

A Little Story About How To Get **BIG** Hiring Results

Always Be Looking For STARS



HOW LEADERS CAN HIRE THE RIGHT
PEOPLE WITH THE RIGHT PROCESS

JERRY PHILLIPS

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ISBN-13: 978-1-947480-95-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020900166

Designed by Joni McPherson, mcpersongraphics.com

INDIE BOOKS INTERNATIONAL, INC.

2424 VISTA WAY, SUITE 316

OCEANSIDE, CA 92054

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PREFACE

This book is a fable to illustrate the need to always be looking for rock stars and have a process to attract and hire the right people for the role.

A little history for context: When I helped launch the DeWalt brand of power tools at Black and Decker, our fear wasn't whether we would grow the business. The fear was could we maximize the growth. Our challenge was not just taking share in the market we targeted, but having enough quality people to support the growth. We developed a recruiting process that produced a stellar team of

sellers and marketers. Our growth was legendary.

As I worked with other companies, I found the process for finding talent to be hit or miss. The process was random, based on who was doing the hiring. Interviewing was haphazard as well. When I started working with clients on the development of their sales and marketing teams, I found the same challenges.

People are the lifeblood of a company. Without a clear process for recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and development of the team, finding the right talent is difficult and limiting your growth potential. We have worked with clients to develop a rigorous, disciplined process to hire and develop the needed rock star talent. My hope is this fable will help you find your rock stars.

Jerry Phillips
September 2019
Austin, Texas

1 ★★★★★

NINETY DAYS, OR ELSE

I'm so disappointed in you, Vincent. When I put you in charge as the CEO, I expected better of you."

Nobody wants to hear that type of criticism. Especially coming from Donna, the chairman of the board.

Vincent was no exception. He was widely recognized in the industry as a terrific strategist who was outstanding at execution. His secret was the development of his people.

But Donna was criticizing him for an undeserved misfortune. Over the past sixty days other companies had swooped in and taken the top three leaders from his team. All three had taken CEO roles, as a testament to Vincent's ability to develop his team.

However, Donna, the chairman of the board, saw it differently. She saw it as a threat to her personally, and to the income she was drawing off the company her father had founded. She saw Vincent as a threat, and also saw an opportunity.

The Power Play

Smyth Tools was an old-line manufacturing company that built parts for some of the biggest names in construction equipment. Donna's father, David, founded the company in the late 1960s and grew it from a small machine shop into a modern, automated facility that produced parts that were used on every major construction project in the world.

After fifty years of heading the company, David chose his oldest daughter to become the chairman.

Donna had little to do with the business, other than attending board meetings, but she was tough, and her father thought that was what the business needed now that he was stepping down. Donna saw it as a mandate. She was, by nature, a skeptic and acted in a narcissistic way. She trusted few people, and heartily enjoyed holding Vincent's "feet to the fire" on a multitude of things she saw as issues. If he was uncomfortable, she felt he would be more engaged in making money for the company. Making money for the company really meant making money for her. Donna had a very lavish lifestyle, and any threat to the income stream was a personal attack on her and her need for control.

Humble Roots

Vincent knew this when he agreed to take the CEO role, but he was an optimist by nature. He was certain he could lead the company and shield it from Donna's lack of leadership skills. He grew up "blue collar" in a large Italian family in a diverse working-class neighborhood in South Chicago. His father worked two jobs so his mother could stay home and raise the kids. Vincent knew the value of working hard and working smart. He was an above-average student in high school, and an outstanding wrestler that earned a scholarship to attend the University of Illinois where he majored in Industrial Engineering. In college he excelled both academically and as an athlete, earning dean's list recognition each semester, and earning all Big 10 honors after a dominating four years of wrestling. The only thing that kept him from becoming an Olympic wrestler was a shoulder injury suffered in a scuffle at a bar, during a team

celebration after winning the Big 10 title. While he was initially devastated by the injury and his lack of judgment, he learned from the experience and moved on.

After graduation, Vincent began his career, working in a management training program for a large manufacturing company that ironically, is now a customer of Smyth Tools. He learned a great deal in the program. He learned all phases of manufacturing, but also was exposed to finance, sales, marketing, and operations beyond the manufacturing floor. He had an aptitude for leadership that saw him rise quickly through the program, and the company recognized it. They offered to pay for his MBA if he would make a three-year commitment to the company after he finished. He quickly agreed and entered the Kellogg MBA program at Northwestern University. Once he finished the program, he was armed with even more drive and ambition.

Vincent peaked in his role at the equipment manufacturer in another seven years, as a plant manager. The funnel narrowed as he grew into larger leadership roles and he was receiving weekly inquiries about his availability from multiple recruiters. He really wanted to continue to grow with the company and he was confident he could make a positive impact for more than the plant he was leading. He expressed his desire to become an operations leader across multiple facilities but was shut down by the VP of Operations. He was told he was too young and there were others with more seniority that would be ahead of him on the list. That day he took a call with the recruiter that was supporting a search for a VP of Operations at Smyth Tools.

After speaking with the recruiter, Vincent was whisked off to Houston to meet with the owner of Smyth Tools. While the interview was very different from those he had experienced in the past, he enjoyed

talking with the founder of the company and decided he would make the move. In the next six months, Vincent and his wife, Maria, and their first son moved to Houston and he began his path to the CEO role at Smyth Tools.

