

How to Recruit Skilled Leaders with Character



In my work with executive teams and growing businesses, five specific qualities consistently surface as the real separators between the best and the rest.

What separates a truly great leader from a merely competent one is not charisma, a longer résumé, or a more polished style. It is a small set of differentiating behaviors that show up consistently under pressure and over time.

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How the Five Traits Were Identified

Earlier in my career, as an officer at a large global firm renowned for attracting, developing, and retaining talent, I was asked to partner with HR and lead a team to redesign our executive recruiting strategy.

The assignment sounded straightforward: define the profile of leaders who would thrive in our culture and deliver outsized impact, then help the organization find them.

Rather than starting with generic competency models, we chose a different path. We went to the people who lived with the consequences of leadership quality every day: thousands of supervisors around the world at every level of the company.

The request to each manager was simple but powerful:

1. Identify the single best performer you have ever supervised
2. Identify a solid, “average” performer you have supervised
3. Rate both people against a broad set of competencies, attributes, and behaviors

The goal was not to define every skill and behavior that mattered. It was to isolate what *truly differentiated* exceptional performers from the reliably competent middle.

After thorough statistical analysis and many follow-up conversations, five qualities kept rising to the surface:

1. A growth mindset fueled by curiosity
2. The emotional intelligence to build productive relationships
3. The courage to speak unpopular truths
4. The ability to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty
5. A tenacious ownership mindset, fortified by grit and resilience

These traits did not replace technical expertise, functional skills, or baseline integrity. Those were table stakes. These were the qualities that most clearly distinguished the outstanding performers in our study.

They continue to provide a practical lens for looking beyond a candidate’s experience and accomplishments to understand how that person will lead.



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Before the Interview

Make sure your organization treats all candidates with respect and sees the process through their eyes. Even if you do not offer them a position, they deserve consideration and clear communication.

Give candidates the information you would want before an interview: whom they will meet, how long the conversations will last, what to expect, where to park, how people typically dress, etc.

Be equally candid about the opportunity itself. What must the leader accomplish? What challenges will the person inherit? What authority and support will come with the responsibility?

For a family-owned business, this includes an honest conversation about working with ownership. Candidates should understand where they will have decision-making authority, where consultation is expected, and how disagreements are handled.

Never forget, recruiting is a mutual evaluation. You are assessing the candidate, and the candidate is assessing you.

Questions That Reveal Leadership Skill and Character

Résumés, track records, and technical interviews matter. But they do not tell you enough about how a candidate will behave when pressure rises, feedback is unwelcome, results fall short, or a difficult principle-based decision must be made.

Over the years, I have used variations of the following questions to better understand not just what candidates have accomplished, but how they think, lead, learn, handle adversity, treat other people, and make difficult decisions.

You do not need to ask every question. Choose the ones most relevant to the role, use a consistent core across candidates, and probe for specifics. Compare what candidates say with the evidence supplied by references, past results, and people who have worked closely with them.

Listen especially for accountability and ownership of results. Can candidates explain their personal contribution while giving appropriate credit to others? Do they acknowledge mistakes without rationalizing them? Can they describe what they learned and changed as a result?

1. A Growth Mindset Fueled by Curiosity

Look for more than a stated enthusiasm for learning. Explore whether candidates seek and welcome feedback, reconsider their assumptions, and change their behavior when experience or evidence calls for it.

- Tell me about a time your work, judgment, or leadership style was criticized. What was the criticism, how did you respond, and what changed afterward?



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- Describe a time you changed your mind about an important issue. What caused you to reconsider?
- If you could begin your career again, what would you do differently — and what have you learned that would lead you to make that change?

The important distinction is not whether someone has made mistakes. It is whether the person can examine those mistakes honestly and explain how the learning influenced later decisions.

2. The Emotional Intelligence to Build Productive Relationships

Explore how candidates strengthen teams, develop trust, understand their impact on others, and manage their own reactions when relationships become difficult.

- Tell me about a team you built or significantly strengthened. What was the situation, what did you do personally, and what made the team successful?
- How do you coach direct reports and prepare them for larger roles? Give me a specific example.
- Tell me about a time you helped someone perform beyond what they — or others — thought was possible.
- What would your direct reports say you do well as a leader? What would they say you most need to improve? Please give me an example of feedback you received and what you did with it.
- What misconceptions do people sometimes have about you?
- What kind of behavior in others most frustrates you? How do you manage your response when it occurs?

