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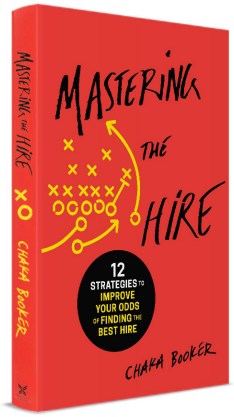
Mastering the Hire

12 Strategies to Improve Your Odds of Finding the Best Hire



by **Chaka Booker**

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Research shows you have a 50 percent chance of hiring the right employee—and a 50 percent chance of hiring the wrong one. Hiring the wrong person siphons your energy and erodes team culture. Replacing them is stressful and can cost over $40,000 per re-hire. It's a toss up, but it doesn't have to be.

With the right tools, all of that can be avoided, and you can consistently make great hires. After years of scientific research and first-hand interview experience with thousands of candidates, Chaka Booker has created a system that helps employers consistently make great hires.

In ***Mastering the Hire***, Booker provides 12 proven strategies that have been used to accurately identify the right talent 90 percent of the time. Whether you're a hiring manager, business owner, CEO, search consultant, team manager, team member, novice or expert interviewer, ***Mastering the Hire*** is for anyone who wants to beat the hiring odds.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To manage intuition: when to trust it and when to put it aside.
- To structure interview questions to help candidates tell the truth.
- To know when to apply or release pressure during interviews.
- Tools for removing bias to give you a competitive advantage.
- To reimagine the hiring process.

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 2 Christy Drive, Suite 302, Chadds Ford, PA 19317 USA. • Subscriptions start at $99/year. To subscribe, visit summary.com. • Vol. 42, No. 10 (3 parts), Part 2, October 2020 • Order #42-25 • Sarah T. Dayton, Editor-in-Chief • Ashleigh Imus, Senior Editor • Kylie Waytuck, Graphic Designer

Introduction: The Coin Toss

What is the purpose of a job interview? According to Frank L. Schmidt, a psychologist renowned for his research in personnel selection, the value of an interview lies in its "predictive validity"—the ability to predict future job performance. The logical next question then is, do job interviews predict job performance?

To answer this question, Schmidt partnered with psychologist John E. Hunter and conducted a meta-analysis on 85 years of research on personnel selection. The results were sobering. At best, the methods had a predictive validity of 54 percent.

Fast-forward more than two decades and little has changed. A recent Gallup study found that when it comes to management talent, companies fail to choose the right candidate 82 percent of the time.

The reason for those odds is simple. The two people who face each other at the interview table don't do it often enough to do it well. What are the odds of a great decision coming from that table? About the same as tossing a coin.

The Black Box

Organizations don't need candidates that interview well. They need candidates that can do the job well. That means they need interviewers that interview well. It is the interviewer who must have a great interview, not the candidate.

For most interviewers, the relationship between interview practices and accurate hiring decisions is a black box where the effect of one on the other is a mystery. We can all point to candidates we interviewed who turned out great. We can also point to those who didn't. But can we point to what we did during the interview that led to either result? That's the black box. Without knowing what is inside that box, we can't consistently replicate our successes. We can't beat the odds.

But there are assessment methods that are most effective at predicting who a candidate is and what they can do. Beating the odds is about recognizing those patterns. What follows are some of the patterns, rhythms, and regularities of successful interviewing distilled into strategies and practices that anyone can learn.

Interviewing should never be a game of chance. Hiring does not have to be a coin toss. Regardless of your starting point, you can increase the odds of finding great talent. That is the goal.

Part I: Reducing Interference

The moment you step into the interview room, human nature kicks in and you and the candidate instinctually begin reading each other. Signals, social cues, and assumptions fill the space between the two of you, influencing your behaviors and your decision-making processes.

Some of the signals are interpreted inaccurately or have nothing to do with assessing the candidate—they are interference. Your job is to understand and minimize the noise that interferes with an accurate read of the candidate's talent.

Strategy 1: Intuition, Know Thy Place

A common phenomenon in candidate selection is a stubborn reliance by interviewers on their intuition. We would all like to believe our instincts are razor sharp and our gut reactions are in tune with reality.

