



The 7 Critical Habits of a Compelling Candidate

TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

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“Fidgeting, playing with your hands or slumping in the seat communicate that you would rather be someplace else.”

An opportunity presents itself. A call from an executive search firm perhaps, or a leadership position featured on an upmarket, online recruitment site. You applied. Shortly, thereafter, you received a call from the recruiter. The result? You have been called in for an interview. Although early in the recruitment cycle – and recognising that more and more first interviews are either conducted via video conference¹ and/or utilise a digital format – the interview in question, in that it’s for a senior role, is in person.



1 If you are asked to be part of a video conference you need to know how to present yourself. Have the lighting directly on your face. Don't sit with your back to the window. Position the screen such that it shows only the upper body. One executive search consultant shared with me that the candidate he recently interviewed had on a nice shirt and tie but thought that the shorts he was wearing would not be apparent on the screen. They were! A tight shot of just part of the face is equally off putting. No one wants to interview a nose. And it happens.



You have attended a number of interviews in the past – not for a while though. What follows represents what might be described as an “aide memoire.” Much of what is outlined you will have already thought about. The value in going through *The 7 Critical Habits of a Compelling Candidate*, however, lies in those key elements of preparation that may have slipped to the back of your consciousness.

1. It Starts with Sound Research

There is a veritable plethora of resources available to prepare for the interview. The company’s website, key customers’ websites, past annual reports, the financial pages, articles on the internet, LinkedIn to research key players, Glassdoor ... and a whole lot more.

The point of investing time in research upfront is to have early insight into the organization’s ownership, leadership, values, culture, products/services, market positioning and commercial momentum. That said, nothing beats a hands-on approach. Access your network to identify someone who used to work for the organization. Try the company’s products, visit a showroom or talk to a friend who uses the service provided.² Caution! Dig as much as you can but don’t come to an early conclusion. To quote Mark Twain, “It ain’t what you don’t know that will get you into trouble. It’s what you think you know ... that ain’t so.”

Research obviously focuses on know-how about the hiring organization. It also represents an opportunity to sharpen your own saw. In a business environment where speed of learning equates to a distinct competitive advantage, leaders, of necessity, are readers. What you read and the ways in which a continuous learning mindset shapes your leadership agenda is central to your own competitive advantage.

Research must also embrace “the state of play in business generally.” Irrespective of the role you are interested in, you cannot afford to come across as merely an interested observer. The following research by Gallup (2023), for example, outlines, what can only be described as, a “cultural crisis.” Your “know where,” “know when,” “know why” and “knowhow,” speaks directly to the kind of leader you are.

² There is an argument to be made that investing the sort of time suggested is appropriate once you have moved beyond the first interview. The dilemma being that if this represents a genuine career opportunity you need to make sure that you get a second interview.



- Fully 59% of the global workforce are “quiet quitting.”
- Be it the US, Germany, France, or the UK, only one in four employees feel strongly that the organization cares about their wellbeing.
- In the US, only 32% of employees are engaged. Globally, the number is 21%.
- Nearly seven in ten full-time employees in the US prefer some type of remote work arrangement.³
- Moreover, 40% of employees would change jobs to work full or part time from a remote location. Recognise it. Accept it. Prepare for it.

What we can take from the above is that the tectonic shift of power from the enterprise to the employee is both undeniable and without precedence.

You should, of course, be fully conversant with central issues in the business where you are currently (were most recently) employed. Key questions worthy of time set aside for reflection – include:

- How would you describe your organization’s current business model? In what ways will that need to change in the future? How are you and your colleagues going about that?
- How do you measure: (i) the culture in your business today; and (ii) the culture you need to succeed in the future? How is the business enacting that cultural shift? What is your role?
- How is the business (you) managing hybrid-employment? What works? What changes are you making? Know that the talent you need most will demand a degree of choice regarding work from a remote location (home).
- How is AI directly impacting your current role and what are the opportunities for your business generally? In what ways has the overall design of the organization been retooled to make the best use of the emerging technology?
- Specifically, why does the top talent in your current organization stay ... and what actions are you are taking to do (a lot) more of it?
- Beyond what has been enacted in the past, what is your current business doing to attract top talent?

³ You may not operate in the US but work trends in the US tend to set the pattern for organization life in the developed countries, generally. The preponderance of US multinationals make this inevitable. By way of example, nearly 50% of the global spend on leadership development happens in the US.



