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The Sales Interview: Differentiating Among Top Producers, Rebel Producers, and Those Who Struggle to the Minimums

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT: The sales interview is one of the most challenging evaluations you'll encounter, with a hefty impact on your organization's bottom line. That's because top producers often march to their own drummers. Some focus on the quantity of transactions, while others build relationships over the long haul. Some consistently produce in the stratosphere, while others merely earn enough to get by. Some have more of a nine-to-five mind-set than an entrepreneurial mentality and consequently rarely perform with distinction. Still others unfortunately define success not in terms of their accomplishments, but by their peers' failures. Although such "rebel producers" often close the month at the top of the charts, they pull down the production of their team members in the process.

So, how do you determine the potential of the stockbroker or loan officer or computer sales representative sitting in front of you? Equally important, how do you anticipate the impact that this individual will have in terms of complementing your existing staff? Bear in mind that your task will be made fuzzier by the fact that salespeople are skilled at saying all the right things and landing on their feet in cold-call situations—which is exactly what your interview represents to them. In addition, many salespeople are criticized for selling their business better than doing their business, which means that many of them will sell themselves better than they'll actually

perform on the job. So where does that leave you as the line manager with ultimate say over who gets to play on the team?

Because there are no clear-cut questions and answers that assess sales professionals consistently, you'll have to employ a series of questions that will help paint a picture of the individual's manner of doing business—a group of questions that, taken together, will address drive, energy, impulsiveness, discipline, and commitment. Patterns and inconsistencies will emerge only when these topics are addressed from several different angles.

42 *How do you rank competitively among other account executives in terms of your production?*

Why Ask This Question?

Salespeople are typically bottom-line types who relish the chase of closing a deal and who measure themselves via their peer ranking. Opening your interview with a bottom-line question regarding the individual's production sets the tone for the rest of the meeting. Those with the most to offer will challenge you to provide them with even greater responsibilities. The opportunities they're looking for will come in the form of stronger commission payouts or long-term management opportunities.

In comparison, those who haven't been able to attain consistent sales often change jobs because they're not making enough money. Excuses and apologies drive candidates from company to company searching for illusory payout packages that will earn them higher wages. The reason why they're not more successful, however, is typically found in their inability to establish rapport, identify a prospect's needs, distinguish features from benefits, overcome objections, or, most important, close the deal. Your mission, consequently, will be to locate each individual's shortcomings.

Analyzing the Response

Good Answers. In response to this question, candidates often rank themselves according to percentages and quartiles:

“I rank among the leading 10 percent of auto sales executives in my region.”

“My numbers are typically in the top 25th percentile of stockbrokers in my firm.”

“I received a President's Club award for finishing last year as the number 4 producer companywide.”

“My production typically placed me in the lower 50th percentile in terms of sales, but that’s because. . . .”

Obviously, those who enjoy the distinguished reputation of ranking at the top have no difficulty sharing those achievements with you. The sales field is all about competition, and those who perform with distinction relish their positions of power. In such cases, most of your interview will be spent discussing how the top producer got there, stays there, and plans to obtain the next rung on the success ladder.



The last example, however, points to the problem producer. Salespeople who do not reach acceptable performance benchmarks immediately volunteer reasons why their numbers were not higher. Sometimes excuses are acceptable; other times, they have very little credibility. Only you know what separates excellence from mediocrity in your field. Your primary focus, however, in dealing with individuals who rank themselves at the bottom of the heap lies in identifying the patterns for their excuses. Short-term tenures with similar types of companies usually spell inconsistent performance. In such instances, this interview question will immediately raise red flags in your mind. Proceed with caution, and measure the answers that follow in this light.

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What are the two most common objections you face, and how do you deal with them?

Why Ask This Question?

Role-playing maintains a critical part in the sales interview. Because there are typically no more than two or three major objections that any account executive faces, it’s important to hear how the candidate rebuts common rejections. This is an opportunity for the two of you to match wits. Therefore, this role-play will provide you with insights into the individual’s sophistication and creativity as the two of you measure each other up.

Analyzing the Response

What are the most typical objections in your industry? Here are some common ones:

“We don’t have any needs for your product.”

“We’re happy with our current provider.”

“We’ve got a long list of vendors who have already sent in sales materials. If

you'd like to add your public relations material to our list, then when we open up for bids next January, we'll consider your proposal."