Research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that first impressions tend to be incredibly accurate. But there is also good reason to be extremely cautious about first impressions. All the studies indicate that first impressions are subject to stereotyping and prejudice.

Sometimes first impressions are accurate. It's not that intuition doesn't have a place, but that you must know its place. To increase the odds of making a strong decision, you need to manage subjectivity, so you can determine the relevance of a first impression.

Practice: Park your first impressions. Eliminating first impressions would go against human nature, so don't try. Instead, go in the other direction. Acknowledge that first impressions exist and then use a practice that allows you to determine if the early impressions are accurate and relevant. That practice is called "parking your first impression." You park your first impression by documenting it the moment it happens. That practice moves it from the brain, where it quietly impacts decisions, and places it in the open, where it can be examined.

Before you are about to interview someone, write down "Yes," "I don't know," "No." Once the interview begins, within the first few moments, make a mark on the line indicating what your first impression is: "Yes, they are a strong candidate." "I don't know if they are a strong candidate." "No, they are not a strong candidate."

Now that you have logged your first impression, your job is to ignore it. This part of the process is critical; otherwise,

Behavioral interview questions generally contain some signal indicating what the answer should be.

you will seek evidence during the interview to justify your first impression. In psychology, this is called confirmation bias. To avoid it, remind yourself that your first impression is a single data point to be considered after the interview along with other evidence.

Strategy 2: Candidates Don't Answer Questions. They Answer People.

Controlling the influence of first impressions on your decisions is only part of the battle against interference. Influence flows both ways. You must also control the influence you have on the candidate during the interview.

Candidates are constantly reading interviewers for cues. Not only can they tell if you like or dislike an answer, they are good at adjusting accordingly. Because of this dynamic, the interviewer can unknowingly do more than just gather answers from the candidate. If not careful, the interviewer can push the candidate to provide certain answers.

Practice: Interview like a poker player. Professional poker players understand social cues and hone the ability to read their opponents' faces to help determine their next moves. But maintaining a consistent expression isn't just for Vegas high rollers; it is an essential skill for an interviewer. To control for the impact your behavior has on the candidate's performance, you must present the same facial expressions across candidates.

A facial expression that maintains consistency across candidates and builds trust with each candidate is the goal. If you are wondering what trustworthiness looks like, the answer is simple: It is an expression that is slightly positive and friendly. Present the smallest of smiles, a slight upturn at the corners of your mouth.

For optimal results, accompany this expression with a set of standard positive responses for all candidates: Give head nods and small encouraging smiles during the interview. Give verbal signs of affirmation that seem positive but are neutral. For example, at the end of the candidate's answer or even during the answer, the interviewer should say, "Got it," or "I understand."

Your expression and affirmative responses acknowledge that you are listening and are in a positive mood, but the comments themselves are neutral. They don't indicate that the answer is right or wrong, just that you hear it.

Strategy 3: The Right Question Asked Wrong Is the Wrong Question

We don't only send signals to candidates through social cues and explicit behaviors; we also send them through the structure of the questions we ask. Behavioral interview questions generally contain some signal indicating what the answer should be.

For example, if you ask a candidate, "Give me an example of a time that you had to learn something quickly," the candidate will know that the right answer involves them demonstrating they have learned quickly, whether they have had to learn quickly or not.

Fortunately, questions can be designed to promote honesty, rather than interfere with it, and candidates can be pointed toward the truth.

Practice: Remove the signals. If the role you are hiring for operates in an unstructured environment, you could ask a traditional behavioral question:

Interviewer: Give me an example of a time you successfully worked in an unstructured environment and had to move work forward without guidance.

This answer doesn't just signal what you want, it plainly tells the candidate you are looking for a person who can move work forward without guidance. If they haven't done this, they will create an answer—or more likely contort another answer they prepped in advance—to fit the question.

Instead, make it more open-ended.

Interviewer: Have you ever worked in an unstructured environment?