Listen for how candidates describe other people, especially those with whom they have disagreed. Do they recognize their own contribution to a difficult relationship, or is the problem always someone else?

3. The Courage to Speak Unpopular Truths

Explore whether candidates can raise difficult issues, challenge authority respectfully, and act on principles when doing so carries personal risk.



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- Describe a time you had to deliver an unpopular truth, challenge a senior leader, or take a principled position that carried personal risk.
- Tell me about an ethical dilemma you faced at work. What made it difficult, how did you resolve it, and what did it cost — if anything — to do the right thing?

Probe beyond what the candidate said. How did the person approach the conversation? What happened afterward? How was the relationship handled?

In a family-owned enterprise, this is particularly worth exploring. You want a leader who can respect stakeholders while exercising independent judgment — not someone who simply tells owners what they want to hear.

4. The Ability to Navigate Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Explore how candidates make decisions and create enough clarity for others to act when the path forward is uncertain.

- Tell me about an unusually difficult decision you made. What trade-offs did you face, how did you make the decision, and what happened?
- Describe a time you had to make an important decision with incomplete or conflicting information. What did you know, what did you assume, and how did you decide to move forward?
- Tell me about a time you had to lead people through unusually difficult circumstances. How did you create clarity, maintain trust, and keep the team moving?

Listen for how candidates balance action with judgment, and course-correct based on fact-based learning. Can they explain their assumptions, acknowledge what they did not know, and describe how they adjusted as circumstances changed?

5. A Tenacious Ownership Mindset, Fortified by Grit and Resilience

Explore how candidates respond when results fall short, obstacles persist, or their original approach stops working.

- Describe a professional failure or significant setback. What was your role in it, what did you learn, and how did you apply that learning later?



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- Tell me about an important commitment you struggled to fulfill. What got in the way, and what did you do?
- Describe an initiative that required sustained effort through setbacks. How did you decide when to persist and when to change your approach?

Listen for ownership without excuses and persistence without stubbornness. Can candidates explain what they did to address the situation — not simply why it was difficult?

Motivation and Mutual Fit

The five traits provide a lens for understanding how someone leads. Leave room to understand what the candidate wants next and whether your opportunity offers it.

- What are the two or three qualities, capabilities, or experiences that most distinguish you as a leader? Please give me an example of each.
- What does your current role not provide that you hope to find in your next opportunity?
- Which of your strengths or capabilities is underutilized in your current role?
- What kind of work gives you the most energy and sense of purpose?
- What do you know about our company, our customers, and the challenges of this role?
- What would you want to understand before deciding whether this company and role are the right fit for you?
- What is the most important question I have not asked you? How would you answer it?



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Look for Patterns and Verify Them

Do not confuse confidence with capability, polish with judgment, or charisma with character.

Strong candidates can describe specific situations in detail, explain their personal role without diminishing others, name what they would do

differently now, and show how their experiences changed their behavior over time.

Character is not established by a polished answer in a one-hour interview. It is revealed through patterns:

- How candidates describe former teammates, employers, and difficult experiences
- Whether they take ownership without claiming all the credit
- How consistently their examples hold up under follow-up questions
- How they respond to people with less power
- What former colleagues, direct reports, customers, and supervisors say when asked for specific examples

Interview for character, but verify it through disciplined reference checks. Ask references not only whether they would rehire the person, but also how the candidate responds to criticism, handles pressure, develops others, and behaves when the demands for short-term results conflict with values and principles.



The objective is not to hire the person who interviews best. It is to find someone whose skills, judgment, and character will hold up when times get tough.

Carry the Conversation into Onboarding

The conversations that help you select a leader should also help that person get off to a strong start.

Revisit what you discussed during recruiting: the results that matter most, the relationships essential to success, the difficult issues the leader will inherit, and the authority the person will have to navigate them.

Be explicit about what ownership, key stakeholders and the leadership team expect — and what the new leader should expect from them. Do not let an encouraging recruiting conversation substitute for a shared understanding of the job.

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JDR SMART Leader Executive Leadership Coaching

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About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at jdrgrowthpartners.com and The Bridge to Growth.