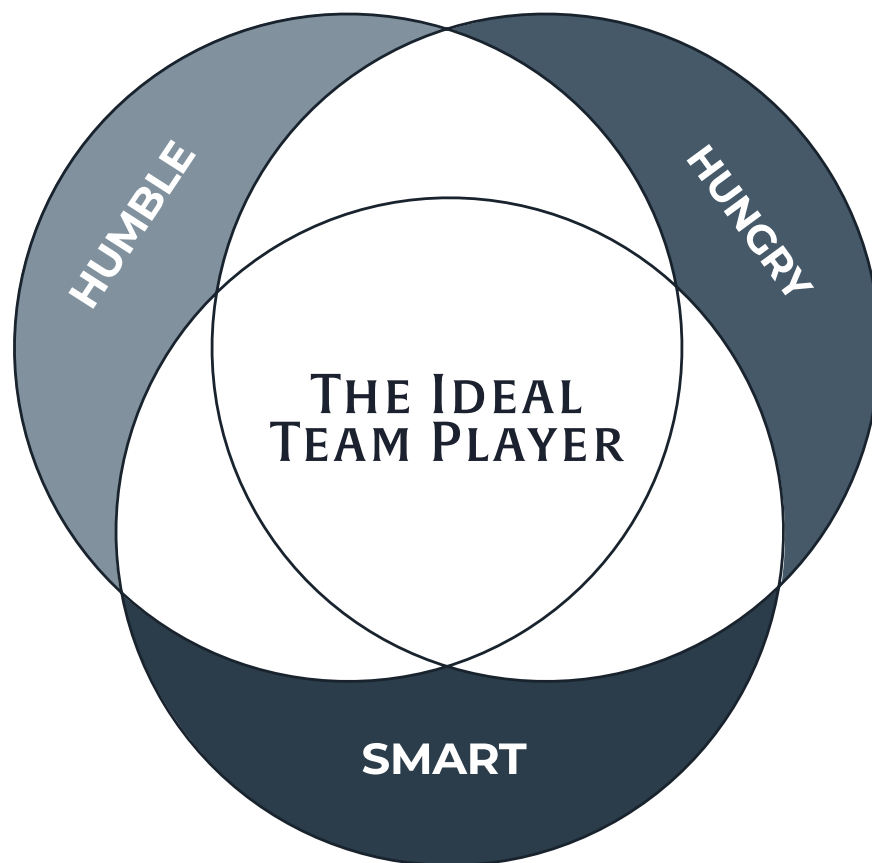


THE IDEAL TEAM PLAYER

Hiring Ideal Team Players

An Interview Guide to Help You Identify Candidates
Who are Humble, Hungry, and Smart



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Humble

Humble team members are quick to point out the contributions of others and slow to seek attention for their own. They share credit, emphasize team over self, and define success collectively rather than individually.

QUESTION

Describe your current team. What do you like and dislike?

INSIGHT

By asking a team-related question, the candidate may demonstrate whether he or she values teamwork and is willing to do what is necessary for the team's good. Encourage the candidate to describe specific interactions with colleagues and experiences working on a team.

QUESTION

What are the most important accomplishments of your career?

INSIGHT

Look for more mentions of we than I. Of course, it isn't about being so simplistic as to count the responses. If someone refers to himself or herself individually more than as a member of a team, probe for whether he or she was working alone or with others.

QUESTION

What was the most embarrassing moment in your career? Or the biggest failure?

INSIGHT

Look for whether the candidate celebrates that embarrassment or is mortified by it. Humble people generally aren't afraid to tell their unflattering stories because they're comfortable with being imperfect. Also, look for specifics and real references to the candidate's own culpability.

QUESTION

How did you handle that embarrassment or failure?

INSIGHT

Look for specifics about how the candidate accepted responsibility, what they learned from it, and if they actually acted on what was learned.

QUESTION

What is your greatest weakness?

INSIGHT

Yes, this is a seemingly tired question, but it's still a useful one. The key is to look for answers that are real and a little painful. Candidates who present their weaknesses as strengths ("I take on too much" or "I have a hard time saying no") are often afraid to acknowledge real shortcomings. To avoid this, it's a good idea to coach candidates with prompts like: "I really want to know what you'd like to change about yourself, or better yet, what your best friends would say you need to work on." The key to the answer is not what their weaknesses are (unless of course, the candidate is an axe murderer), but if they're comfortable acknowledging something real.

