SALES GEEK LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

COMPANION PLAYBOOK — EPISODE 16

Hiring Wrong

A selection process that tests the job, not the interview

FOR	USE	TIME TO COMPLETE
Sales leaders and owners	**Any sales vacancy**	**Ninety minutes to set up**

WHAT THIS PLAYBOOK IS FOR

Most sales recruitment measures one skill — the ability to perform well in a conversation with a stranger — and then treats it as evidence of five others. Salespeople happen to be professionally excellent at that skill, which is why sales hiring goes wrong more often than hiring for any other role. This playbook replaces the guessing with an audition you can watch, a scorecard you can compare candidates on, and reference questions that get past “they were great”.

HOW TO USE IT

- Part One explains why the interview misleads you, with a self-audit of your current process.
- Part Two is the audition — three exercises with the briefs written out, ready to run.
- Part Three is the wiring scorecard and the red flags that override everything else.
- Part Four covers references and the final decision.
- You do not need to have heard the podcast episode to use any of it.

PART ONE

Why your interview is lying to you

Ask a leader why they hired somebody and the answers are about presence: great communicator, personable, sold themselves well. Ask twelve months later why it did not work and the answers change completely: would not take feedback, no admin, went quiet after knock-backs, never qualified anything. Nothing on the second list was tested for on the first.

FRAMEWORK

The Interview Paradox

An interview is a talking contest. The job is a listening one.

WHAT WINS THE INTERVIEW	WHAT WINS THE DEAL
Talking well. Filling silence confidently.	Asking well. Sitting in the silence until they answer.
Having an answer ready for everything.	Admitting what you do not know and going to find out.

WHAT WINS THE INTERVIEW	WHAT WINS THE DEAL
Making the other person like you.	Being willing to be disliked while you qualify properly.
Enthusiasm for the opportunity in front of you.	Walking away from it when it is not real.
Presenting as the finished article.	Being coachable, which requires admitting you are not.
One good performance on one good day.	Turning up on the ninth bad day in a row.

The interview is not worthless. It answers one question well — can I work alongside this person — and that question matters. The error is asking it to answer six.

Self-audit: score your current process

One point for each honest yes. Most businesses score three or four before they change anything.

- ☐ Every candidate is asked the same core questions, in the same order.
- ☐ At least one exercise requires the candidate to do the job rather than describe it.
- ☐ Somebody other than the hiring manager observes at least one stage.
- ☐ We assess something in writing before we make an offer.
- ☐ We test how the candidate responds to feedback, deliberately.
- ☐ We score against a written standard rather than discussing impressions afterwards.
- ☐ The scorecard is completed before candidates are discussed as a group.
- ☐ Reference questions are open, not answerable with yes.
- ☐ We have a written list of red flags that stop a process regardless of everything else.
- ☐ We have declined to hire at least once rather than fill a role we needed filled.

That last one is the hardest and the most revealing. A process only means something if it is allowed to say no when the role has been open for four months.

PART TWO

The audition

Three exercises, roughly ninety minutes in total, run after a first interview and before any offer. The purpose is to watch the candidate do the job rather than talk about it. Send the brief a day ahead — the aim is to see their best version, because if their best version is not good enough, you have your answer.

FRAMEWORK

The Audition

Three exercises. Ninety minutes. More useful than four interviews.

EXERCISE	WHAT THEY DO	WHAT YOU ARE WATCHING FOR
Discovery role-play	You play a prospect with a plausible problem. Twenty minutes.	Do they ask or tell? Weak candidates pitch inside four minutes. Strong ones are still asking at minute twelve.
Written follow-up	Forty-five minutes alone, straight afterwards. Write the follow-up email.	Did they listen — is your problem back in your own words? And will they do the unglamorous part of the job?
Coachability test	Stop the role-play halfway. Give one specific note. Restart.	Do they adjust or defend? The most predictive ninety seconds in the whole process.

Role-play brief — template

Send this to the candidate the day before. Adapt the scenario to your market, but keep the problem slightly ambiguous — a clean brief lets them prepare a pitch, which is what you are trying to avoid.

- You will have twenty minutes with me. I am a prospective customer, not an interviewer.
- My business is [sector, rough size]. We have been looking at [broad problem area] for a few months.
- You have not met me before and I have not agreed to buy anything.
- The objective is a sensible next step, not a sale.
- I will stop you once during the exercise to give you a piece of feedback, then we will carry on.

Scoring the role-play

Keep a tally of questions asked against statements made. It feels fussy and it removes a surprising amount of bias, because charm is very hard to discount in real time and a tally is not. Note the minute at which they first pitched.

What to look for in the written follow-up

- Is your problem described in your words, or theirs?
- Have they captured anything you said that they were not asked about?
- Is there a clear next step with a date?

- Did it arrive when you asked for it, in the format you asked for?
- Is it well written? This is a piece of customer-facing work.