- How are you leveraging your current organization’s sense of purpose and what lessons have you learned from that?
- In what ways has your current organization changed the way middle managers operate in your business? As we flatten the organization – and take out non-decision making levels, as we must, to facilitate needed organization agility – the role of middle management changes dramatically. In particular, their role in innovation and collaboration has to be thought through anew.
- What strides are you and your current colleagues making on diversity, equity and inclusion? What challenges do you still face and how are you overcoming them?
- What recent steps forward has the organization made on sustainability? What challenges do you still face and how are you overcoming them?
- How have you identified and, specifically, how are you developing your successor? Being able to describe how and when you coach is a fundamental issue here. In today’s world, those who can’t or don’t coach are a liability.
- Beyond results, how do you assess (measure) your current team’s success. Specifically, what are you doing to take the team to the next level?

“If I only had one hour to solve a problem, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and the remaining 5 minutes solving it.” Albert Einstein





2. Anticipation versus Making It Up as You Go

Good research is complemented by sound preparation. Having spent a good deal of my life interviewing executives, it is quickly apparent when the candidate comes to the interview with the obvious, underlying belief that it's okay to simply “wing it.” They arrive knowing that they are less than fully prepared but work from the assumption that they have the intellectual wherewithal to finesse the interview.

There is a good deal written about leadership competencies, but there is one underpinning and reliable fact: successful executives work harder than those who fall by the wayside. Lack of preparation strongly points to a lack of work ethic.

Consider the following anticipatory steps as being invaluable.

- It sounds like an oversimplification ... but know where you are going, how long it will take to get there and where to park.
- Think through why you want this role. To what extent does the challenge associated with this position complement your personal goals and priorities?
- Reflect on what you need from an immediate leader. Avoid being idealistic or aspirational. Your thinking should draw on past experience.
- Recognising that talent acquisition at a senior level must always be strategic, take the time to build a future-oriented context map of your potential employer.⁴
 - i. Looking forward, what issues, would it appear, the organization will face in the marketplace?
 - ii. What social, political and economic forces are likely to impact future business performance?
 - iii. Three to five years out, what challenges are likely to emerge internally (within the business)?

Building a robust “map” will provide you with a sense of the emerging context as it relates to the business, prevent your thinking from being too internally

⁴ Ideally, the best way to interpret the context map is not to see each of the three domains (the marketplace; the social, political and economic forces; and the internal dynamic) as standalone forces but to interpret your map's dynamic nature. That is to say, the way in which everything impacts everything else.



focused and inform the questions that you ask about the organization's future. It will also help you make a strategic rather than a tactical decision (short-term success) about the role, should an offer be forthcoming.

- From what you have been able to uncover about the organization and the role, think through the key questions you are likely to be asked. Rehearse your response. Continue to rehearse.
- Highlight those aspects of personal past performance you want to showcase.
- Be prepared to describe the culture of your current organization, your leadership point of view, your digital capability, how you coach, your leadership reach (ability to operate across different cultures), past endeavors in taking the team to the next level and the qualities that outline how resilient you are.

“When you know clearly what you want, you’ll wake up every morning excited about life.” Mark Victor Hansen

3. Make Sure the Real You Turns Up

Be early ... but not too early. Be courteous to the receptionist – a good interviewer may well ask their opinion. Dress in a manner that says, “I want this job.” If relevant, polish your shoes. Relax. Be yourself. Be authentic. Don’t try to control the interview. Give the gift of presence. Shut off your mind from all of the problems that might otherwise distort who you really are. Be there ... really be there. Be the best version of yourself.

Playing a role is both self-defeating and – to the skilled interviewer – clearly obvious. Moreover, even if you put on “a mask” that gets you the job, at some point in time the real you has got to show up. No matter how convincing the cut-out facsimile of you mirrors the résumé you wish you had, it’s the real you who will have to deliver.

“You’ll never know who you are unless you shed who you pretend to be.” Vironika Tugaleva



4. Establish the Building Blocks of Trust Early

You have a small window of opportunity to display behaviour that leads the interviewer to feel that they can trust you. Wait to be asked to sit down. Accept a drink (water, coffee) only if the interviewer is having one. Don't wait to be served. If the opportunity presents itself, go to the kitchen (or as appropriate) with the interviewer. Smile ... look the interviewer in the eye. Have a relaxed posture. If you are tense that's what you will communicate.