No matter what field of sales you're in, these stonewalling show-stoppers typically throw salespeople off. So the first thing you want to observe is how confidently the candidate attacks the objection. Persuasion plays a big role, after all, in establishing rapport with new accounts. The second issue lies in the creativity of the individual's response. If her rebuttals sound like everyone else's in town, there's a chance that she hasn't given much thought to what makes her product or service unique.

Therefore, beware of candidates who regurgitate hackneyed responses like: "Well, what would you do if you suddenly needed a . . .," "I bet we could offer more competitive rates than your current provider . . .," or "Change is good. I'm sure that's how you found your current vendor in the first place. Why not give me a chance to show you what I could do?" Such trite and overused comebacks typically result in very little new business.

Good Answers. Look for responses, instead, that reveal creative insights and go beyond the obvious. For example, a stockbroker who possesses a CPA license might respond to an objection like "I've been working with my current broker for fourteen years" with this rebuttal:

"Nancy, I respect the relationship you have with your current provider. My only suggestion to you is that I might be able to provide you with financial advice under certain circumstances where your current broker can't. I'm a CPA, and my niche in the investment field is to help clients plan their portfolios with an eye toward the tax ramifications of fairly complex investment setups. I wouldn't expect you to jettison a personal relationship that you have with a friend just because I happened to phone you today. But I'd like your permission to send you information about my practice since I go where most brokers fear to tread. A number of attorneys depend on me to provide them with timely tax and estate planning advice, and I've been successful at tying that back-end knowledge into front-end investing. Does that sound like something that could eventually benefit you?"

Similarly, a copier salesperson might respond to the objection "I have no plans to purchase new machinery" like this:

"Doris, copiers and fax machines are only the products I sell, not the reason why I'm in business. I think that any vendor worth his salt will try to establish long-term relationships with as many companies as possible. The way I do that is by offering value-added service to people who need help when they're in a pinch. If your systems go down and your current provider is unavailable, call me. I'll be happy to personally walk you through the problem and find quick

and practical solutions. Hopefully, if enough of a rapport is established over time, when you need to purchase new machinery, you'll naturally think of me. I know that doesn't sound like the way most copier salespeople develop business, but it's worked exceptionally well for me. I'd like to leave you my name and number in case I could ever be of service."

What's common to these responses? Creativity and uniqueness! People who leverage their backgrounds or education to a customer's advantage maintain an edge in the client development arena. Similarly, those who put the customer before the sale build goodwill and credibility. After all, not many stockbrokers hold CPA status. Most salespeople, as a matter of fact, do very little to understand what their clients do. So when an executive recruiter, for example, gets a certificate in human resources management in order to learn his clients' business, he'll stand out. Look for such commitment to the industry being serviced.

Salespeople who present their services on a problem-to-solution level and who show patience and goodwill in the sales process turn prospects on. There's no sales pitch and, even more important, the salesperson shows a commitment to building long-term relationships. Sophisticated, relationship-driven salespeople will consistently outperform transaction-driven, "buck-shot" types who see no farther than this month's billing log.

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. Once you've gotten a rebuttal, pose a follow-up query as if you were the customer. Does the candidate respond to questions at face value, or does she try to close each response by setting an appointment? How many questions will she field before gaining some type of commitment from you? How does she respond to your requests for unreasonable discounts or service? On-the-spot role-plays, like pictures, paint a thousand words. Use them to gain valuable insights into the individual's style, character, and business savvy.

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Role-play with me, if you will, presenting yourself to me over the phone as if you were a headhunter. Can you convince me that this "product" you're selling is worth my time?

Why Ask This Question?

No, this isn't only an exercise for hiring potential recruiters. Instead, it is an exercise to replace a hackneyed and trite interviewing query used way too often in corporate America: "Sell me the pen." The problem with the "sell me the pen" scenario is that it's so overused that candidates come to expect

it. That being the case, they prepare themselves to sell pens better than they sell their actual products.

The reason why this query has stood the test of time is because it forces job candidates to distinguish between the object's features and benefits; to overcome any objections that you, the pretend prospective buyer, could raise; and, most important, to "close" you on the purchase. However, Question 44 does all this much more effectively without being so predictable, so let's take a look at it.

Analyzing the Response

Asking candidates to sell themselves to you is challenging because they have to be totally objective about a very personal topic—namely, themselves! Distinguishing features from benefits isn't so easy when discussing their own strengths and limitations as well as what makes them stand out among their peers. Furthermore, because of the intimacy of the subject, most candidates are doubly challenged in providing role-play answers that mesh well with their interview responses. That extra dimension of accountability often adds some circumspection to candidates' otherwise bold responses and makes overcoming objections and closing you on the hire a tougher challenge.