They will still sense that the "correct" answer is yes, but you have increased the odds of getting at the truth by allowing for an honest answer.

Part II: Pressure Management

What makes interviewing hard for candidates is pressure. There are two types of pressure the candidate feels: the type you apply as the interviewer and the type they put on themselves. The pressure you apply that leads to a better answer is necessary. The candidate's self-imposed pressure is unnecessary and gets in the way of accurate assessment.

There is also a pressure that you experience as the interviewer. This pressure shows up after the interview when you feel the need to make the right decision. Knowing how to release pressure, apply pressure, and make decisions under pressure will shift the odds in your favor.

Strategy 4: To End With Truth, Start With Trust

Every candidate enters the interview room with a degree of uncertainty about what to expect. They are about to sit across the table from someone who controls their future. Regardless of how confident or comfortable they seem, they have their guard up to protect themselves. The protection is necessary because each side wants something the other has, and neither is sure they want to give it up.

The interviewer has a job they are holding for just the right person. The candidate holds the truth about who they truly are and what they can do. But they don't know if what they have is what is being sought. That pressure makes the candidate not sure how much of themselves they should reveal.

From the first moments of the interview, you must create an environment that allows the candidate to willingly reveal their true selves. Lowering the pressure will get them to lower their guard. To do so, make three things clear: You and the candidate are equals. You and the candidate are working toward an outcome together. It is in both of your best interests to be open and honest.

Practice: Minimize physical barriers. If there is a physical barrier between you and the candidate, you must minimize it to increase a feeling of equality. In most interviews, you are behind a desk or a table. Don't stay seated. Break the barrier. Step from behind the desk or table to shake hands and introduce yourself. The message you are sending is that you are equals standing on the same ground with nothing between you.

Make sure there is water in the room. Ask if they would like some. And pour it for them. The message again is clear: "I'm not above you. I'm here to help."

Next, call attention to the fact that there is a physical barrier between the two of you. Interviewer: "I usually don't like to have such a big space between me and someone I'm interested in learning more about, but we'll do our best to make this work." The message you are sending is that, despite the barrier, you are still on the same side. Their guard isn't completely down yet, but it's dropped an inch or two.

Strategy 5: You're Not Assessing the Candidate. They're Assessing Themselves.

During an interview, you are the one asking the questions. So far, so good. But when you analyze what happens next, the belief falls apart.

The first thing the candidate does in response to a question is delve into their brain, selecting from a range of experiences, perspectives, and opinions. When they come back out, they share what they found. You then ask them what they did well, what they could have done better, and what they would do differently next time.

None of this is you assessing the candidate. What you have just done is ask the candidate to retrieve a memory and assess it themselves. You are judging the quality and relevance of their self-assessment.

When you tilt the interview to look at it from this angle, you expose two problems. First, interviews rely entirely on the candidate's ability to accurately recall events, results, and decisions.

Second, your assessment relies on their ability to evaluate themselves. Science suggests those are big problems. Countless studies show that stress negatively impacts working memory. Research also shows self-evaluation is inherently difficult. People often have the wrong view of their own competence because they don't have enough subjective information to accurately self-assess.

So, not only are we asking candidates to remember something under sub-optimal conditions, we are also asking them to do something humans aren't good at doing. Now that we see the interview in a different light, let's bring science back on our side, remove unnecessary pressure, and improve the odds.

Practice: The memory anchor. To lower the memory hurdle, you should intentionally use the resume as a "memory anchor." The memory anchor protocol is simply the following: At the start of the interview, ask the candidate if they have their resume. If they do, ask them to pull it out and feel free to use it to help answer any question.

If they don't have their resume, provide them a copy. Your job is to lower the psychosocial stress of interviewing and help the candidate access their thoughts. You want them to reflect on those thoughts and give you enough insight to help with your ultimate decision.

As an interviewer, your goal is not to apply extreme pressure, nor do you need to know each candidate's tipping point.

