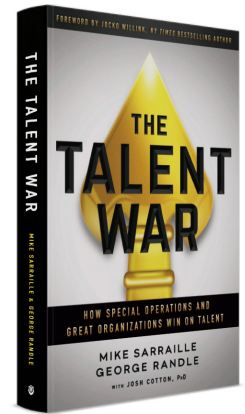


# The Talent War

How Special Operations and Great Organizations Win on Talent

by **Mike Sarraille and George Randle**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Special Operations Forces and top-performing organizations around the world all have one thing in common—they know how to find the right talent and develop that talent. So why do so many other organizations struggle in this area?

One of the reasons is that they simply don't know how to find, attract, and develop talent the right way. Other companies simply don't think it's a priority, focusing instead on the 'money making' areas of their business. But companies are made up of people, which means that your talent acquisition and development process is indirectly the single most significant revenue-generator at your company.

Organizations must develop a talent mindset, which involves a high level of focus on finding the right talent, choosing people with character that can be trained rather than focusing on people with poor character who may already have some of the job-specific skills they need. In *The Talent War*, veteran Special Forces leaders outline how SOF and other organizations find world-class talent and develop that talent into world-class leaders—and how your organization can do the same.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How the world's best organizations find the right talent to excel.
- Why traditional hiring practices don't work, and how to improve them.
- How to train the right skills into talented people in order to succeed.
- The nine foundational character attributes of talent, from drive and resiliency to curiosity and emotional strength

## Introduction

Any good business leader will tell you that people are the most important factor in a business. If you want long-term, lasting success, you need leadership—and that means you need to select and invest in the right people. The ‘who’ is almost more important than the ‘what.’ It’s not what you sell that determines if your organization will be great; it’s who you have doing it. People make the products. People deliver the service. People innovate and adapt. People solve the problems. And most important, people lead people to accomplish all these things.

Whether you’re a CEO, CHRO, executive, HR representative, mid-level manager, or anyone at all involved in hiring, you and your company can benefit from this book. The sooner you begin thinking about and approaching talent differently, the sooner you can begin maneuvering your team to win the talent war.

## A Talent Mindset

At the most basic level, talent equals high-potential candidates—the people most likely to become high performers. It is the individual who never gives up, who performs in high-pressure situations, and who will win when others say it’s impossible. Talent is the leaders that make plans and decisions, the people that drive teams forward. And talent wins.

In the hiring process, you need to look for talent—those high-potential candidates who display the attributes and mindsets necessary to become high performers within their respective fields. The more high potentials you hire, the more high performers you can develop into effective leaders. The first step in hiring more high potentials is establishing a talent mindset.

## What’s So Wrong with Traditional Hiring Practices?

When companies lack a talent mindset, it’s a common refrain: cost. Creating a robust talent acquisition and management process is simply too costly, they say. What most companies don’t understand is that the major cost is not money, but time and devotion to creating a world-class talent acquisition pipeline. In this process, you will actually save money in the long run as your attrition lowers and you consistently make better hires.

Talent acquisition and talent management are indirectly the largest revenue generators at your company, because they

impact every other revenue-generating function.

## What Makes Special Operations So Special?

By necessity, Special Operations Forces have adopted a deep talent mindset. SOF’s team mentality and the high stakes of war reinforce the importance of talent, and because it’s impossible for candidates to have prior SOF experience, the SOF community has been forced to find better ways to identify talent.

Five truths drive everything Special Operations Forces do:

- Humans are more important than hardware.
- Quality is better than quantity.
- Special operations forces cannot be mass-produced.
- Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.
- Most Special Operations Forces require non-SOF assistance.

## Hire for Character, Train for Skill

Hire for what you can’t teach and train for what you can. That means hiring for character and training for hard skills. Meanwhile, remember that personality is not the same thing as character. You should hire based on the core character traits that predict performance, not based on likability. Set appropriate minimum standards for hard skills, but don’t obsess over finding applicants that exceed the minimums to the exclusion of character.

Industry experience is the number one factor companies use in the hiring process, yet it is actually a poor predictor of success. Look beyond industry experience to patterns of success. After all, resumes tell a story—but you have to look deeper, beyond the surface-level facts, to understand a candidate’s character.

## The Nine Foundational Character Attributes of Talent

We define talent—high-potential individuals—as those possessing drive, resiliency, adaptability, humility, integrity, effective intelligence, team-ability, curiosity, and emotional strength. A person’s character is the aggregate of their deeply ingrained attributes. These traits are predictors of high-performance, and they cannot be taught. As such, they should be the primary focus of your hiring and talent acquisition process at your company.

## Drive

Drive is the need for achievement. An individual with high drive wants to be the best, has a desire to grow and push themselves, is willing to take risks, and often seeks out fresh achievements. Those with high drive are always searching for the next goal or challenge. If someone with low drive makes a million-dollar deal, they might pat themselves on the back for months. For someone with high drive, it will be just hours or days before they start asking, “Alright, what’s next?” High-drive individuals are never satisfied. They’re continually hungry for achievement.