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. In evaluating candidates' responses, expect some initial discomfort. After all, no matter how confident candidates are, this exercise does set them up to brag about themselves. (And most people on a job interview don't want to go overboard in that area.) Next, gauge the presentation. Does the individual start off the sales presentation timidly with a trite "How are you today?" or does the person get to the point right away? A creative presentation, for example, might sound like this:

"Ms. Employer, I'm calling to tell you about a copier sales executive who's expressed an interest in meeting with your company because he's aware of your reputation, he works for a direct competitor, and he's thoroughly researched your organization. He ranks among the top 20 percent of producers in his company and has a proven track record of taking a poorly performing territory and increasing market share above the national average within two years. Would you consider talking to someone like that?"

Good Answers. It won't always sound this smooth, but the presentation should at least offer tangible results and future benefits. You're then free to lob some objections at the individual, including, "I have no openings," "Tell me more about him," and "What's he looking for?" After presenting an objection like "We have no openings," look for candidate rebuttals like, "Well,

you know, Ms. Employer, it's been my experience that strong companies would set up an office in a closet for someone who could immediately add to their top-line revenues. Perhaps you'd consider comparing his track record to some of your existing staff." Such heads-up rebuttals show a great deal of ingenuity, creativity, and wit.

Finally, the close in this scenario lies in setting up the interview. See how aggressively the individual overcomes your objections and gets you to commit to meeting with a top producer if only on an exploratory basis. It's an exercise that will shed lots of light onto candidates' self-esteem levels and their abilities to present a product that they're not naturally inclined to sell.

45 *How do you define your closing style?*

Why Ask This Question?

If there is one area in sales where people fail, it's in their inability to persuade a prospect to take a recommended course of action. Some people just never seem to master this one technique regardless of the amount of training they've undergone. That's because closing skills really can't be taught; they stem from innate personality traits. As a result, people either (a) close prospects aggressively by repetitively asking for the sale and wearing the prospect down emotionally, or (b) make a logical case for why customers would want the product and then induce customers to "close themselves."

Both styles work: There are too many fields of sales to isolate one closing style as *the* optimal manner for doing business. Although top producers usually fall into the aggressive closers group, many successful salespeople are gentle persuaders as well (especially when dealing with more sophisticated clientele). The brand of closer that you want will ultimately depend on your product line and corporate culture.

Analyzing the Response

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. Candidates typically respond that they're capable of adapting their style of closing to a prospect's needs. Such a wishy-washy response does little to get to the heart of the matter: closing abilities. Of course, you will already have experienced the candidate's real-life closing skills firsthand in the previous role-plays about overcoming common objections and headhunting. Still, this self-appraisal query completes the picture by allowing the candidates to explain why they consider themselves soft or hard closers.

Therefore, to encourage a more detailed response, ask candidates to grade their closing skills on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being very aggressive, 1

being very benign). Such a weighted ranking exercise will result in responses like this:

“I’d consider myself a 4, meaning that I don’t really believe that aggressive closing tactics work in the field of employee benefits consulting. Clients expect their consultants to be excellent information and networking resources, so cold-call techniques and a transaction mentality simply won’t work. Not that I can’t make a strong recommendation to a client who’s sitting on the fence regarding a certain issue. But you’ll notice in my role-play of overcoming objections that I didn’t push too hard on that first sales call. Building relationships takes time, and I’d rather nurture someone’s business in small increments than aggressively push my way through the front door.”

or

“I consider myself a 9 on a scale of 10. In auto sales, you’ve got to strike while the prospect is sitting in front of you. At our branch, statistics bore out that once customers walked out the door, they had only a 7 percent chance of returning. So if you didn’t close them on the spot, you lost the sale. If my role-play appeared to be overly aggressive, it’s because anything less would result in failure.”

In addition, you might choose the following behavioral question to aid the candidate in this self-appraisal exercise: “How do you define hard versus soft selling? Give me an example of how you’ve handled both situations.” In this instance, you’ll solicit real-life stories from an applicant’s past that reveal an inclination either to educate and gently persuade a customer (that is, a problem-solving, rational approach) or to push reaction buttons that appeal more to a prospect’s emotions and fears.

Other questions to determine an individual’s closing style include:

“Tell me about the last difficult sales negotiation you experienced. Could your sales manager have accused you of debating with customers rather than persuading them?”

