


3 Ways to Better Gauge Ethics and Integrity during the Interview

written by Rory Lodge | March 7, 2014



 Honesty and integrity are often conditions of employment for most organizations, but these qualities are nebulous and difficult to detect.

The protagonist of CBS' hit show, *The Mentalist*, possesses uncommon insight into the human psyche and utilizes his powers of observation to detect lies. Although most of us are not as skilled as this mentalist, we can develop techniques for spotting someone whose integrity may fall short of your organization's standards.

Common Ways To Screen For Integrity and Ethics

The most common way to evaluate the integrity of a new candidate is to confirm the details he or she submits in an application. When you conduct a reference and/or a background check, confirm educational qualifications and even request a criminal records check, a drivers abstract or credit history (when justifiable), you are gathering information concerning a candidate's integrity. When you ask technical questions about a candidate's abilities, you are comparing the candidate's level of knowledge to their professed experience. These methods of screening for honesty are sufficient in most cases, but they do have their limitations.

There are additional methods of evaluating a candidate's integrity and ethics, but these methods can be both time consuming and costly. Without hiring a private investigator or using a polygraph machine, you have three basic options.

3 Methods for Screening Candidates for Integrity and Ethics

1. Conduct written assessments. Some screeners ask candidates to complete personality/psychological, emotional intelligence assessments and/or integrity and ethics assessments. With this data they can gauge a candidates frame of mind and look for inconsistencies between the results, a candidate's past actions or responses to interview questions. In psychology, several main personality traits have been dubbed 'The Big Five': openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. In particular, researchers report that high scores on 3 of the 5 traits

– agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability – correspond to higher levels of integrity when tested. Of these three personality traits, conscientiousness is the strongest predictor of ethical behavior.

2. Ask integrity related questions to a candidate's references. Ask references to describe how the candidate reacted when faced with an ethical dilemma or in situations where the candidate had a conflict with a client, co-worker or supervisor. Asking the reference for details can be more effective than asking them to rate a candidate's integrity. Unfortunately, the bias of a reference may influence his or her response, so it is important to use this data in conjunction with other results of your honesty screening.

3. Ask integrity and ethics related questions of the candidate.

Behavioral questions can be designed to reveal information about how a candidate would respond in a specific situation. In some cases, you may observe that a candidate will avoid eye contact, fidget, perspire, or touch their face and mouth. These behaviors may indicate dishonesty, but they can also be signs of nervousness. It is important to note changes in behavior in response to certain questions, especially as compared to baseline responses.

Questions that May Reveal Ethics and Integrity

1. Describe a situation in which you disagreed with the majority or with your supervisor about something of importance. How did you deal with the disagreement?
2. Describe a time when you witnessed a co-worker (or anyone) engaged in behavior that you believed was inappropriate. Tell us what happened and how you responded.
3. Imagine a dilemma in which a colleague informs you that the product we are prepared to deliver to the client may be defective, but that failure to deliver the product on time could result in the closure of the company. How would you deal with this situation?

Follow-up Questions Are The Key

Ask a candidate why they acted a certain way, what they were thinking or how they felt in these instances. It is difficult for a candidate to keep track of multiple lies, and follow-up questions may trip up a candidate who is untruthful.

Be Cautious and Seek Out Second Opinions

Even the best assessments have their shortcomings. Some tests may generate false positives or fail to identify dishonest behavior. Other tests may be falsifiable, especially if they rely on the candidate's honest responses to questions.

If you uncover an egregious example of unethical behavior, you may be in a position to reject a candidate. In the absence of an obvious ethical failing, proceed with caution. It is always useful to get additional opinions. Involve colleagues, managers, or supervisors in the interview process to mitigate potential bias.

For best results, consider employing a combination of these methods. For sensitive and important positions in your company, these efforts may be worth the time and cost.