Strategy 6: Pressure Clarifies and Reveals Potential

Minimizing pressure is good when it leads to better insight and more accurate decision-making. Pressure, however, also has its benefits. A considerable amount of studies have been done in the fields of sports, law enforcement, the military, student performance, and leadership. In all fields there is a point when pressure goes from enhancing performance to hindering it. But that tipping point varies across people and settings. What is consistent is the finding that pressure which challenges people is helpful, and pressure that threatens is not.

As an interviewer, your goal is not to apply extreme pressure, nor do you need to know each candidate's tipping point for optimal performance. You need to know how to appropriately challenge candidates to gain insight for an accurate assessment. How you apply pressure that challenges candidates depends on the type of insight you are pursuing.

Practice: Keep questions lean and follow-ups specific. Whenever you ask questions during an interview, you inevitably will get an answer that does not provide the information you need to help make a decision. There are a range of reasons for this—none of them should have anything to do with your questions themselves. Strategy 3 showed how to remove signals from a question. A rule of thumb to accompany that strategy is keep the question as short as possible, keep it open-ended, and use specific follow-up questions.

Keeping the question short and open-ended puts you in stronger position of control. Not only because of fewer signals but because once the candidate starts talking, the follow-up questions can be targeted to gather specific and relevant information.

The following are ways to frame a follow-up question to gain clarity:

- "That answer was very general. I could use some more specifics to help me understand."
- "I'm not clear on what role you played and what you accomplished in that example."
- "I don't understand what the goal of that project was and whether you got there."

This should then be followed by

- "Can you give me a better answer than that?"

Strategy 7: Stop rationalizing

Think of a hiring mistake you've made, and you can likely recall moments during their interview process that indicated it wouldn't end well, but you pressed forward and hired the candidate anyway. Whatever the pressure, at the core of this faulty decision-making is our brain's ability to rationalize.

Rationalization helps reduce cognitive dissonance, an uncomfortable psychological state produced by discrepancies between actions and attitudes.

The key to conquering this self-deception is understanding that in the moment—when we make mistakes that we need to rationalize—*we know we are making a mistake*. That's precisely why we rationalize. Rationalizing requires your brain to first recognize you are being irrational—only then does it begin the process of justifying. That moment of recognition is what strong interviewers learn to identify and control.

Practice: Premortem. The trick is to have the same clarity of thought during the decision as you will after the decision. When you are leaning toward hiring a candidate, potentially against your best judgment, conduct what cognitive psychologist Dr. Gary Klein calls a "premortem" before making a final decision.

Conducting a premortem will feel like a counterintuitive approach because rather than envisioning success with this candidate, you envision failure. Imagine hiring the candidate, and then imagine every concern you have about the candidate becoming true. Imagine all the bad ways this will play out. The deadlines they will miss. The relationships they will damage. The decrease in team productivity.

Imagine firing them because of what you knew during the interview. Imagine having to restart the hiring process.

Articulating what could go wrong brings you back from the brink of doing what you want and forces you to think more clearly about what you need. You may still decide to hire the candidate. But if you do, you've shifted the odds toward it being the rational decision versus the one you rationalized.

Part III: Sharp Tools

Like a physician, the interviewer's job is to diagnose. Physicians use a structured process of question, answer, and examination to gather insight. When the issue is complex, they draw blood. An interviewer's job, to delve into the candidate's mind, is complex. It also requires them to draw from the candidate. But not blood. Answers.

The stakes during an interview are not life or death, but errors can lead to pain that could have been avoided. The interviewer's tools must be as sharp as any physician's instruments. The tools must be clean so as not to pollute the answer. The interviewer must know which tools to use when and what to look for in the answer they've drawn.

Strategy 8: An Interview Is a Glimpse

The modern meaning of interview is tightly associated with assessing talent. The original meaning of the word from the 16th century, of Middle French origin, is "entrevue," derived from "s'entrevoir," to see each other, visit each other briefly, have a glimpse of. An interview is only a glimpse of someone else.

The brevity of the interaction points toward two things. First, use the time well. Leave nothing to chance. If something is only working 50 percent of the time, then strip it down, keep what works, and rethink what doesn't. Second, to get a full picture of the candidate, take each glimpse from a very different angle.

