3075 Stop Asking Goofy Questions

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Before we talk about what to ask, let's talk about what to stop asking.

Behavioral interviewing — the "Tell me about a time when..." format — is one of the most widely used and least effective hiring practices in this industry. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult person. Tell me about a time when you had to solve a tough problem. Tell me about a time when you learned from a mistake.

Every candidate over the age of twenty has a polished, rehearsed answer to every one of those questions. They've been coached on them. They've Googled them. They know exactly what you want to hear and they'll tell you exactly that. You haven't learned anything about the person sitting across from you. You've learned how well they prepared for a performance.

Think about it this way. If your kid stuffs a sock down the tub drain and it gets stuck, you call a plumber. When the plumber picks up, you don't say: "Tell me about a time when you had to retrieve something from a drain." You tell them what the problem is. You describe the specific situation. And the plumber assesses their approach from there. Because that's the only way either of you gets useful information.

Hiring works the same way. If you won't tell a candidate what your actual challenges are, what your operation actually needs, what gaps you're trying to fill — you can't evaluate whether they can close those gaps. And if you're too proud or too guarded to be honest about the blemishes in your operation, remember: the minute you hire this person, they're going to see all of it anyway. The only difference is whether you found out upfront if they could handle it.

The best interview is a real conversation about your real business. Share your current challenges. Hear how they think about them. Brainstorm together. Determine whether who they are matches what you need. That tells you infinitely more than their answer to "What's your greatest weakness?"

Before you get to the filter, ask one thing: Have you eaten here? If the answer is no, that tells you something. Not necessarily disqualifying — but worth noting. If the answer is yes, ask them to talk about it. Don't prompt them. Don't guide them. Just listen. The person who talks about the food is giving you one answer. The person who talks about how they were treated is giving you a different one. And the person who noticed that the server checked back at the right moment, that the table next to them had their drinks refilled without asking, that the energy in the room felt intentional — that person is already seeing your floor the way you need them to see it.

The Three-Question Filter

Values-based hiring doesn't mean a six-week search process. It means you have a filter — a set of criteria that every candidate must clear before you hand them an apron. Here's mine:

First, do they share your values? Not in the abstract — in the specific. Do they believe what your team believes about how to treat people, how to show up, how to take ownership?

Second, do they have a genuine desire to serve? Not "I like working with people" — a genuine, observable impulse to make someone else's day better. You can see this in an interview if you know what to look for. Describe a real situation from your floor — a Guest who showed up on the wrong night for a reservation, a family celebrating a birthday with no advance notice, a regular whose usual server isn't there. Don't ask what they would do. Watch how they react. Watch whether their first instinct is to solve the problem or to ask whose job it is. People who have the desire don't wait for the question to be finished before their mind is already working on it.

Third, are they coachable? Can they take feedback without getting defensive? Can they acknowledge a mistake without making excuses? Will they grow, or have they already decided they know everything they need to know?

Three questions. Three non-negotiables. If a candidate doesn't clear all three, you don't hire them. Period.

The Turnover Tax

Industry research — including data from the National Restaurant Association and Cornell University — consistently puts the cost of replacing a BOH hourly employee between $1,500 and $2,800. FOH hourly: $1,000 to $2,200. A manager: $10,000 to $15,000. A restaurant executive: well into six figures.

Those aren't soft numbers. Those are real dollars that leave your business every single time a hire doesn't work out. And for most operators, the revolving door spins so fast they've stopped even counting the cost. They just accept turnover as a fact of life — an unavoidable tax on running a restaurant.

It's not unavoidable. It's the direct result of who you're hiring and how you're hiring them.

As for turnover, when your company starts hiring and growing the right leaders, your employees will stop leaving.

The Desire to Serve

Some people have a unique desire to serve others. Some people serve others because it's their job. You cannot train the desire into someone who doesn't have it.

This is the single most important thing to screen for in any hire, and it's the thing most operators completely ignore. They ask about experience. They ask about availability. They ask whether you can work weekends. They never ask whether you genuinely care about making a stranger's day better.

No amount of planning, marketing, leadership, management or culinary effort can impact the individual Guest experience more than the values of a single front-line employee.

Read that again. The values of a single front-line employee. Not their skills. Not their experience. Their values. That's why hiring for values isn't a luxury — it's the most strategic decision you make in this business, and you make it every time someone walks through your door looking for a job.

The CFO/CEO Exchange

There's a conversation that gets passed around in business circles. It goes like this:

CFO to CEO: "What happens if we invest in developing our people and they leave?"

CEO to CFO: "What if we don't and they stay?"

Sounds clever, right? Everyone loves that quote. It shows up in LinkedIn posts and motivational presentations. But here's my addition:

Me: "What if you invest in developing the wrong people?"

CEO & CFO: ".....uhhhhhh"

Cute word plays make bad strategy.

The point isn't whether to develop people. Of course you develop people. The point is that development without selection is waste. If you're pouring resources into people who don't share your values, you're building their resume for their next job — at your expense. Hire right first. Then develop relentlessly.

Build Systems for Talent — Not Talent for Systems

Here's where most operators get the sequence completely backwards.

They hire whoever's available, figure out what that person can do, and then build around them. The system gets shaped by the talent they happened to find. And then they wonder why the operation never quite runs the way they envisioned — why there are always gaps, always workarounds, always a role that isn't fully covered.

That's not a talent problem. That's a sequencing problem.

The right sequence is: define your goal first. What does this business need to accomplish? What does that require? What roles does the system need filled, and what does the person in each role need to be able to do? Build that clarity before you ever post a job or sit across from a candidate.

When you know what your system requires, you know exactly what you're looking for. You stop hiring generically and start hiring specifically. You stop filling seats and start filling roles. And you stop building operations that are permanently shaped by whoever happened to walk through the door on a Thursday.

This is also why your Killer Interview Question is different from every other operator's. Because your system has a specific critical need — the thing that, if you get wrong in a hire, costs you the most. You can only identify that need if you've done the work of understanding what your system actually requires.

Square pegs in round goals. That's what you get when you hire first and think second. The peg always looks close enough — until the pressure is on and the gaps show.

The Killer Interview Question

Every operator needs a hiring process that goes beyond "Can you start Monday?" And every business has a Killer Interview Question. But it's not the same question for every business — and nobody can hand it to you.

Your job is to find yours. Figure out what the single most critical issue is for your business right now — the thing that, if you get it wrong in a hire, costs you the most. Then engineer your question or questions around that. A concept that's been burned by kitchen culture needs to screen for something completely different than a front-of-house-heavy operation rebuilding Guest trust. A restaurant in year one needs different things than one in year five.

The principle is always the same: your Killer Interview Question is designed to surface what can't be trained. Skills can be developed. Work ethic can be coached. But genuine care for other people — the instinct to actually want someone else's experience to be better — that's either there or it isn't. Know what you need. Build the question that finds it.

Hire for Three Things — In This Order:

1. Values Alignment — Does this person believe what your team believes? Will they reinforce the culture or erode it?

2. Desire to Serve — Do they genuinely want to make someone else's experience better, or are they just looking for a paycheck?

3. Coachability — Can they take feedback, adjust, and grow — or will they resist every attempt to develop them?

Skills can be Coached. Character can't. Start here. I don't care how short-staffed you are. The body you put in that slot under desperation becomes a bigger problem than the open shift it was supposed to fill.