“When is the last time you chose to stick to your guns and lost a sale? How do you determine when it’s prudent to walk away from a deal?”

“Realistically assessing your style, do you find that you sometimes hesitate to ask for a sale? If so, what circumstances or kinds of people hold you back?”

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All salespeople need to find equilibrium between (a) high-volume production numbers and (b) quality. Which philosophy drives your sales style more?

Why Ask This Question?

Most salespeople will tell you that they’re basically balanced in terms of harmonizing quality and quantity. Reality bears out a slightly different

truth, however. Most people lean in one direction more than the other. Top producers are typically much more quantity driven. They close deals and don't look backward. If they're lucky, they've got a great assistant to tie up the administrative loose ends. If not, they tie up their own loose ends when they get around to it, but not until all the deals that could possibly close that day or month are done.

Those who define themselves as more quality driven, in comparison, usually close fewer deals, but all the details are neatly accounted for. They take the time to follow up with customers to ensure their satisfaction. Their paperwork trails are logical and easy to follow. And they pride themselves on building a solid referral base to ensure future business. Yes, it takes longer to make the sale for these individuals, but does the smaller volume potential mean any less of a return on investment for your company over the long haul?

Analyzing the Response

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. Only you can answer this question on the basis of your own sales style, corporate philosophy, and the amount of time you allow salespeople to show profitability. A smaller number of deals, however, doesn't necessarily equate with minimized revenues. If the profit-per-deal ratio is higher, then the number of deals closed becomes a secondary factor. Therefore, when employing this question, ask:

“Please distinguish the *quantity* of sales from the *profitability* per sale.”

“Give me an example of your ability to structure high-point deals.”

“What's the size of your average sale, and how could you have gotten more mileage out of it by selling more add-on products or configuring your mark-up differently?”

For example, in the mortgage lending business, sub par borrowers with poorer credit histories typically carry a greater risk that they won't repay their loans. To offset that additional risk, lending companies charge higher fees and percentage rates with variable payback terms. A loan officer who effectively structures higher-point deals—even though the volume of those transactions might be relatively low—ultimately rewards herself with higher commission earnings. A high-volume loan officer who structures fees below market, however, will typically earn very little above her base salary.

Therefore, to further confirm your insights, distinguish between the candidate's monthly guarantee and gross monthly earnings. The difference will be the commission payout, and it should typically at least double the base salary.

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Tell me about the last time you failed to meet quota. How many times did that happen over the past year, and what plan of action did you take to get back on track?

Why Ask This Question?

The quality-quantity debate will always generate definitive insights into a candidate's way of doing business. When push comes to shove, however, sales boils down to hard-core numbers. You'll always read on a candidate's résumé about quotas exceeded and top production awards. However, you won't find out about the hiccups in the individual's production unless you ask.

Analyzing the Response

Failing to meet quota is nothing to be ashamed of if you're a salesperson. It's happened to everyone—a lot. "Racehorses"—performance-driven, short-term-minded people—work in sprints. "Plow horses"—consistent billers—provide you with a consistent return, but rarely win the Kentucky Derby. The brand of salesperson you desire is up to you.

If the candidate had four or five inadequate months in a twelve-month period, you should be concerned. Meeting quota 70 percent of the time is probably a realistic expectation (although this can vary from industry to industry). Even if the candidate may bill well when he's hot, too many production gaps not only will lower aggregate annual production results but may also indicate problematic outside influences in the person's life, mood swings, and other inconsistencies that could negatively affect the team's performance.

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. If the candidate responds that there were no problems making quota, follow up by asking, "How much does your production vary from month to month?" Learn about production changes that might indicate large rises and falls (even though the falls never went below the quota threshold). Finally, if a candidate provides only a vague response, ask, "Doris, we're very thorough in terms of reference checking prospective new hires. How would your past supervisor at XYZ Company grade the fluctuations in your production? What would she say we could do to give you added support in that area?" Remember, asking candidates to volunteer shortcomings will provide you with a blueprint for future direction and focus.

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With no undue flattery, if you will, grade me on how well I'm conducting this interview: What can you tell me about my sales and management style on the basis of the questions I'm asking you?

Why Ask This Question?

People-reading skills are critical to any sales executive's success. Because perception skills can't be taught by training, each candidate needs to have a fairly well defined ability to recognize a stranger's personality and business style. Without that innate ability to adapt to another person's mode of communication, establishing rapport remains difficult, and sales opportunities will be missed. After all, prospects shouldn't have to adapt themselves to the salesperson's style: The salesperson is responsible for breaking through communication barriers and immediately establishing common ground.

