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, and life was good.

<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 began talking about things like morale and how we interacted with each other through our work.

<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>**

So what’s the point?

My point is that I have firsthand experience with an exceptional team, and that experience is why I feel qualified to give this talk.

**<click: dividends>**

One of the reasons I think my company is exceptional is that when we find the right people, they stick around. Seven people out of 20 have over 10 years of service with the company. On the team that I run, the average tenure is 6.5 years, which is like 6 programmer lifetimes or something. And over our 20-year history, 5 people have left for various reasons and then come back.

TODO: add another slide about shipping on time.

But people don’t rage quit from exceptional teams, do they? When that valued employee left, it made me wonder both about what had led them to leave, and what led them to return. Since then I’ve read a lot of books and listened to a lot of podcasts and through that research I’ve identified 4 key things that we do that contribute to our success as an exceptional team.

**<click: agenda>**

My agenda today is to share this model with you and to give you some specific advice in each of these 4 areas:

* How to identify the right people to hire from your recruiting pool
* How to get off on the right foot with a new hire
* How to build relationships with your existing team through effective 1-1s
* How to inspire and retain your team by giving them autonomy, mastery, and purpose

It was through the application of this model that I identified and addressed some of the issues my team was having, and this is the model I continue to use today.

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

I want this talk to be more than just a random collection of tips from some guy at a conference, so I’m going to introduce some concepts that I learned about during my research that I was previously totally unaware of.

These concepts include a model for hiring team players, 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 these topics. I don’t have time to fully cover them in enough detail where you could leave this session able to implement them. Instead, I’m just going to introduce them and do enough to move them out of your “things you don’t know you don’t know” bucket into your “things you know you don’t know bucket”. That way, if they’re on your radar, you’ll be in a position to recognize when you’re in a situation where deeper knowledge might be useful and will have the language to seek out that knowledge.

**<click: back to agenda>**

Let’s start by talking about hiring.

As a manager, one of the most impactful things that you can do is to make sure that the organization hires and retains the right people. The phrase “garbage in, garbage out” really applies here; every bad hire reduces the quality of the output of the people around them, so it’s really important to get the right people to start.

I’ve been successful in this area by focusing my recruiting efforts on team players that share our corporate and team level values. We attribute the longevity of people’s careers with us to how well we’ve integrated our core values into the recruiting process. When you hire people that are naturally aligned with you they feel more at home, they’re more likely to make the correct knee-jerk reactions and snap decisions, and they are less likely to chafe at the less than perfect aspects of your company. No company is perfect, every team has rough edges, but when people feel aligned with the values of their company and team, then tiny irritants are far less likely to blow up into big problems.

**<click: identify>**

The first step is to identify your core values.

I realize that this isn’t super profound, as far as advice goes. I mean, it’s kind of 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: show examples (TODO)>

At Heuristics, we have a set of corporate values that the whole company shares. 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*)

In addition, the technical team has some additional things that we like to focus on:

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

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 these things, and they aren’t something that some wackadoodle CEO dreamt up on an African vision quest and then turned into motivational posters. These values came from the people already doing the work, and everyone on the team knows them.

If you can’t point to a random person on your team and ask them to talk in a meaningful way about your values, then you need to start there because it’s really hard to hire the “right person” if you don’t even know what traits the “right person” will have.

There’s lots of ways to do come up with these things, and if you do a Google search you’ll find plenty.

Guiding you through that process is a little out of scope for this talk, so let’s pretend that you and your team purchased a ton of post-it notes, went through a values identification ritual, sang Kumbaya together, and you now have your list of Core Values. What next?

**<click: Hire team players>**

But before you start writing job descriptions to focus on those core values, let’s talk teamwork first.

Selecting candidates that align with your core values is a great way to find individuals that are compatible with your way of thinking or working. That’s a *necessary* part of building an exceptional team, but it isn’t *sufficient* on its own. Core value alignment is a strong signal that a candidate would be successful *if you hired them to work alone*.

But to really have an exceptional *team*, you have to have a collection of people that do more as a unit than they would on their own.

<click: quote>

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together”.

This saying has held true for my entire 24-year career in software. I can almost always get more stuff done by going heads-down and cranking through it than I can by bringing along other people. When I’m going solo I don’t have to spend time making sure that people are all “on the same page”, that they understand the decisions I’ve made, or that they agree with those decisions. I can literally spend *all* of my effort in making progress.

But what if I get sick and need someone to pick up my slack for a few days? Or what if I made a mistake, and I’m going in the wrong direction and there’s no one to point it out?

If you want to be a great manager, then build groups of team players with a common purpose.

And if you want to hire team players, then you need to look for teamwork traits in addition to your core values and principles.

