Welcome to Hiring, Firing, and Inspiring an Exceptional Team!

**<click: Once upon a time…>**

I’m Seth, and to introduce myself and explain why I feel qualified to stand up here, I want to tell you a quick story.

<click: show team>

Once upon a time, I joined the programming team at my current company. I was a pretty good programmer and I spent six or seven years on this team as an individual contributor, slowly gaining more and more technical leadership but really not *responsible* for other people.

Eventually, however, I was promoted into management.

<click: promoted to management>

My head grew a few sizes, and I traded code reviews in Visual Studio for TPS reports and time sheet approvals. Super exciting stuff.

<click: Things were great for awhile>

Things were great for awhile and the team seemed happy and productive. I encouraged them to be open and honest with me about problems they might have, no one said anything, and so I believed there not to *be* any problems.

<click: but all good things come to an end>

But all good things come to an end, and eventually …

<click: someone quit>

… someone quit.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t a case of someone moving on to bigger and better things, it was a case of someone hitting the end of their rope and walking out.

<click: shook>

This really shook me. This was a key employee that I really depended on, and who I had thought to be happy and challenged in their job. I was taken totally by surprise.

<click: uncomfortable>

This was my first real blow as a manager, and the first real blow to the team I’d started to lead. I had to face the uncomfortable truth that it *wasn’t* sunshine and rainbows for everyone.

<click: lets fix it / got to work >

But instead of letting things fester, we worked hard to address those issues. I did a lot of research. I did a lot of introspecting. The team talked about morale and about how we interact with each other.

<click: things improved>

And you know what? Things got better! We identified some issues and fixed them. We strengthened our relationships, and it feels like the team really is productive and healthy now.

<click: … and then …>

I’m happy to report that this story has a happy ending! A few months later, the person that had quit came back.

<click: hey team, haz job>

A few months working elsewhere made him realize that while Heuristics isn’t perfect, we really are an exceptional group, and he really wanted to be part of it.

<click: yay>

So we welcomed him back with open arms. The end.

<click: cool story bro>

My point is that I have firsthand experience with an exceptional team. We have a very low turnover rate, and even when people leave they sometimes come back.

Now, some of our success is because we hire good, smart people with natural tendencies to work hard and be successful. Evan a really bad manager can often find some success when given really good people to work with.

But another part of our success comes *despite* our less desirable natural tendencies. We’re imperfect human beings, we make mistakes, we sometimes act on emotion and not logic. Those things can really destabilize a team if not managed well. When that person left, I spent a lot of time examining those tendencies and the ways that they affected how we communicated and how we both engaged in and avoided conflict. I learned a great deal about not only my own team, but about people in general, and I want to share some of those things with you.

However, I really want this talk to be more than just a random collection of things that some dude at a conference says you should do.

And as I went through the process of troubleshooting my own team, I learned about some tools and techniques that I was totally unaware even existed. And some of those things would have been really helpful if they’d been on my radar, because they might have helped me head off that departure before it happened.

**<click: stuff you don’t know you don’t know>**

My objective today is to introduce some “stuff you don’t know you don’t know”.

You all know *some* stuff about management and leadership and people already. And there’s probably some stuff that you know you *don’t* know, but you could at least recognize when you’re in a situation where you’d need that knowledge, and how to go about getting it. For those things, you at least know enough terms to rely on your Google-fu to make progress.

But if you were promoted into management like I was, there’s probably a ton of stuff that is completely foreign to you. I was promoted into management because I was a good individual contributor, and someone thought “hey, Seth is great at programming and working with computers, so obviously he’d be great at management and working with people too!” What could possibly go wrong?

I wasn’t given any training, and none of my 20 years of technical experience really prepared me for what it meant to lead a team. And as a result, I had some pretty big blind spots when it came to building and motivating a team without driving away the top performers.

<click: bring in 3 images>

Some of the things I’m going to introduce are some ways to recruit and hire team players that are aligned with your core values, how to use DISC personality profiles to improve communication with your team, and how to use the Cynefin framework to empower your team to make their own decisions.