Making Work And Life Adjustments

There were adjustments to make in both his business life and his personal life. Vincent had moved from a large corporate environment to a smaller, family run company. He had to adjust from the politics of a larger company to the politics of a family. He had to adjust to the new role, having responsibility for several plants in different locations, including one in Mexico. But the most difficult adjustment was personal. He now lived a great distance from where he and his wife had lived most of their lives. They had moved several times with the previous company, but it was just the two of them then. When they started their family, they were near both of their families and the

support that goes with it. They now were on their own in a new city, and Vincent was traveling and buried in learning the culture and systems of Smyth Tools.

Though it was a stressful situation for both of them, it only made him better. Vincent thrived under pressure. Armed with the leadership training he had received from his past company, the knowledge he had gained from his MBA, and the experiences he had in all phases of the business, Vincent worked across all functions of the business to build a network of support that allowed him to increase productivity and align output with sales. The metrics he was goaled with were challenging, but he and his team were able to meet them.

His marriage grew even stronger as he leaned on his wife for her thoughts on business decisions and life decisions. He respected her ability to adapt to living in Houston and taking on the family

leadership role as he took on the business leadership role. He realized he had some blind spots in his leadership skills, but she could see them when he could not. They were a strong team.

After four straight years of increasing productivity in operations, it was decided to elevate Vincent to the COO role. He had proven he could work across all functions and he was well respected.

The move was celebrated by the entire company. He was a powerful force, not only in the company, but in the entire industry. He was regularly quoted in trade magazines as an expert in building strong teams. He was outstanding at delegating assignments that helped his team members grow individually. He had been able to develop his team members and promote them to new roles.

Recruiters recognized this and his direct reports were constantly being recruited by other companies. With his guidance,

some accepted new roles outside of Smyth Tools, but most stayed. They enjoyed working with Vincent and saw a great opportunity to continue to learn.

As his career grew, so did his family. He now had two sons and his wife was expecting their third child. They had put down strong roots in the community. Vincent had recruiters calling on a regular basis to inquire about his availability to join other companies. Some were interesting roles, others not as interesting, but he was always polite and open with the recruiters. He was on a path to be the CEO of Smyth Tools and he and his wife were in Houston to stay.

Two years after accepting the role as COO, David, the founder, came to Vincent with an offer. He was stepping down from running the business daily, and he wanted Vincent to take over as CEO. He was also stepping down as the chairman of the board. He was elevating Donna to the

chairman role. He wanted to separate the roles, as this was the first time they had ever gone outside the family for a leader at this high level. While Vincent knew Donna was inexperienced and she had challenges in leadership, he was certain he could insulate the company from her musings, and he would have the role he had been preparing for his entire career. He accepted the offer immediately.

Growing Into The Role

Vincent's first few months as CEO were once again a flurry of activity, as expected. He was learning on the job. He was fine-tuning his ability to work with the board. He was getting through the challenges of working with Donna specifically. He had been able to promote from within the company to fill three key roles of leadership in sales, operations, and finance. His staff was strong, and the business continued to grow under his leadership. Even with a downturn in the economy, they were able to anticipate the

effects and meet their goals. He identified initiatives to improve their mix of products, improve their mix of customers, and increase profitability.

He continued to be sought after as an industry expert, he participated in panel discussions and he was quoted in trade magazines. Late this last year, he had been interviewed by a reporter that wrote for *The Wall Street Journal* and there was a very complimentary article written about Smyth Tools and his leadership. That is when the real trouble started with Donna.

While the company was thriving and it was spinning off cash for the family, Donna wanted more. She had become very jealous of the publicity that Vincent was receiving. She wanted to be recognized as the person driving the company, not Vincent. While they had a workable relationship before the article, she now felt Vincent was a threat to her

as chairman. She knew her father was very fond of Vincent and the work he was doing. She also knew, even though he was retired, her father still was the power in the boardroom. With the three key leaders being recruited away from Smyth, she saw this as her opportunity to bring Vincent in check and show him who really was in charge. So, she called him in to this meeting to set the rules, as she saw them, and to put herself in the spotlight.

“I’m so disappointed in you Vincent. When I put you in as the CEO, I expected better of you.” Those words stung him. How did he get to this place? He had worked hard, and he had made moves that had made it a better company. He had a great staff that was so talented that they were recruited for CEO roles at other companies. That was as big a compliment as anyone can receive. He knew Donna was upset by the *Journal* article, but this, he didn’t see coming.

He knew he had a talented staff and he was happy to support them in finding opportunities for them to run other companies. They had peaked in their ability to grow with Smyth Tools. He had taken great satisfaction in helping them develop their skills and the roles they took were well deserved. Yet now he was sensing that this was going to be an unpleasant conversation with Donna.

“What are you doing to replace your three key roles?” asked Donna. “I can’t believe you let them leave. I’m told you even supported them leaving. Is that true?”

Donna was raising her voice and sounding more incredulous as she went through her prepared speech. She never waited for an answer to her question.

“You have ninety days to replace all three roles, or I will replace you.”

SEARCHING FOR STARS



- ▶ **Losing your star team members is disruptive and expensive.**
- ▶ **Investing in their development allows you to retain your stars for a longer period of time.**
- ▶ **If you don't challenge your stars, they will find challenges elsewhere.**