



How to hire a team of A-players

With Eric Herrenkohl

VISTAGE

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Recruiting is a leadership priority as well as a HR priority.

The best leaders owe it to themselves to learn how to become the best recruiters. A great leader or coach that can figure out how to get the best players on their team will have greater wins.

Recruiter-in-Chief

About 10 years ago Eric was speaking for the Engineers Club in St. Louis. There were roughly 100 engineers, 99% of which were between the ages of 25-35. However, there was one gentleman that did not fit this profile. Sitting in front of Eric was a quiet, professional 55-year-old man. He sparked Eric's curiosity. Eric wanted to figure out what he was doing there. At the end of the program Eric asked him, "What is the value that you find participating in this group?" He replied confidently, "That is simple, I'm a Recruiter-in-Chief for my business." His presence was intentional. He was there to build relationships, invest time with talent and get on their radar screen. He wanted to be remembered, so that when one of the engineers was ready to make a move they would call him.

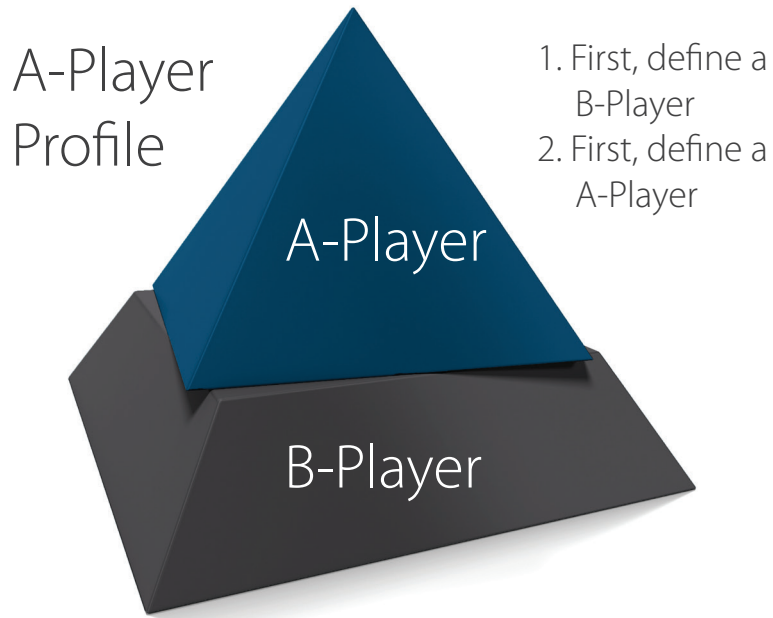
As a leader, think about becoming a Recruiter-in-Chief, owning the recruiting responsibility and modeling it.

If each leader in your organization gets serious about actively recruiting top talent you'll find that in 18 to 24 months your organization will perform at a higher level.

Creating an A-Player Profile

Instead of the traditional open conversation around what everyone thinks of a candidate, the A-Player profile provides a much more scientific process around assessment.

The first step involves defining a B-Player. Before you can know what a real rock star looks like in a particular role, you have to know what a solid citizen looks like. A solid citizen gets the job done reliably. On the other hand, an A-Player does everything a B-Player does, but takes it to the next level. Once you understand the job requirements and competencies of a B-Player, you can define your A-Player.



From here you'll create a scorecard with three columns for each competency. In this example we use leadership as the competency.

A C-Player has no one following them, a B-Player tells people what to do and relies on their skill and expertise and A-Players take an entirely different approach. They insist and require people to think for themselves, provide coaching and guidance and spend more of their time asking questions. These characteristics are the makings of an A-player leader.

Scorecard		
<i>Leadership</i>		
C	B	A
No evidence of anyone following them	Directive leader	Coach and Catalyst

How do you find more A-Players?

1. Formally or informally, interview two people per month.

You should always be interviewing, whether or not you have an immediate “hole” to fill. When you set that objective for your management team, you’ll find you have a wide pool of prospective new hires when you need them. This is a discipline; you have to be dedicated and intentional to reap the rewards.

2. Create your Farm Team.

Create a list of potential prospects that you can pull from when the need arises, similar to how Major League Baseball teams can pull talent from the minor leagues at any time. Keep your bench full.

3. Cultivate at least one great referral source.

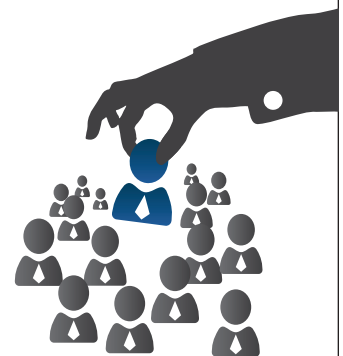
Referrals are a great way to hire people because they come recommended and prequalified. For example, the insurance industry will tell you the ratio is 200 to 1 for cold call recruiting to hire one person. On the other hand, when a referral is involved, the odds are 6 to 1. The numbers don’t lie; referrals are efficient. The best referrals come from people that really understand your business such as employees, vendors, brokers, suppliers or customers.