<click: cross out “don’t>

I’m not going to dive super deep into any of these topics, I just want to introduce them and move them into your “things you know you don’t know” bucket. I want you to know enough to recognize opportunities to use them, so that you can seek out deeper knowledge when you need it.

If you’ve been in a leadership role for a long time, or if you’ve already applied these things on your own teams, then this talk probably isn’t a good use of your time and you won’t hurt my feelings if you “law of two feet” you want out of here.

**<click: Now Hiring>**

Let’s start by talking about hiring.

As a manager, your job is to organize and direct your team’s collective output towards meeting the organization’s goals. In a nutshell, that’s it. Individual contributors do stuff, and managers make sure they’re doing the right stuff, and help them do that stuff better.

There’s a saying, “garbage in, garbage out”. The overall quality of your team’s output is heavily influenced by the quality of the people that comprise the team, so one of the most impactful things that you can do is to make sure that the organization hires and retains the right people.

At Heuristics, we’ve been really successful on this front.

**<click: stable teams>**

Out of our entire 20-person company, we have 7 people that have been with the organization more than 10 years.

Of those 20 people, 9 are on my team, and we have an average tenure of 6.5 years with the organization.

And over 20 years, there have been 5 people that have left the company for one reason or another, and then returned to us at a later point in their career.

We attribute the longevity of people’s careers with us to how well we’ve integrated our core values into the recruiting process. We care a lot about our core values, and the people that do well here are the ones that share those values with us. When someone leaves us within the first year or two, we can usually identify some aspect where that person *didn’t* share our values, or even worse held *competing* values instead.

But when someone is well-aligned to those values, they tend to work out. They feel more at home, their knee -jerk reactions and decisions are more likely to be judged as “correct”, and the easier it is for us to manage them.

Over time we’ve built up a 4-step process for hiring the right people.

**<click: build teams, 01 selected>**

The first step is to identify your core values.

I realize that as far as advice goes, this isn’t super profound. I mean, it kind of seems stupid obvious. But I think it’s worth starting with the basics because so many teams *think* they’ve done this, but haven’t.

Quick question: how many of you have seen a memo or a powerpoint on “core values” at some point at your job? How many of you are re-exposed to those values on at least a quarterly basis? Anyone have a team habit of actually *referencing those values* during team discussions or decision making?

**<click: identify core values>**

At Heuristics, we have a set of corporate values that the whole company shares. We came up with this list many years ago at an all-hands company meeting, I think there were maybe 15 of us at that time. We went through an exercise where everyone went around the room and talked about what we saw as our greatest strengths and successes. I think we had one of those paper flip-charts that we wrote on, but you can also do things with post-it notes.

As we talked, we started to group similar concepts together, and our 4 main values sort of crystalized on their own. They are:

1. Pioneering (*innovate / seek out new solutions*)
2. Act Intentionally (*have a reason for everything you do*)
3. Achieve Excellence With Others (*collaboration FTW*)
4. Show That You Care (*treat people as people*)

I don’t want to focus too much on the values themselves, because that’s not really the point I’m trying to make. The point is that we have them, and that they aren’t something that some lofty CEO dreamt up on an African vision quest and then turned into motivational posters. These values came from the people already doing the work.

**<click: umm… I’m new at this>**

My experience at Heuristics probably isn’t typical. Not everyone gets to help establish those company wide values; if you work for an established company, especially a larger one, those corporate values probably already exist, so you’re off the hook for needing to create them.

However, you *can* establish a set of *team-level* values as the foundation upon which you’re going to build your exceptional group of people.