Your body language is an extension of what you are feeling. Sit at a slight angle to the interviewer. Sitting full on can come across as confrontational. Sit up straight. Lean forward slightly. Fidgeting, playing with your hands or slumping in the seat communicate that you would rather be someplace else. Let the interviewer set the pace and rhythm of the interview. If they have a slow, studied pattern of speech, slow down yourself. If the interviewer brings out a copy of your résumé feel free to follow suit. If not, leave your résumé in your briefcase. The interview is a behavioural dance – let the interviewer take the lead.





It's common for the initial interview(s) to be conducted online (e.g., Zoom, Teams). To be successful, several key actions are the difference that make a difference. Here we have to remember that the virtual interview is a very different process to its face-to-face sibling. The virtual interviewer will allot less time, the brain's receptors are 40% less active and the behaviours that facilitate rapport are one dimensional. The traditional interview contains subtle and nuanced messaging. By comparison, the virtual interview is like waving a series of coloured flags. Consider the following:

- Have a professional looking and uncluttered background, e.g., a bookcase, a plain background with an appropriate picture. A seascape of one of the Hawaiian Islands fools no one and, at a subconscious level, suggests deception.
- Buy a good camera and a stand for your laptop. Looking up someone's nostrils or at the, inevitable, double chin when someone is looking down is not a good look. A good camera will allow your head and shoulders to be seen full frame. Filling only 30% of the screen or displaying a wide area of screen above your head projects something less than professionalism. Light your face. Master the platform you are using. Check for sound and video ahead of time.
- Dress for an interview. Look like you want the position. Avoid overly bright colours. They are distracting. It's important to be mindful of what you share on your screen during a video call. Protect your privacy. Don't assume the interviewer won't realise you are wearing shorts.





- Practice deep breathing before the interview. Be settled and still. Bobbing your head around is distracting. Anticipate the questions; rehearse your answers. Be succinct, while, at the same time be expressive. Smile. Use your hands to express and emphasise key points.

Where more than one candidate appears to be qualified and little separates them from a leadership perspective – the client will be drawn, inevitably, to the candidate who displayed the greatest degree of rapport. It's simply how we are hard wired. Rapport is being on time. It is being prepared. It's listening. It's not speaking over the interviewer. It's going out of your way to be courteous. It's respecting a confidence. It's avoiding disparaging remarks about past and/or present colleagues. It's displaying integrity in response to any and all questions asked. It's sending a handwritten note to the interviewer thanking them for the opportunity to meet. Rapport opens the door to trust.

“When the trust account is high, communication is easy, instant, and effective.”
Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*

5. Listen, Listen, Listen

Even if you are unsure that this is the position you really want, avoid being judgmental at the interview stage. The time to step back is when you have **all** of the facts. Being nonjudgmental allows you to consider options that might otherwise be off the table. It creates both the appearance and the reality of being comfortable with who you are. And it shapes the quality of your listening. In Western cultures the assumption is that the person speaking shapes and controls the dialogue. In reality, the person with the hidden baton is the one listening. Listen like you have always wanted to be listened to.

Avoid script writing – thinking about your response while the interviewer is talking. Because we listen far faster than the speaker can deliver, it's an easy trap to fall into. To signal that you are listening, wait three beats after the interviewer has finished their sentence or question. Eye contact, leaning in and, as appropriate, a slight nod of the head further affirms that you are fully present.

Work to avoid being a passive listener. Listen in a way that interprets what is said from the interviewer's perspective. Listen for intent. Listen to the subtext. Listen for what



is meant ... and not merely what is said. Learn to move “outside” of the candidate-interviewer perspective, outside of the “dyadic loop” that frames the conversation. In your mind’s eye move to the side of the room and observe/interpret what’s really going on. That way you can make any subtle adjustments in rapport needed.

“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.” Peter Drucker

6. Competency is Judged Not so Much by What You Have Done ... But *How* You Describe What You Have Done

When everything else is set aside, you are being interviewed to unpack who you are and what you have achieved. Within that context, a masterful interviewer will seek to determine what drives you. To make money? To make a career? To make a difference? Who would you hire? Three factors have primacy when describing how you made a difference.

- i. Describe your accomplishments such that you capture what the key business challenges were, why each issue was important to the business, the





leadership challenge, how you addressed the issue, who else was involved and what the outcome was. Keep in mind, “the how” is just as important as “the what.” Your goal is to come across as the right ... and not simply the best candidate. Leave your opinion on the bench. An interview punctuated by opinion or hypothetical responses ends up being a beauty contest. Provide “the evidence” that makes you a compelling candidate. Know the numbers! Conversely, show your best side but don’t bend the truth.

