate’s name\_ overall performance? Why did you give them that rating?

5. To clean up a few details, what were \_the candidate’s name\_ starting and final employment dates?

6. What was \_the candidate’s name\_ initial and final compensation levels?

7. Let me tell you more about the job \_candidate’s name\_ is applying for is\_title of position\_ . How do you think \_the candidate’s name\_ might fit the job? Good fit indicators? Bad fit indicator?

8. Would you please rate \_candidate’s name\_ on these categories, excellent, good, fair, and poor scale? (Share the top personal skills from the position benchmark for the job. Ask for a rating for each area and comments.)

9. What would be your best advice on how to manage \_candidate’s name\_best? Do you have any final comments or suggestions about \_candidate’s name\_?

*“I would like to thank you very much for your insightful and useful*

*comments and suggestions. Our feedback has been constructive.”*