4. Invite A-Players to events that showcase your company culture and people.

Host events that bring people from the outside in. Whether it’s an educational workshop, sporting event or community activity, providing exposure to your company and what makes it unique is a great opportunity to attract talent. Also, think about the conferences, tradeshow, trainings and events you already attend and how you can use them to develop relationships that may turn into valuable hires.

How do you get B-Players to become A-Players?

If the B-Player has the capability and a strong work ethic, but does not have the skill and experience, you can coach them and provide learning opportunities. Another approach is using the scorecard to be explicit about the expectations of the job. Sometimes employees that have good integrity and intent, but don’t exhibit the performance standards required, just need clarity about the job. Clearly explain where they are today and how you will coach them to where they need to be. However, if you cannot turn things around in 6 months, it’s next to impossible to turn B-Players into A-Players without making their jobs smaller.



Interviewing and the Economic Power of Good Looks

If you don't know how to ask the right interview questions, you're going to find yourself hiring good looking, articulate people, but not necessarily the right person for the role.

The three most important questions to ask in an interview:

- 1. For each job ask the candidate to tell you about the company and what they did in the role.** This helps provide context so you can ask meaningful questions later on.
- 2. Ask the candidate to tell you about their results, accomplishments and outcomes.**
Ask for specifics on what was different or improved from when they started in the role compared to when they left.
- 3. Ask any and every open-ended follow-up question that helps crack the programmed answer open.** Ask follow-up questions like: How did you go about doing that? What were the key lessons you learned? What were the mistakes you made? How did that work? What was your role and what were the roles of others on your team? What was the strategy?

If you ask these questions for every role on a resume you will get a picture of the pattern of accomplishments or lack thereof that someone has generated throughout their career.

Many of us have heard about behavioral based interviewing. Behavioral based interviewing asks questions like, "Tell me a time when you had to deal with a difficult customer," or, "provide an example of when you had to overcome adversity in a professional environment." While these are not bad questions, they allow the *candidate* to pick and choose their response. A better way to tackle this is to have candidates give you a comprehensive snapshot of their careers, then ask specific follow-up questions that help you drive deep.

Another approach is the tandem interview. Pair up with someone who balances out your interview style. For example, if you are highly relational you may want to consider having a peer join you who is fairly analytical, factual and quantitative. This helps to ensure the picture you develop of the candidate is comprehensive.

Is the candidate motivated and accountable?

Consider everything you heard in the interview and from references as well as on-line leadership assessment results. Then ask yourself: is there enough evidence to "convict" this person of being motivated to achieve and personally accountable for results? If not, move on to the next candidate.

Assessments

You can also use online assessments that draw out areas of strength and potential areas of weakness. Assessments can help weed out impostors. They never take the place of an interview or a reference check, but they can provide additional insight that you can start to leverage to corroborate. You want the assessment, interview and reference check to all integrate together.

References

References are a powerful talent selection tool. Some companies are strictly forbidden from providing references, but don't let this scare you from getting them. You may need to ask for additional references if you run into challenges collecting information. One way to ensure you're set up for success is to ask the candidate to set the reference up so they expect the call. Also, ensure you have a current email address and mobile phone number prior to engaging the reference.

Would you rehire this person?

End every reference call by asking if the reference would hire/rehire the candidate. "In a heartbeat" or something close is the only right answer. Every other response is less persuasive and may raise concerns.

To take it one step further, ask the reference for more references. See if there is anyone they would recommend you talk to that also worked closely with the candidate. Once you collect a couple names, go back to the candidate and ask if you can call the additional recommend references. If the candidate says yes, that's great. If they say no, that should be a potential red flag and you'll need to dig a little deeper to find out why.

You can also independently identify references that you can contact. This involves identifying people that the candidate would have worked with and cold calling them.

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The best reference check comes when an executive is talking to a peer, not a subordinate. Don't have low level HR employees calling senior executives to do your reference checks. Seasoned leaders should be making those calls. You're able to gather higher levels of key information when the reference is talking to a peer.

The combination of interviewing, assessments and reference checking will reduce hiring mistakes.

Hiring A-Players takes dedication, time and effort. It's a commitment. But if you do it right, and recruit consistently, the rewards are well worth it. You'll save yourself a lot of headache, risk, time and money if you hire the right person the first time.

Is it you or is it me?

Sometimes managers know an employee is not getting the job done, but don't confront this poor performance because they have failed to provide strong accountability and coaching. In this situation, use the scorecard to be explicit with the employee about what strong performance looks like. Then get committed to coaching and follow up with him. If the employee has not made progress in 6 months, it's likely time for him to exit the organization.



Eric Herrenkohl is the founder and president of Herrenkohl Consulting, a retained executive search firm that works with the top leaders in supply chain and manufacturing. He is the author of *How to Hire A-Players*, published by Wiley and named by the Toronto Globe and Mail named as one of its top 10 business books of the year. His work has been cited by Business Week, Fox News, Monster.com, Careerbuilder.com, and Inc.com.

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