<click: <new slide, team values>>

After those corporate values were in place, we held a similar exercise for just the development team and we came up with a second list of technical values or principles that we share:

1. Go Slow to Go Fast (*avoid technical debt and cutting corners; stable velocity over time*)
2. Always Build Components (*invest in reusable pieces of code*)
3. Automate All the Things
4. Innovate Intentionally

In our case, because we had such a good set of corporate values already in place, our technical values focus more on the work product itself, rather than how we (as people) do the work. If you don’t already have a strong set of core values to start with, then make sure you’re thinking as much about interpersonal relationships and interactions as you are about code-level stuff.

Lastly, if all you do is make up a fancy sounding list of values, throw it in a memo, and then go back to business as usual, then you’re really not doing anything “exceptional”. In order to leverage those values into some sort of improved outcome, you need to *demonstrate* them on a regular basis. There’s lots of ways to do that: you can dedicate a portion of a retrospective once a quarter to reflecting on your values. You can reference them in your 1-1s. The point is to make sure that you’re actively reinforcing these things on the team, because these shared values are the foundation upon which you’re going to build your exceptional team.

**<click: back to list, #2 highlighted>**

In order for those values to help you with hiring, you’ll need to integrate them into your recruiting process.

Recruiting and hiring is a massive time suck, and not every candidate is equally valuable. A smart manager plays the percentages; you want to spend the most time on the candidates with the greatest potential, and the least time on those with the least potential.

If you identify your core values and make them evident in your recruiting process, candidates that are really well aligned with those values are going to be excited and engaged during the screening process, and that makes them easier to identify. It also leads to more productive interviews.

And on the flip side, candidates that are *not* aligned with those values are going to be hesitant and uncertain. In fact, in the best case, candidates that are not aligned with your values will self-select *out of the process*, making it that much easier for you to avoid wasting time on them.

For example, lets say your team has identified “Be Part of the Community” as a core value. Maybe you all have a passion for open source, or you like to be active in the conference scene, or maybe you want to foster a culture of volunteering or helping others. If you talk about this in your job ad, and then you ask screening questions about it during the initial phone screen, and then you ask the candidate what sort of community involvement they are looking to have in the position, then you’re creating numerous opportunities for someone that *is* community-minded to demonstrate that to you. And at the same time, you’re sending all sorts of signals to the non-community-minded candidates that perhaps they’d be happier somewhere else.

**<click: hire team players>**

I think that a good manager is a “force multiplier” for the team; he or she helps the team be more than the sum of its parts, and to be more productive as a group than the members would be working independently.

In order for that to happen, however, you have to have a team that is *capable* of working together. This can be harder than it seems.

One of the books that made the biggest impression on me was “The Ideal Team Player” by Patrick Lencioni. In it, he identifies 3 characteristics that are shared by the best teammates.

<click: humble>

First, team players are *humble*.

<click: hungry>

Second, team players are *hungry*…

<click: people smart>

Lastly, team players are *people smart*…

<click: The Pawn>

Let’s look at what happens when we hire someone that is lacking those characteristics.

Someone that is only Humble can be considered a pawn…

<click: The Bulldozer>

If someone is only hungry, then…

<click: The Charmer>

Likewise, if someone is people smart but not humble or hungry, then…

<click: Accidental Messmaker>

What if we hire someone that has two of the characteristics, but not all three?

Someone who is humble and hungry, but not people smart, is an accidental messmaker…

<click: Loveable Slacker>

Someone who is humble and people smart, but not very hungry, is a loveable slacker…

<click: Skillful Politician>

And lastly, someone who is people smart and hungry, but not humble, is the skillful politician…

<click: all three>

Someone with all three…

<click: TODO>

<click: Now what>

OK, so you’ve done all of that stuff and you’ve finally landed this awesome new employee that’s super aligned with your values, a total team player, and ready to join this amazing team you told them about.

Now what?

I believe that teams are immutable; when you add or remove people, you don’t just *change* the team, you create an *entirely new team*. This new team is susceptible to all sorts of disruptions as a result of new communication paths, new behavior patterns, etc.

**<click: Design the Alliance>**

One way that I like to head off those disruptions is an exercise that’s called “Design the Alliance”.