Analyzing the Response

Testing an individual's people-reading skills should provide insights into how the candidate sizes up strangers. Since you're the only person that the two of you know in common, you might as well make yourself the focus of attention. This query will then reveal how accurately the candidate evaluates and bonds with newly introduced people on the spot.

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. Since the candidate needs to gauge your values as a manager to answer this question, save this query until the second half of the interview. Note the kinds of words the interviewee uses to describe you: "You're a really nice guy and you like your job" is a cop-out response because it's so superficial. Push the candidate further by asking for specifics regarding your management and sales styles:

"What would it be like working for me?"

"Where do you think I'd have the least amount of patience?"

"Tell me where I ranked as a salesperson when I was on the floor."

A candidate should be able to tell a lot about an interviewer by his attention to detail, his logical follow-up queries, and his questioning techniques. ("Behavior-based" interviewers, for example, come across a lot differently than "stress" interviewers.) Similarly, a sloppy office with mounds of paperwork makes a different impression from a neat office with neatly stacked files. These follow-up queries should consequently generate some firm re-

sponses from even the most gun-shy candidates. Their answers won't necessarily be correct, but there should be a logical basis for their responses.

Good Answers. For example, a perceptive response might sound like this:

“You’re meticulous because everything is in order on your desk and on your bookshelf. You’re taking lots of notes, so you obviously study applicants for later comparison and approach final decisions objectively once you’ve collected all the data. And just by asking this question, I see that you’re not afraid of hearing rejections, so you obviously feel confident that you know your stuff. Finally, you listen very intently to every word that I say without finishing my sentences for me, so you’ve got excellent listening skills! I bet you expect the same kind of clean operation from your sales staff, so working with you would mean that I’d have to dot my i’s and cross my t’s.”

Don’t be surprised, by the way, to hear some undue flattery. Do, however, watch out for candidates who shower you with insincere, unfounded compliments. That’s a sales style in and of itself, but that approach went the way of the dinosaur once sophisticated consumers educated themselves and learned to avoid the Slick Eddies of this world.

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How important is the base salary component to you? Would you prefer a straight commission if it offered you the potential for an additional 35 percent in aggregate earnings over the base salary?

Why Ask This Question?

Measuring candidates’ risk factors says a lot about their sales mentality. Those who cling to high guarantees often come from conservative, risk-averse households where stability and steady income took precedence over risk-based earnings. These people have more of a “I work to live” attitude, and they typically see their work as a means to an end—namely, putting bread on the table.

In comparison, entrepreneurs “live to work” regardless of the amount of money they make. Their parents were most likely successful salespeople who opened their own businesses at fairly young ages and perhaps experienced a bankruptcy or two. The kids opened corner Kool-Aid stands once they turned five and have been bitten by the profit bug ever since. These are the people who never give up the helm of the ship even after they’ve made their millions. In short, they typically define themselves by the level of material success they generate.

Analyzing the Response

Distinguishing aggregate payout potential from guaranteed earnings could be telling. A salesperson with a husband, two children, and a mortgage may opt for a higher base pay with a lower payout potential because the timing in her life dictates conservatism over risk. If that's the reason why this woman is sitting in your office for an interview (and you happen to offer the highest base pay program in town while all your competitors offer only straight commission), then you have lots to offer her. In this case, the problem that made her decide to leave her past company is solved by your organization.



If, on the other hand, you're interviewing someone who's fresh out of college, who considers himself a millionaire in the making, and who would opt for the \$1,500/month base plus minimal bonus over the straight commission package, then beware: You're probably looking at the classic risk-averse mentality mentioned previously. The moral of the story: Even if you don't offer a choice of earnings options (among base salary, commissions, and bonuses, for example), ask candidates how they'd ideally like to see their pay structured. Obviously, the higher the risk that candidates are willing to assume, the greater the reward for you and the aggregate payout for them.

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Tell me about your quality ratios: How many prospects do you typically see before closing a sale?

Why Ask This Question?

Locking salespeople into a rhythm of activity dictates long-term success. Top producers focus on daily activity objectives rather than on monthly production dollars because daily activities are in their control and production results are not. Once the salesperson identifies the necessary daily activity numbers that he needs to reach his production targets, you need to question his *quality ratios*. After all, the number of outbound phone calls and face-to-face sales presentations is limited. Tighter quality ratios, however, guarantee more results for the effort expended. Consequently, questioning an account executive regarding his activity level without balancing the equation from the perspective of quality ratios is the biggest mistake that sales interviewers make.

