

The five unique traits of rainmakers

Research shows that rainmakers have five unique personality traits. Once you know what to look for, you can pick individuals with a high probability of business development success.



By Chris Croner & Neil Witmer

To succeed in a competitive market, professional firms must hire recruits who are skilled at generating new business. Failing to hire strong business developers can put a firm's future in jeopardy. Yet, one of the most difficult jobs managing partners face is hiring rainmakers, whether attorneys, accountants, consultants or sales staff. Managing partners who want more rainmakers on their team typically look for individuals with a proven track record in business development. The problem with this strategy is that established rainmakers are in high demand and are expensive to recruit. This leaves most managing partners to pick potential rainmakers from a pool of relatively unproven talent.

However, spotting a future rainmaker in a lineup of candidates can seem like groping in the dark. Fortunately, research has shown that rainmakers have five unique personality traits that form the foundation of their success. Once you know what traits to look for, you can sharpen your hiring process, picking individuals with a high probability of success.

THE CORE FIVE

These five personality traits are essential for selling any product or service. Read this list carefully and bring it along the next time you interview a candidate. Or, consider hiring outside experts to assess your finalists.

I DRIVE

Research shows that of the five essential skills, drive is the most important. In a survey of over 100 rainmakers at professional services firms, Ford Harding, author of *Creating Rainmakers*, found that relentless drive was one of the most important factors behind their success. Our research has shown that drive has three elements. All three must be in place for a person to be truly driven.

a Need for achievement: Top business developers have a burning need to achieve. They are ambitious, disciplined and focused on career advancement. They will work long and hard to attain excellence. Achievers want to set the bar high, jump over and set it higher. This desire for accomplishment was researched extensively by social psychologist David McClelland. In the world of professional sports, Tiger Woods exemplifies the achievement motive. He is known for consistently striving to improve his performance regardless of his previous success. Rainmakers show a similarly intense desire for accomplishment and improvement.

To ascertain whether a candidate is high in need for achievement, here are a few questions to ask:

- What kinds of sacrifices have you had to make to be successful? (Look for

substantial past sacrifices for success at work).

- What is the toughest goal you've ever set for yourself? How do you plan to top it? (Look for accomplishment of a very challenging goal; and a plan to top that achievement.)

b Competitiveness: Competitive business developers have a hard-wired need to be number one. This trait compels professionals to surpass the performance of their peers. A fitting sports analogy here is Michael Jordan, the embodiment of competitiveness. He was known for his intense desire to win and refusal to let anything get in the way of victory. This same seething need to win drives the top rainmakers.

To assess for competitiveness, ask:

- When was the last time you were competitive? Another time? (Look for recent examples, including work, home or sports.)
- Tell me about the most competitive situation you have ever tackled at work? (Look for healthy competition with colleagues.)

c Optimism: Optimism is the business developer's expectation that he/she will succeed at landing that new client. The optimist sees the glass as half-full. Optimistic expectations provide a cushion against the slings and arrows of rejection. To the optimist, the next victory is right around the corner. Perhaps no one exemplifies optimism better than Lance Armstrong, whose unwavering certainty allowed him to overcome cancer and win seven consecutive Tour de France titles. Rainmakers share the

same intense belief in their future success. Martin Seligman, a pioneering optimism researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, has found that optimists consistently outsell pessimists. Additionally, Ford Harding found that optimism was the key trait that distinguished rainmakers from the rest of the pack.

Here are a couple of questions to find out if your candidates are optimistic:

- Describe a case where your persistence really paid off. Another case? (Look for a history of substantial effort and refusal to quit.)
- Think back to the last time you lost in an RFP competition. What did you do to recover? (Look for quickly putting the situation in perspective and bouncing back.)

2 CONFIDENCE

Confidence allows rainmakers to handle the challenges of generating new business effectively. Confident individuals have a thick skin; they are not easily offended. They will say what is on their mind and can handle an irate or difficult client with composure and diplomacy. Confident individuals never back down from a challenge and are not deterred by setbacks. They will not take criticism personally and respond to rejection by increasing their efforts to win the next new account. Confident individuals also show assertiveness: they get their needs met, while respecting the needs and rights of others. In contrast, professionals low in confidence will react defensively to criticism from clients or peers. Without confidence, even a professional high in drive will not have the resiliency to handle repeated rejection. Eventually, they will seek a career:

The following questions will help you assess whether your candidates have a rainmaker's level of confidence:

- When was the last time a client got under your skin? (Look for firmness and minimum frustration.)
- When is your confidence strongest? Weakest? (Look for a small number of weak areas.)

3 PERSUASIVENESS

Persuasiveness is composed of three elements.

- a Sales comfort:** Rainmakers are comfortable in the role of a salesperson or nego-

tiator. Many people in professional services firms bristle at the thought of selling anything, rather than viewing selling as an opportunity to help a client.

b Direction: Rainmakers are not shy about taking control of business acquisition, from the initial call, to lunch, to proposal and, finally, engagement. Many professionals err on the side of caution and reactivity.

c Adaptability: Rainmakers are like

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chameleons; they adjust their conversational style to match their audience. Their personalities remain consistent, but their approach is tailored to the client.

To determine if a candidate is persuasive, ask:

- What do you see as the easiest and toughest parts of developing new client business? (Look for comfort in the role of business developer.)
- Tell me about a time where you came on too strong with a potential client? Not strong enough? (Look for willingness to be directive.)
- What is your most effective method of closing a new client? (Look for them to tailor their approach to the client and be assertive.)

4 RELATIONSHIP

Rainmakers never allow a client to disappear. They keep track of clients after the initial engagement and connect with them regularly. They know how to bond with a client by understanding their personal interests and by exerting extra effort to make sure the client is satisfied, both during and after engagement.

To check on a candidate's relationship skills, you can ask:

- What has challenged you most in establishing a client relationship? (Look for

multiple examples of relationship building.)

- Talk about your most frustrated or disappointed client recently. (Make sure the disappointment is not related to the professional's behaviour.)

5 ORGANISATION

Rainmakers organise themselves and their time. They multitask effectively. Rainmakers apply a consistent, systematic approach to acquiring new business. Two organisation questions:

- How do your organisational skills compare to your peers? (Look for superior skills.)
- How do you avoid getting overwhelmed by daily hassles? What techniques work? (Look for use of effective tools.)

DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL

Most managing partners want to create rainmakers from within, by developing their current staff's business acquisition skills. But not all skills can be developed. The good news is that Relationship, Persuasion and Organisational skills can be developed. Confidence takes more time to develop and often requires a combination of additional seasoning and targeted work on specific fears. Drive, on the other hand, is almost impossible to develop.

In summary, two steps are necessary for professional firms who seek rainmakers:

Step 1: Hire candidates who demonstrate the five core skills. Weigh drive and confidence most heavily, because they are hardest to develop. Also assess the other knowledge, skills and abilities essential for the position.

Step 2: Develop current staff by focusing on Relationship, Persuasiveness and Organisational skills. Make sure that Drive and Confidence are already present in those you attempt to develop.

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