Practice: The reverse interview. A candidate who looks strong on paper doesn't always turn out the same in person. By the time you realize that, you've already invested several hours interviewing the candidate live. You can gain some of the same insight and save time by spending 20 minutes conducting a phone screen. A phone screen often boils down to four basic pieces of information: Do they communicate well? Have they done research on the organization? Why are they interested in the role? Clarifications based on their resume.

Use these four areas to conduct the reverse phone screen. This turns the tables and gives the candidate 10 to 15 minutes to ask the interviewer the top 10 questions they have about the role, the organization, etc. The interviewer then takes five to 10 minutes to ask the candidate a few questions. With this flipped structure, the questions that candidates ask and how well they prepare tell you a ton about them, yet your preparation is minimal. To make this work, notify the candidate in advance via email of the reversed structure. This gives them time to prepare.

Strategy 9: Break Down the Fourth Wall

In the world of theater, the fourth wall is the term for the imaginary wall between the audience and what occurs on the stage. This wall exists in the world of interviewing as well. In an interview, you are the audience and the candidate is on the stage. Since you can't step onto their stage, you must observe from your seat and determine if the story being told is an accurate reflection of reality.

The traditional interview as your only mechanism means you must rely on learning about the candidate through their recounting of events. Using additional approaches breaks the fourth wall and gives you a completely different lens to look through.

Practice: In-basket assignments. In-basket assignments are activities you give the candidate to complete in advance and then you discuss them during one of the interviews. Think of in-basket assignments as homework for the candidate. The approach takes some up-front preparation by the interviewer but can be used time after time and does not have to be complex or require a lot of planning. The key is to choose assignments that mimic the work they will do on the job. Have them create a presentation, or have them do an analysis. Have them review part of your strategic plan. Have them research a topic and write a memo.

Regardless of the assignment, conduct the discussion with the candidate the same way you would with a team member. Try to re-create what it would feel like to have a meeting with you. That will give you a better sense of what working with them may be like. It also has the benefit of giving the candidates a feel for the work and what interaction as a team member is like. The interview is a glimpse of each other, and in-basket assignments are a perfect opportunity to make it a two-way experience.

Part IV: Identity and Bias

When a candidate sits at the interview table with you, they

The first step toward controlling biases is to think about what your biases might be and write them down.

represent two people: the person they are and the person you think they are. The bigger the gap between reality and perception, the higher the odds of the wrong decision being made. The opening chapters discussed the interference that fills that space. There is another culprit whose existence serves to keep reality and perception apart. That culprit is bias. This section is focused on making effective hiring decisions at the intersection of identity and bias.

Strategy 10: Biases Are Unspoken Criteria

In practice, biases fall into two categories: the ones people will admit to and those they won't. The biases in that second category tend to include race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. Unconscious or not, the larger problem is those beliefs are rarely discussed. Yet the biases that spring from them lurk in our minds during the interview, quietly impacting our decisions. They become unspoken criteria that wedge between who the candidate is and who we think they are.

Your goal isn't to suddenly shift everyone's unspoken beliefs through a set of interview practices. Your goal is to make them aware of how their beliefs can negatively impact their behavior and how increased self-awareness makes them better decision makers. You won't get far if you start with a discussion about their most controversial biases. Instead, leverage the research that shows an effective approach to managing bias is to tap into people's desire to be fair-minded.

To get there, start simple by explaining that bias isn't a dirty word defined exclusively by racism, sexism, homophobia, or the like. A bias is just a tendency to believe some categories of things (people, ideas, products, etc.) are better or worse than others. Synonyms for bias include "non-objectivity," "partiality," and "one-sidedness." Whether a bias is helpful or hurtful depends on whether the underlying belief is relevant or not.

Seemingly innocent biases, such as preferences for strong handshakes, types of attire, or certain personality traits, are where you want to start. They get people to acknowledge that bias exists.