Running the coachability test

Halfway through the role-play, break character. Give one clear, specific note — for example: “you are pitching before you understand my problem, ask me about budget before you go further”. Then restart. There are three possible responses and only one of them is good: they take the note and change; they explain why they did what they did; or they thank you warmly and carry on exactly as before. The third is the most common and the easiest to miss.

PART THREE

The wiring scorecard

Split what you are assessing into three. Knowledge — your market and product — takes weeks to teach. Skill — discovery, negotiation, running a process — takes months. Wiring cannot be taught at all, and it decides everything. So hire on wiring and train the rest. Score each predictor out of five, from what you observed in the audition rather than from impression.

SCORECARD

The Four You Cannot Train

Score each out of five. Evidence only.

PREDICTOR	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	WHERE YOU SEE IT	SCORE
Coachability	Takes a note mid-exercise and visibly changes. Asks about the note rather than defending the original choice.	The coachability test. How they describe a past manager.	/5
Curiosity	Asks about your business out of interest. Follow-up questions that could not have been prepared.	The role-play, and what they ask you at the end.	/5
Discipline	Prepared. Followed the brief. Follow-up on time and properly written.	The written follow-up, and whether they did what was asked in the way it was asked.	/5
Resilience	Describes a real failure without flinching and without blaming. Specific example of persisting past a knock-back.	Behaviour-based questions. Push twice on the same failure.	/5

The coachability rule

No candidate goes forward with two or below on coachability, whatever the other three scores say. If somebody cannot take a note in a role-play, no amount of onboarding or coaching will ever land, and everything else you liked about them stays theoretical.

Red flags — these override every score

- ☐ Blames every previous employer, manager or company.
- ☐ Vague about their numbers, or the numbers change when you ask a second time.
- ☐ Cannot name a single thing they have got wrong.
- ☐ Talks about customers or prospects with contempt.
- ☐ Asks nothing about the job itself — only about package, patch or progression.

Any one of these stops the process, however strong the audition was. The common way leaders talk themselves past a red flag is that the role has been open too long. That is a legitimate pressure and a completely different reason for hiring somebody. Be honest with yourself about which reason you are using.

Behaviour-based questions worth asking

- Tell me about a deal you lost that you should have won. What did you do differently afterwards?
- Tell me about a time a manager gave you feedback you disagreed with.
- What is the longest you have gone without closing anything, and what happened during it?
- Describe a customer you walked away from.
- What would your last manager say you needed most help with?

On each of these, ask the follow-up. The first answer is prepared; the second one rarely is.

PART FOUR

References and the decision

Most reference calls produce nothing, because most reference questions can only be answered kindly. “Was she good?” and “would you rehire him?” have one socially acceptable answer. Ask questions that require a real answer instead.

TEMPLATE

Reference questions that get past “they were great”

Open questions only. Ask the follow-up.

QUESTION	WHAT YOU ARE LISTENING FOR
What did they need most help with?	A real development area. A blank here usually means the referee did not manage them closely.
Where did they rank against the rest of the team, and how do you know?	Whether performance was measured at all, and whether the candidate’s account matches.
What would you tell me to do differently as their manager?	The single most useful question in recruitment. Almost nobody asks it, and the answers are unusually candid.
How did they respond when you gave them difficult feedback?	A second, independent read on coachability.
What was going on in the business when they left?	Context that the candidate may have presented differently.

Making the decision

Complete every scorecard before anyone is discussed as a group. Once candidates are compared out loud, the most confident description wins rather than the strongest candidate.

- Any red flag stops the process, regardless of score.
- Coachability below three stops the process, regardless of the other three.
- Where two candidates are genuinely close, take the higher coachability score. The one who can be taught will be ahead by month nine.
- If nobody clears the bar, do not hire. A vacancy costs less than the wrong person in it.

One thing to do on the day you make the offer

Write down the two lowest scores on the scorecard. Those are the first two things their onboarding has to address, and you will have forgotten them by their start date if you do not record them now.

CLOSE

Your next seven days

- ☐ Score your current process against the ten-point self-audit in Part One.
- ☐ Write the discovery role-play brief for your market. One page.
- ☐ Add the written follow-up exercise to your next vacancy, whatever else changes.
- ☐ Agree your five red flags in writing, before you are under pressure to fill a role.
- ☐ Replace your reference questions with the five in Part Four.
- ☐ Look at your last two hires and score them retrospectively on the four predictors. The pattern is usually obvious.
- ☐ Decide now what you will do if nobody clears the bar. Decide it before you need to.

Selection is only half the job. A candidate with the right wiring can still be lost in the first month if they are handed a laptop, a login and a target and left to work it out. What happens after the offer is accepted is covered in the next playbook in this series.

This playbook accompanies Episode 16 of The Mastery Podcast with James Denny and extends the Sales Geek Leadership & Management Programme. It is designed to be used standalone — no podcast listening required — and may be shared with clients and prospects by Sales Geek franchisees.

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