

EXAMPLE REFERENCE CHECKING QUESTIONS

Honest Feedback is Crucial for Executive Positions

Oftentimes negative feedback from managers, peers, and sources can be the most insightful. Getting the reference to feel comfortable enough for you to ask the hard questions is key to a successful reference call.

Plan to spend several hours checking references over the phone by asking the categorized questions below. If at any point a reference's response generates a follow-up question, ask them as they arise to keep a conversational feel and to better capitalize on a reference's insights and train of thought. You do not need to ask every question below and can tailor them to your style and the reference. However, be sure to adequately cover all of these categories.

RELATIONSHIP / INTRODUCTION

Start off a reference call with high-level, relationship-based questions to ease into the harder questions that will follow. You will also gain insight in this step to understand the relationship between your reference and candidate.

- ② Please tell me about yourself and how you came to know the Candidate? For how long?
- ② When did you meet the Candidate and how well do you know them?
- ② What are the Candidate's passions in and out of work?
- ② What is one thing that not many people know about the Candidate?

TEAMWORK

After you have established the relationship framework between the Candidate and their reference, you will explore the candidate's ability to work in teams. In particular, you are looking for performance feedback, influence, and shortcomings.

- ② (If the Candidate had peers in the role) "The Candidate was good, but compared to X and Y was the Candidate clearly the best at the job? Or did they each have their strengths and weaknesses? What was Y better at than the Candidate?"
- ② Was the Candidate an effective team leader?
- ② The Candidate is by far the best we have seen, but everyone has their short-comings. What are the Candidate's?
- ② Did the Candidate have any lasting impact on the organization or others on the team?
- ② (To build a list of references) "Everyone I speak with says such great things about them. Is there anyone the Candidate didn't see eye-to-eye with? Why do you think?"

GROWTH

This set of questions is designed to understand growth, obstacles and the Candidate's career path. When asking multiple references these questions you will be able to formulate a clearer story behind a Candidate's career progression, beyond what your Candidate has disclosed.

- ② Did the Candidate report directly to you? For what portion of their tenure at the company?
- ② Who else did they report to?
- ② Why wasn't the Candidate promoted further at your company? Sometimes there wasn't a role for them to move into (i.e. they would have replaced their boss). If that's the case, what skills / ability does the boss possess that they lack? How do you think they would perform in their boss's role? (This one might be hard to ask if you are talking to their boss).
- ② Ask the Candidate, bluntly, "What was the biggest mistake you made in the role" – then ask the reference to check against their answer.
- ② To the best of your knowledge, what were the reasons the Candidate left the company?

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LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT STYLE

As a senior executive, the Candidate will be responsible for managing people and strategy. These questions are critical for assuring that the Candidate's leadership and management style will fit in with the company culture and complement the styles of other senior leaders on the executive team.

- ② How would you describe the Candidate's management style?
- ② How does the Candidate motivate people?
- ② How would you rate the Candidate's overall communication skills?
- ② How does the Candidate interact with other senior leaders and leadership?
- ② What leadership skills would you say are the weakest for the Candidate?
- ② The Candidate mentioned X was one of their big achievements. What was their actual role in this? Were they solely responsible, or was it a team effort?

ADAPTABILITY & CHALLENGES

These reference questions are asked in order to build a more complete picture of how your Candidate reacts under pressure, conflict and their ability to adapt and manage these challenges.

- ② Do you remember a time the Candidate had to resolve a serious conflict between staff or management?
- ② How hungry is the Candidate for results, for example, what is the craziest thing you've ever seen them do to achieve a goal?
- ② Did the Candidate have setbacks? How did they handle them?
- ② If I were to hire the Candidate and six months from now you hear that the Candidate voluntarily resigned, what would be your best guess for the reason behind that?
- ② If I were to hire the Candidate and six months from now you heard they were fired without other context, what would be your best guess as to why they were fired?

AGILITY & FIT

This set of questions is used to evaluate how well a Candidate fits into an organization and inform us of the ideal role and culture in which the reference believes the Candidate would thrive.

- ② Would you hire the Candidate again? If so, would you rehire them without hesitation? Would you create a role for them if you didn't have one or only hire them into the right role?
- ② How would you change the role we're considering the Candidate for to best suit their abilities?
- ② We're inclined to make the Candidate an offer, and I hope that they will take the position. If they do, how would you suggest they be managed to get the best performance out of them?

CONCLUSION

These questions are used to end the conversation on a lighter note and leave the conversation open ended for the reference to offer any additional feedback during or after the call.

- ② On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest), how would you rate your referral for the Candidate? If less than 10, follow up with "why not a 10?" After the reference gets the first reason out, ask why again and again until the reference runs out of things to say.
- ② Is there anything else that should be said about the Candidate?