

Select New Hires Based on Abilities, Not Successes

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I'm intrigued by how congress confirms presidential appointments. When the president nominates someone for a cabinet position such as Secretary of Defense, congress reviews the nomination and votes to confirm or reject the appointment. In their review process, congress often subjects the nominee to intense questioning that more closely resembles an interrogation than an interview.

As part of the confirmation process, congress reviews the nominee's background and track record. When they uncover past mistakes and wrongdoings, members of congress swarm on the nominee like a hawk about to eat its lunch. It seems the few nominees who escape the wrath of congress and reach easy confirmation are those without blemish. Yet in my experience, it is those with a track record of mistakes and those who have dealt with adversity who are most qualified to lead. As a citizen, I don't want someone leading my country who has only enjoyed the easy street of success. Neither would I want someone leading my business without having been through tough times and the crucible of adversity.

When hiring someone, what do you look for? Do you look for people with a track record of success or a track record of experience? Success is a tempting trait to look for, but just as important, if not more so, is a person's experience. People's experience—mistakes included—along with the lessons they've learned, make them the most qualified. Would you rather hire a successful sales person who has only taken orders, or a sales person who has had to work especially hard to make her sales, and by the way lose a few sales in the process? Would you rather hire an engineer who has only solved simple problems, or one who has overcome many complex problems, and made a few mistakes along the way? Most hiring managers would rather hire the latter, people who had to overcome adversity, made some mistakes, and developed a deeper level of skill.

A history of success, especially a short one, doesn't guarantee that a person knows much of anything. Past success and prosperity don't guarantee that a person is highly competent any more than it guarantees that the person benefited from a fortuitous market, a vibrant economy, or the work of someone else. Adversity and mistakes, however, do ensure that people have experience and lessons to learn from.

Don't misunderstand; I'm a proponent of success. But don't let someone's success be your only selection criteria. Success on its own is not a reliable predictor of future performance. Success also carries some baggage. The more successful people are, the more egotistical they tend to become and the less likely they are to learn or change. When people are successful, whether due to their own hard work or lucky circumstances, they figure whatever they are doing is working and so why change. If you hire someone who has seen only success and never overcome adversity, or made their share of mistakes, the chances are good that they know little and will learn little else.

People who are most successful are action-oriented. They take risks. They are not afraid of making mistakes, looking foolish, or even failing. As a result, action-oriented people have track records that include mistakes and failures. Hiring managers who evaluate people only on successes overlook the people who are the most action-oriented and potentially have the most to offer.

Baseball's best hitters and homerun record holders are also at the top of the strikeout list. Akio Morita and Masaru Ibuka sold only one hundred of their automatic rice cookers because the cookers burned the rice. Their product was a complete failure, but their failure wasn't an accurate reflection of their actual ability. Later they built an inexpensive tape recorder for Japanese schools that formed the foundation of the highly successful Sony Corporation. Isaac Newton, the seventeenth-century English scientist who is considered one of the most influential people in human history, failed at running his family's farm and did poorly in school.



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Ulysses S. Grant, the eighteenth US President and Union general in the American Civil War who is considered one of the greatest military strategists of all time, was a clerk in his family's leather goods store before enlisting to serve in the war. Most anyone who has achieved greatness has a track record that includes poor performances and failures. There are roles that anyone could be put in, including some of the world's most acclaimed people, that would guarantee their failure. The difference between failing and succeeding is sometimes a very fine line between being in the right role at the right time or being in the wrong role at the wrong time.

The characteristic that is most important to understand when hiring people is what they have learned from their experience. It is the extent to which they have dealt with and overcome adversity. It is less about what they accomplished in their past and more about what they are capable of doing in the future. It is about what they know and can do, not simply the results they were associated with in the past.

When hiring people, look for abilities, particularly abilities that have been honed through experience and adversity. Look for people who have the mistakes to prove their experience and lessons learned. Look for people who said and did things they wished they didn't, but learned from them and now know better what not to say or do. If all you look for are people with perfect track records, either give them an easy job or be prepared for them to make many mistakes.

This article adapted from content in Mike Hawkins' book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches. Mike is award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.activatingyourambition.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.alpinelink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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