Practice: The bias list. The first step toward controlling biases is to think about what your biases might be and write them down. To increase the odds of accurately assessing someone else, you must recognize the triggers of certain emotions, assumptions, and reactions in you. Putting thoughts in writing is a powerful way to make your thinking concrete. This mechanism for capturing the "unspoken criteria" makes it easier to manage. It allows you to compare your biases against the actual criteria needed for the job.

For example, some people dislike candidates who give weak handshakes or have a heavy accent. As with first impressions, the point is not to immediately view biases as wrong but to stop them from hijacking your decisions before you have a chance to determine if they should be part of your criteria.

Strategy 11: Be Mindful

Gaining control of first impressions and creating bias lists helps disrupt automatic thinking. But the best interviewers take it a step further. They spend time specifically learning about issues related to identity. They also spend time thinking about what they think about those issues. "Thinking about what they think" is a subtle nuance worth exploring. One level of learning is to gain exposure to issues of identity that others may struggle with. A higher level is to then question what you believe about those issues and why you believe them. That practice of introspection is a type of mental preparation called mindfulness.

Psychologist Dr. Jill Suttie defines mindfulness as a mental state that involves an increased awareness of our emotions, thoughts, and surroundings, accompanied by a sense of nonjudgment. Research has shown that mindfulness can be used to overcome the impact of bias and prejudice on decision-making.

Practice: Mindfulness through reading. Increasing your mindfulness can be achieved by reading an article about the impact of implicit bias on issues of diversity shortly before you interview. After you read it, reflect on what you agree with and what elements of the reading might apply to your thought processes. A simple internet search will provide a wealth of reading options. The reading does not need to be long nor does it need to be complex.

If you have capacity, do this practice the evening before you interview and then peruse the reading again the day of the interview, shortly before you conduct it. Brief moments of this specific type of mindfulness have been shown to create positive effects against bias.

Strategy 12: Culture Fitness, Not Culture Fit

The term "culture fitness" serves as a reminder that, before you assess for culture fit, you need to get your culture in shape. On one hand, you may be in an organization where that means you need to improve your culture. That's unfortunate, but as you work to solve that problem, you will still be hiring people into that culture. On the other hand, you may have a good culture, in which case you need to get the definition of your culture in shape.

The word "fitness" also brings us back to the topic of bias. While your organizational culture may not be constantly changing, it should be constantly strengthening. A culture that is constantly strengthening requires openness to pressure from new perspectives and approaches. Fitness signifies the opposite of status quo and stagnation. If your culture is "fit," bringing in people who force you to stretch is healthy and an opportunity to consider rather than avoid.

Practice: Culture add. Before coming to a verdict involving culture fit, spend a moment in self-reflection. Ask yourself, "Can this candidate add something to our culture that we may not realize we need?" Perhaps this candidate not "fitting" could be valuable in terms of their personal experience, thinking style, identity, or other indicator that may initially signal a lack of compatibility.

When it comes to identity, your organization's and the candidate's, you need as much help as possible. So, get the candidate's input as well with the following question: "Based on your experiences either with us so far or your experiences in other organizations, what insights, viewpoints, or perspectives can you bring that others might benefit from?"

From boardrooms to corporate hallways to classrooms to meeting rooms to interview rooms to any setting where decisions must be made, instinct and good fortune are not enough.

Mental preparation serves as a foundational tenet for every practice discussed above. All the hard work of understanding the person across the table can be undone without an understanding of yourself. Don't rush into the interview room, crumpled question packet in hand. Pause. Take responsibility. Note your first impressions. Manage your body language. Reword the question. Build trust. Let the question breathe. Be mindful. Know your target. Pause. Prepare.

Let the 12 strategies help you shift the odds away from a coin toss and toward great talent.

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Chaka Booker is a managing director for The Broad Center, a national organization focused on leadership development. For over a decade, he has crisscrossed the country identifying and developing talent from a wide range of industries. He has interviewed nearly 3,000 professionals from Fortune 500 companies, the military, graduate schools, consulting firms, and leadership programs, as well as the public and social sectors. He is a Pahara Fellow at The Aspen Institute, a *Forbes* contributor on leadership and entrepreneurship, and has written for the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.