- ii. In describing how past success was achieved, stand behind your success not in front of it: link critical actions to the organization’s values. Use “we” and “the team.” Use “I” only when essential. Describe how you built a constituency. The illusion that you did it on your own – for it is an illusion – in a world where tomorrow’s organization will be a team of teams, presents a major impediment to your career prospects. The best leaders I have worked with are humble (understated). At the same time, paradoxically, they are able to see what others cannot see. In doing so, they are able to do what others say cannot be done. Don’t forget, money can’t buy commitment.
- iii. Dry facts and a dull narrative will soon be forgotten. What will be remembered – what will make you stand out – is how you share “the story.” We tell a joke. We share a story. In much the same way that we cannot step into the same river twice, every time you share a story it’s always a new story. A great story causes the secretion of dopamine and oxytocin in the brain of the listener and, in doing so, changes the way people think. Storytelling not only makes people feel good, it builds empathy. That said, although negative stories can inform ... only positive stories inspire. A great story has six elements.
 - a. Context
 - b. Challenge or opportunity
 - c. Hero(s)/heroine(s) in the story (ideally, the customer figures in your story)
 - d. Struggle (overcoming)
 - e. Outcome
 - f. What was learned

As a species the decisions we make are dominated not by the facts but by emotion. Get in touch with your storytelling gene. Practice makes perfect. In



getting your point across, language isn't important ... it's everything. In the lexicon of leadership language, little is more impactful than a sentence that starts with the word "imagine." And if you want to make a lasting impression, respond to a question that speaks to your strengths with the phrase, "let me share a story." In paraphrasing the late Maya Angelou – people will forget what you say ... but they will never forget how you made them feel.

"The human species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories." Mary Catherine Bateson

7. Winning Respect is Related to the Quality of Questions Asked

A great question has three defining qualities. One: it challenges the listener's assumptions. Two: it asks for what you want. Three: using a Japanese proverb – it makes the silence louder. To be able to make a sound career decision there are a number of critical issues the interviewee must understand.⁵ You might not have an opportunity to address all of the questions outlined. Identify those you consider to be pivotal to accepting the position. The questions fall under two subheadings: the organization and the role. *Note:* revisiting issues that have already been covered earlier in the research section is quite deliberate.

The hiring organization:

- Where does the organization need to be three years from now? What contribution towards that goal is expected from this role? Will any growth be organic or through acquisition?
- How would you describe your current business model? What makes the organization special? In what way does the business have a compelling value proposition? Is that point of difference sustainable? What changes are under way? What clients/customers would you like to do business with that you don't currently have?

5 As central to orchestrating "fit," a top-drawer executive search firm will, of necessity, have already explored a number of the questions identified in this section (#7) with the client. That said – in addition to whatever input, guidance and support from the search professional is deemed professionally appropriate – the interviewee must fully work these questions through with the hiring organization themselves. Perhaps not at the first interview but certainly before making a career decision. Tomorrow's success starts today!



- What is the organization’s culture today and what does it need to be moving forward? What is happening in the business to make that shift? How do you measure culture?⁶
- What is the organization’s posture on diversity, equity and involvement? What work still needs to be done?
- What is the organization’s policy on sustainability? What projects are under way? What work still needs to be undertaken?
- What is the organization’s compelling purpose? How do employees across the organization relate to that purpose? What evidence is there?
- What are the organization’s values and how do those in key leadership roles bring those values to life inside the organization?
- How is the role of middle managers evolving?



⁶ To understand how to measure organization culture, see *The A-Z of Organization Culture*, John O. Burdett (2017). Available for download from the major book sites.



- Who are the organization’s major competitors? What do you admire in them that you would like to bring to your own organization? What is the worst thing the competition could do and what is the organization doing to combat that potential eventuality?
- Who are the organization’s most admired leaders – past and present? Why are these heroes and heroines so highly thought of?
- What is the organization’s policy on hybrid work? What’s working? What’s not working?
- What is the current rate of attrition across the organization? If warranted, what is the organization doing to address that?
- Why does top talent stay? How do you know? What is the turnover of those in key leadership roles? Why do key leaders who leave the business tend to move on?
- How does the organization give back? How is the organization’s role in society best described?