QUESTION

How do you handle apologies, either giving or accepting them?

INSIGHT

Look for and ask for specifics. Humble people are not afraid to say they are sorry, and they accept other people's genuine apologies with grace. People who do this usually have specific stories.

QUESTION

Can you tell me about someone who is better than you in an area that really matters to you?

INSIGHT

Look for the candidate to demonstrate a genuine appreciation for others who have more skill or talent. Humble people are comfortable with this. Ego-driven people often are not.

Hungry

Hungry team members are self-motivated and diligent. They are constantly thinking about the next step and the next opportunity.

QUESTION

What is the hardest you've ever worked on something in your life?

INSIGHT

Look for specific examples of real but joyful sacrifice. In other words, the candidate isn't complaining but is grateful for the experience.

QUESTION

What do you like to do when you're not working?

INSIGHT

Look out for too many time-consuming hobbies that suggest the candidate sees the job as a means to do other things. That's not to say that there is one specific kind of activity that is an indicator of not being hungry. And it's certainly not to say that you're looking for someone who has no interests in life outside of work. But a long list of hobbies like extreme skiing, sled dog racing, storm chasing, and shark hunting might just be a red flag when it comes to someone who is not going to put the needs of the team ahead of personal pursuits.

QUESTION

What was your work ethic like as a teenager?

INSIGHT

Look for specifics, usually relating to schoolwork, sports, or jobs. And when it comes to sports, it's not about participation and having fun. Look for examples of difficulty, sacrifice, and hardship. Ask the candidate about how hard they worked in high school. Did they really strive to do well? Did they have a job? Did they train extraordinarily hard in a sport? You're not looking for one particular answer, but rather for something real that indicates the person has a work ethic. And a work ethic usually, but not always, gets established early in life.

QUESTION

What kinds of hours do you generally work?

INSIGHT

Hardworking people usually don't want to work nine-to-five, unless their unique life situations demand it. And if they do, they are usually getting additional work done at home. That's not to say that some people aren't stuck in dead-end, nine-to-five jobs and are itching to get out and do something challenging. But if a candidate is satisfied with a predictable schedule and talks too much about "balance," there's a chance he or she isn't terribly hungry. Again, not a litmus test, but a red flag. None of this is to advocate that people should prioritize their work over their families. Not at all. It's just that when a candidate focuses a lot on the hours that they're expected to work, they may not be the kind of hungry team player you need.

Smart

Smart team members are interpersonally appropriate and aware. They have good judgment and intuition around the subtleties of group dynamics and the impact of their words and actions.

QUESTION

Have you ever worked with a difficult colleague or boss?
How did you handle the situation?

INSIGHT

By asking the candidate about a difficult work relationship, you will learn if he or she can read situations and people and handle them skillfully.

QUESTION

How would you describe your personality?

INSIGHT

Look for how accurately the person describes what you are observing and how introspective he or she is. Smart people generally know themselves and find it interesting to talk about their behavioral strengths and weaknesses. People who seem stumped or surprised by this question might not be terribly smart when it comes to people.

QUESTION

What do you do that others in your personal life might find annoying?

INSIGHT

Everyone annoys someone, sometimes. Especially at home. Smart people are not immune to this. But neither are they in the dark about it. And they tend to moderate these behaviors at work.

QUESTION

What kind of people annoy you the most, and how do you deal with them?

INSIGHT

What you're looking for here is the candidate's self-awareness and self-control. Smart people know their pet peeves, and they own the fact that some of those pet peeves are their own issues. They also know how to deal with annoying people in a productive, constructive way.

QUESTION

Would your former colleagues describe you as an empathic person? -OR- Can you give an example of how you've demonstrated empathy to a teammate?

INSIGHT

Some people use the word empathetic. The issue is whether the candidate seems to understand what others are feeling. Now, there are certain personality types that are less empathic than others, and that's fine. What you're looking for here is an indication that the person values empathy and whether he or she has an understanding of his or her own strengths or weaknesses in this area.