Analyzing the Response

Good Answers. The purpose of this exercise is to measure candidates' understanding of their own quality ratios and the activity numbers they need to

make monthly production quotas. The most practical way to apply this question is to ask the candidate to reverse order the activities necessary to make a sale. For example, a pharmaceutical salesperson who is expected to sell \$10,000 in prosthetic devices per month might answer the question this way:

“The cost of an average prosthetic device that we sell is \$2,000 to \$3,000. To meet my monthly quota, therefore, I need to sell four products a month, or one a week. My ratio of presentations to sales is about fifty to one, so I need to visit about ten medical offices a day in order to make fifty presentations per week and, in turn, close one sale. So, if my production ever drifts lower than it should, I make sure that I’m hitting my ten visits a day, and then I let my quality ratios take care of themselves.”



Beware candidates who have difficulty articulating their quality ratios. Without a thorough understanding of the average activities necessary to generate a sale, there’s a great chance that the candidate hasn’t given enough thought to the trade. If that’s the case, challenge the person to calculate on the spot the “numbers trail” that leads to closed deals. Take notes on the out-loud calculations to ensure that the estimates (and numeric reasoning skills) are accurate.

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. Finally, once those activity numbers are defined, query further:

“If it takes fifty presentations to close one sale, what would you need to do to tighten your quality ratio to forty-five to one? How could I, as your prospective sales manager, strengthen your reward-to-effort ratio? How could you structure five more presentations per week to close more deals every year?”

Combined with the candidate’s production numbers, quality ratios will help you determine whether the individual focuses on high-payoff activities and maximizes available time.

51 *How much does production vary from desk to desk in your office?*

Why Ask This Question?

Identifying huge discrepancies in per-desk production averages may point to a serious issue known as the “rebel producer” syndrome. Rebel producers are very difficult to manage, and they destroy camaraderie and teamwork. Of course, determining how difficult an individual is to manage belongs in the reference-checking process. After all, previous managers will be much

more forthcoming about a candidate's inclinations to undermine her peers than will the applicant herself. Still, allowing self-assessments in this critical area often points out problem situations that should be more fully explored in a background investigation.

Analyzing the Response

How do you know whether you've got a potential rebel producer on your hands? There are two telltale signs of this syndrome: (1) a distorted ratio of per-desk billings and (2) a higher-than-expected turnover rate. For example, if you find out that the candidate in question produces 50 percent of her branch's revenues, your first reaction will be ecstatic: After all, you'll feel that you caught the goose that lays the golden egg! If a copier salesperson produces \$600,000 of her branch's annual \$1.2 million revenues, what could possibly be wrong with that?

After you think about it, though, you realize that this is a four-person office. If Kathy is generating \$600,000 in revenues, then three other sales reps are producing only \$600,000 among themselves: roughly \$200,000 each. Since Kathy triples everyone else's production, ask her to account for the discrepancy. If all of her counterparts are trainees, then the disparity in billings certainly makes sense.

Kathy tells you, however, that everyone in the branch has similar tenure with the company. So why would the company keep all those underperformers who aren't making any money, you reason, when Kathy is holding the bar so high? Perhaps it's because she's a rebel producer who indeed makes a lot of money, but who, because of her insecurity, needs lots of "little failures" around her to convince her of her worth.

How to Get More Mileage out of the Question. If you find such a gross disparity in production among staff members, you should deftly probe for more information: "Kathy, what are the typical problems and grievances that plague your branch, and what has employee turnover been like over the past two years?" You learn from this follow-up query that branch turnover is greater than 100 percent per year—far exceeding what you consider acceptable. When questioned about this enigma, Kathy has no response: Apparently everyone else out there is having problems keeping up with her and can't take the pressure.



These telltale signs point to a top producer with very little empathy for the people around her. They also point to a management team paralyzed by the rebel's production because she's keeping the branch alive. Is Kathy the wrong person for your organization? It's too

early to tell. Instruct Kathy, however, that in checking references, you believe in talking not only with supervisors but with subordinates as well. Peers and subordinates in this case should be able to provide you with valuable insights into the individual's penchant for being a team player and maintaining a positive work environment.

Ending up with a high-needs superstar could ruin all that you've built in a particular unit. It will cause conflict and turnover and, more significantly, impede your ability to attract other top producers. In short, your branch will never earn much more than that one producer's billings because you'll never be able to build a staff on that foundation.