The suggested role:

- What is/are the reporting relationship(s) for this role? Is there a matrix component?
- What is the hiring manager’s leadership point of view? How is that evident?
- Why is this position available? Why did the previous incumbent move on? Why was there no internal talent available to fill this role? Note: if several leaders have failed in this role it may very well be that, using a term coined by Peter Drucker, the position is “a widow-maker.”
- What mandate is there in this role for orchestrating culture change? What actions are already under way?
- What role-specific leadership competencies define this role? Note: “role-specific.”⁷

⁷ To explore role-specific leadership competencies, see *The Empty Suit*, John O. Burdett (2016). Available for download from the major book sites.



- Would I be able to review a scorecard for the role? What are the critical performance outcomes associated with this role – for the next 12 months and beyond? Which single critical objective represents the greatest stretch (opportunity)?⁸
- Describe the peer team I will be (i) joining; and (ii) asked to lead? Note: ideally, this implies measurement by the organization.⁹
- Can you provide examples of the need for collaboration in this role?
- What is the organization’s philosophy and practice regarding leadership development for a role such as this? Note: a sub-component is for you to make a determination regarding the hiring manager’s coaching capability. If the role demands significant stretch, the hiring manager’s coaching mastery (or lack of) becomes a pivotal issue.
- How might the integration process unfold? What support (e.g., personal coach) would be available?

In addition to the questions posed there are several generic questions worth raising. “Is there any aspect of my background that you would like me to drill down into?” (Conveys openness.) “What is the timing for this appointment ... and what are the next steps?” (Communicates interest in the role without being pushy.) If it is the hiring manager who is interviewing ask, “What is your thinking regarding work-life balance?” “How would you describe your leadership style?” “What are you proudest of both as a leader and in terms of what you have achieved in your current role?” Note: These latter three questions start to unlock the leadership orientation and character of the person you would be working for. It’s also a good idea to introduce a question where, in providing the answer, the hiring manager is given an opportunity to feel good about what they do. Cheering works!

“Yesterday’s leaders were expected to know the answers. Those who are handed the reins of leadership today will be judged on the quality of the questions that they ask.”
John O. Burdett

⁸ Ideally, this would be contained within a performance scorecard.

⁹ To understand how to measure team performance, see *TEAM*, John O. Burdett (2015). Available for download from the major book sites.



Conclusion

The dictionary describes a habit as, “A settled or regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up.” We all know habits are difficult to move away from. The reason? The brain is programmed to save energy, and until it becomes second nature (automatic), establishing a new habit makes the brain work harder. With the same energy saving rationale in mind, the brain purges memories it doesn’t need.

We think we are in charge of our lives, but in truth we follow a pattern of behaviour shaped by established habits. There are positive habits, of course. Fortunately, we can change our habits. We change habits through: (1) **R**eflection regarding what we really want from life; (2) **R**ecognising that what we are doing isn’t moving us towards our goals; (3) **R**eplacing an old habit with a new one; (4) **R**epetition of the new behaviour; and (5) **R**ealising the value of and taking pride from the new routine.

The 7 Critical Habits of a Compelling Candidate represent a new routine of sorts. A framework to follow when faced with an important interview. Remember, you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression. The text also suggests the questions





to consider when joining a new team, in pursuing a collaborative initiative with a key customer/supplier and/or building a new constituency generally.

An interview is a conversation with a purpose. Your goal is not simply to win the position but to be fully informed as to whether (or not) it's the right job for you. Make the interviewer a collaborative partner in that regard. It behooves everyone involved in the process ... that the hiring decision is the right decision.

When there were too many applicants chasing too few jobs there was a natural propensity for talent acquisition to be dominated, on the part of the hiring organization, by an “assessment mentality.” The acute shortage of top talent reframes that paradigm. In its place is the need to build a strategic, transparent, collaborative, win-win relationship between the organization and the candidate. As we move forward, AI will potentially – when transparency is assured – assess potential, reduce human bias, evaluate communication skills, provide the recruiter with feedback regarding team orientation, build baseline data about fit generally (for multiple occupancy roles), determine cognitive capability and even scope out the candidate’s personality. But we are a long, long way from a machine being able to establish trust.

Read through and reflect on the suggestions made. Strive to make the ideas – when viewed collectively – a positive habit. Good luck with the upcoming interview. Prepare, build rapport, take full advantage of your reading habits, make your contribution evidence-based, share meaningful and relevant stories, ask great questions, be the best version of yourself ... and you will be tough to compete with.

“Your body language is an extension of what you are feeling.”



John O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Leadership Beyond Crisis Series came out in 2021. In 2022, in addition to a number of leading-edge articles, he brought out a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*.

"Listening is not a spectator sport. It's an intense, full-bodied, emotionally involved, empathetic experience."
- J. O. Burdett