**<click: Ideal Team Player>**

There’s a book called “The Ideal Team Player” by Patrick Lencioni that I really highly recommend. I like his books because he uses parables to make his points, and that layer of narrative fiction makes the books much easier to consume while I’m driving or working out than your typical business book.

In the book, he identifies 3 characteristics that are shared by the best team players.

<click: humble>

First, team players are *humble*. This doesn’t mean they aren’t confident or self-assured or think less of themselves, they just think of themselves less. They’re open to new ideas and they aren’t selfish.

<click: hungry>

Second, team players are *hungry.* They have goals and they *go after them*. As a manager, you want hungry people on your team because they are going to give you forward progress. At least, if you’ve properly aligned their goals with your overall team goals.

<click: people smart>

Lastly, team players are *people smart.* These are the folks that have enough emotional intelligence to have healthy interactions with other people.

This is why exceptional teams always have a “No A-Holes” rule. It doesn’t matter how smart you are, how good of a programmer or tester or designer you are, it doesn’t matter how productive you are personally, if you’re an A-hole, then you’re doing damage to everyone around you, and that damage becomes a drag on the overall team effectiveness.

Team players are people smart enough to understand how to collaborate and work with other people in healthy ways.

It’s important that you get all 3 characteristics because they balance each other out. Let’s look at what happens when we hire someone that is lacking one or more of those characteristics.

<click: The Pawn>

Lencioni considers humility the most important of the three traits when it comes to teamwork, but taken on its own it may not be that desirable.

Candidates that are humble but are lacking a drive to succeed and emotional smarts can be easily taken advantage of and are unlikely to push the envelope.

<click: The Bulldozer>

Hungry candidates are the people that will push and push until the job is done. These can be your innovators and your closers and can motivate others to do better as well.

But that sort of drive, absent humility and people-smarts, creates a bulldozer that doesn’t work well with others and is more focused on their personal success than that of the team.

<click: The Charmer>

Candidates with lots of people-smarts tend to interview really well. These people are likeable and charming, but you need to make sure you’re hiring folks with humility and hunger as well. Otherwise, you’re going to end up with some very likeable people that don’t actually get much done on their own and don’t help out other people either.

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

<click: Accidental Messmaker>

Candidates who are humble and hungry are generally good-hearted people who have a drive to succeed, but without emotional intelligence they tend to make mistakes in group settings. These are the people that might miss subtle social cues and offend other people on the team. It’s harder for these people to create strong interpersonal relationships, and that can make it hard for them to “gel” on your team.

<click: Loveable Slacker>

Candidates with emotional smarts and humility tend to be fun to have around, they care about their teammates and are willing to help, they establish good relationships, but at the end of the day they just don’t have a hunger to succeed. This makes them a loveable slacker.

This is actually a really, really damaging type of person to hire. They aren’t going to push the team forward, they aren’t going to produce a whole lot, and their colleagues are going to have to pick up their slack. But at the same time, because they’re so loveable and likeable, it can be hard to fire them.

If you’re the kind of manager that likes to be liked by your team, and you’re squeamish about holding people accountable to productivity standards, then you need to be super careful to avoid hiring Loveable Slackers.

<click: Skillful Politician>

Lencioni says that the most dangerous combination of traits is smart and hungry, but without humility. These people are like politicians; they’re skilled at working with people and they have a lot of drive, but they’re primarily focused on themselves. When faced with a choice, these people will always make the decision that benefits them personally, regardless of what it does to the team.

This is dangerous not only because they threaten your team’s ability to meet its goals, but also because these folks tend to drive away your other employees. The longer you have a “lone wolf” on your team, the harder it will be for the team to maintain its culture of teamwork, and the more likely that your valued team players will start to leave.

<click: all three>

You should avoid hiring people with just *one* of these traits.

In some situations, you might be able to hire someone with *two* of these traits and then work with them to develop the missing one.

But if you really want to build an exceptional team around the values of teamwork, then test for all three traits.

**<click: sounds great…>**

So step 1 in this model is to hire team players that are aligned with your core values.

That sounds great, but *how* exactly does one go about doing this?

The traditional interview setting, where a candidate sits down in your office and tells you about their greatest strength and weakness, is not very effective at this. It’s great if you want to see the candidate the way they want you to see them. It’s great if you want to hear them tell you that they are team players and would be happy on a team with your values.

Of course they’re going to tell you that, because they want the job that you have to offer them. This doesn’t mean that they’re necessarily lying, either. In that moment, when the candidate is doing everything they’ve practiced to come across as desirable, they may even *believe* that they would be happy on your team and that they would be a team player. They may have every positive intention of doing those things, but once you hire them and they get acclimated, people return to their true nature.