## Resiliency

Someone with high resiliency bounces back from stress quickly, is adaptable, and is not easily discouraged. An individual with high resiliency resists quitting and is focused on completing goals. Essentially, resiliency is how people handle setbacks and persevere in the face of challenges. They accept failure as part of the process. They don’t accept it passively but utilize their lessons learned and mistakes as a basis to grow.

## Adaptability

Adaptability is the ability to adjust one’s behavior and actions according to what the situation requires. If you have somebody with high drive and high resiliency but zero adaptability, they’re not going to be one of your best performers. It’s that old saying: “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.” Adaptability is the difference between insanity and innovation.

## Humility

Without a doubt, humility is the most important trait of a true leader. A leader with the right level of humility is a willing learner, maintains accurate self-awareness and seeks out others’ input and feedback. Humility is the antidote to arrogance. Someone with appropriate humility recognizes that they do not have all the answers and that the aggregate intelligence and experience of everyone below and around them always far outweighs their own knowledge and experience. They are conscientious of the perspectives and views of others to form more educated decisions.

## Integrity

Someone with integrity understands what is legal and what is right and aligns their actions and words with both. Integrity is not optional. High performance without integ-

riety is dangerous and will backfire eventually, like it did with Enron and Wells Fargo. Somebody who is going to step on others or break the law to succeed is not someone you want in your company. People like that are generally not pleasant to work with, and they can prove to be very expensive. While they may produce results in the short-term, their behavior and toxic leadership will damage if not destroy the organization in the long-term.

## Effective Intelligence

Raw intelligence is an important attribute that both Special Operations Forces and many other successful organizations prioritize. But it’s important to note that intelligence is only important to a point. Just as there are physical minimum requirements in Special Operations, there are also mental minimum requirements. After meeting that minimum, increasing levels of intelligence do not predict increasing levels of performance. You don’t need to hire a genius who is deficient in emotional strength or humility. You just need someone who meets a certain standard of intelligence that will allow them to learn quickly and perform intuitively when required.

## Team-ability

Nothing worth accomplishing can be done alone. There are no Ramboes in the military. That might look cool in the movies, but individuals die pretty quickly on the battlefield, or worse, get others hurt. The greatest successes require that we work together.

SEAL groups are called ‘teams’ for a reason. You will often hear SEALs refer to themselves as ‘team guys.’ In all of Special Operations, teams are a way of life. This notion is driven into SOF candidates from day one. Teams aren’t added, they’re multiplicative. If you have three people acting as individuals, they will output the work of three people. If you combine them into a cohesive unit, they’re going to output the work of more than three people.

## Curiosity

Curiosity—exploring the unknown and questioning the status quo in pursuit of better, more effective solutions—is the key to innovation. Without curious individuals, nothing would ever change or improve. Curiosity is especially critical in hiring because it is an indicator of future potential. We have no idea what roles or skills we’ll need in the future, but you can count on someone with curiosity to learn what they need to.

## Emotional Strength

An emotionally strong individual has a positive attitude, high empathy, and emotional control in stressful situations. Many of the successful talent acquisition individuals interviewed identified a positive attitude as important to their hiring decisions. Attitude is contagious. Positivity breeds positivity.

### Know Thyself: Creating a Talent Acquisition Plan

You can't hire talent if you don't know what talent looks like in your organization. Build talent profiles in your organization by assessing top performers at every level. Identify the most important attributes of these top performers, then reinforce your findings with objective written assessments. Update your succession plan regularly, ideally every three-six months.

### Know Your Audience: Attracting Top Talent

The key to attracting talent is to market yourself as a talent magnet. To show that you value talent, you must provide the things talent wants: competitive pay, talented leaders and colleagues, a sense of community, challenge, growth opportunities, and purpose. And remember—your current employees and alumni are your best recruiting mechanism.

### Build Your Hiring Team: A-Players to Select A-Players

Having talent in your hiring team is one of the best and most dependable ways to ensure you have talent everywhere else. Your hiring team should not be homogenous. Bring in different perspectives in order to get objective takes on potential candidates. Also remember you have to actually train your hiring team, treating hiring as a primary function rather than a secondary one. And finally, incentivize your A-players to take on hiring functions. Link talent acquisi-

tion to their job so that they say it as vital to the value they provide your organization.

### The Hiring Process: A Decisive Battlefield

The hiring process can include interviews, observation of candidates, and assessment tests. To be most effective, use a multivariate assessment process, where multiple assessment strategies are used, including a mix of subjective and objective measures. Pressure testing is critical. Under stress and adversity, true character is revealed.

Meanwhile, interview questions should be standardized and aligned to specific character attributes, with scenario-based and behavior questions being best. To add pressure, give candidates challenges, like case studies, during the interview and push them out of your comfort zone.

### Conclusion

You can have the most effective talent acquisition program in the world, but if you don't properly develop your talent, your company will most likely still fail. Building talent is a two-phase process that involves both acquisition and development. If you lack training and leadership development, your organization will fail, even if you have a great talent acquisition process.

Remember—Talent + Leadership = Victory.



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