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# Getting to Know Your Next CEO

How to generate genuine insights from the interview process for the top job

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When interviewing CEO candidates, what questions can you recommend that fall outside the usual routine? — Neil Eckersley, Johannesburg, South Africa  
Ah, yes—the usual routine, in which executive job candidates are lobbed softballs like, "How would you describe your leadership style?" and, "What was your biggest management challenge, and how did you handle it?" It's no wonder you want to avoid that ritual; such interviews can be so perfunctory, for both sides. Avoiding it, however, takes effort. Real interviews—truly meaningful and illuminating—are incredibly hard to orchestrate. It's one thing when the candidate is internal. You have years of shared experience to talk about and typically some level of rapport to help set a candid tone. Moreover, you can augment your evaluation by talking with the candidate's subordinates and peers within the company. But with outsiders, you're in a tougher place. Most references tend to be positive in a careful sort of way, thanks to a widely ingrained sense of lawyer-fear. Which leaves boards, HR executives, and other searchers with interviews that often play out like first dates, shiny and polite and full of exaggerated promise.

Fortunately, there's another way. First, make sure every candidate has a solid reputation for honesty and fairness before they get in the door, as integrity is a must for your next CEO. Once that step is done, the whole interview charade can be circumnavigated by tightly linking questions to the key characteristics you're after—vision, leadership, crisis management ability, "runway," and authenticity. Taking vision first, your questions should seek to uncover a candidate's ability to see around corners, probe consensus thinking and competitive data with a healthy skepticism, and swiftly make change when the markets demand it. For example, you might ask: In your career, what's the best example of you anticipating market changes that your competitors did not? When did your curiosity lead you to probe deeply and uncover a competitive trend or marketplace dynamic that others didn't see, or didn't want to see?

On leadership, you're looking for examples of each candidate's track record with people. Thus, you might ask for examples of their hiring successes and disasters, and explanations of what they got right—and what they missed. (That last query is a nice test of candor!) You might also ask: Can you point to any of your people who "grew up" with your guidance and have gone on to succeed in your own company or beyond?

Every leader faces a crisis, or two or three. What you want your CEO interviews to uncover is candidates with the experience and courage to overcome another.

Try asking: What was the toughest integrity violation you have ever encountered, and how did you handle it? Have you ever had to define yourself in the midst of criticism, and did you succeed?

"Runway" is our shorthand for the capacity to grow and learn. When you hire a CEO, it isn't just to lead the company as it stands but to continually see the organization and its future with fresh eyes. So ask about reinvention. Has the candidate ever willingly gone through a personal or professional metamorphosis? Finally, authenticity. Well, hmmm. This one's the trickiest because authenticity, arguably the most important CEO trait, is so hard to ferret out. Sure, you might ask: "When have you been blindsided in life, and why did it happen?" But judging authenticity is a matter of observation. Does the candidate have a sense of humor about life? Is he excited, in his bones, about watching people grow? Is she comfortable in her own shoes? Watch—and listen.

Listen, incidentally, is the key word here. Questions are only questions. You can start to feel quite full of yourself asking good ones, but the real power of an interview lies in how well you listen to the answers. Really listen, to the end, between the lines, through the pauses, and after the awkward silences. That discipline is so much harder than it sounds. And yet, when you let candidates talk, even seasoned veterans of the interview game, they often, in time, reveal what you need to know. Whether you've found your CEO or not.