**<click: screening for values & teamwork>**

So if you want to hire the people that truly share your values, and that truly possess those key teamwork traits, then you need to look for *evidence* of those things in the candidate’s behavior, in their experience, and in how they talk about other people in addition to how they talk about themselves.

<click: get out from behind the desk>

The first suggestion is to get out from behind the desk.

Lencioni suggests conducting nontraditional interviews by taking a candidate out to run errands, or attend an event of some sort.

Charles Schwab’s CEO has been known to take candidates out to a restaurant and asks the waiter to deliberately mess up the order, in order to assess how well the candidate reacts to mistakes or stress.

Richard Branson once disguised himself as a taxi driver to drive some candidates around. People that were rude to the taxi driver didn’t get a job offer, because he believed that how they treated folks in a service role was a strong indicator of their real character.

Zappos does something similar; they have a company shuttle drive candidates around the campus, and the hiring manager checks in with the shuttle driver at the end of the day to ask how they were treated. Like Branson, the Zappos people believe this tactic helps them determine if a candidate is really a nice person, or was just faking it for the interview.

And at a company called TechnologyAdvice, prospective hires play a few games of ping pong with a designated employee. This person is a skilled player that starts out easy but slowly ramps up the difficulty as the matches continue, giving the interviewer a chance to assess how the candidate handles a loss and their willingness to try new things under pressure.

The actual approach you take will depend heavily on the values you’re looking for and your existing interview process, but even something as simple as taking a candidate for a walk in a nearby park is enough to shake things up and give you insight into their true personality, rather than the façade they put up through their resume.

<click: eliminate siloed interviews>

Another tactic you can try, especially if getting out of the office isn’t feasible, is eliminating siloed interviews.

For instance, at Heuristics, multiple people are involved in the interview process, and we have a debrief between each round. If someone early in the process has concerns about a candidate’s “people smarts”, subsequent interviewers can adjust their questions to spend more time in that area.

In addition, the very last step in the process for us is a panel interview of the candidate’s peers, *without me in the room*. I might give the team some direction on things to focus on, but generally I try not to bias them one way or the other. The panel format is great for getting multiple reads on a person, and then I debrief the panel participants as a group. (TODO: Story about Sara)

In the end, by layering all of these assessments together and treating the interviews as a collaborative process, rather than a siloed process, we get a much more comprehensive picture of the candidate.

<click: scare them with sincerity>

Another tactic is this idea of “scaring them with sincerity”, where you make a big deal about how seriously you take something, and that if they aren’t enthused by that prospect, they might not be a great fit. For instance, if one of your core values is community engagement, then you might make a big deal about how you’d expect them to show up to user groups or speak at conferences or whatever, and really press them to demonstrate enthusiasm while reiterating how important this is. This gives the candidate an out, and it’s awesome if they take it. If you do such a great job of articulating your values that candidates are able to realize and accept that they aren’t a good fit, and they subsequently self-select out of the process, then it saves you a ton of wasted time on interviews, not to mention the money you’d waste by hiring someone that doesn’t last very long.

<click: TODO>

TODO: Southwest Airlines wearing khakis story

**<click: Design the Alliance>**

OK, lets pretend that you’ve done all of those things, you put out this great job ad, you whittled it down to some team players, and you picked the best one. Today is their first day, and they show up in your office all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Now what?

You might be anxious to get them engaged, but it’s a mistake to just point them towards whatever problems they were hired to solve and step back. Instead, I like to devote some time that first week to an exercise called “Design the Alliance”.

<click: first two sentences>

The idea here is that the most important first step to take is setting up a foundation for effective communication with the newbie. If they don’t understand what you want from them, then they’re going to waste a lot of time trying to figure it out. And if you don’t understand what they need, then you’re going to do a terrible job of removing blockers and making them productive. There is literally no problem that your employees can have that isn’t made *worse* by an inability for the two of you to communicate effectively.

<click: second two>

The point of “Design the Alliance” is to help each of you understand the other’s preferred styles of communication and working, so that you can collaboratively approach any gaps or conflicts in your styles *before* they become issues.

If you’re a stickler for starting meetings on time, but you just hired someone that likes to get into the zone and go deep down the rabbit hole when working on something, then you have a potential problem! It’s so much easier to identify those things up front.

**<click: Design the Alliance, #2>**

The exercise itself is really simple. There’s just a list of questions that you both answer, and then you talk about any obvious conflicts.

The actual questions that you ask should be tailored to your specific situation, but here a few that I’ve found really helpful:

1. Interaction Style – do you prefer face-to-face conversations or virtual? Frequent checkins, or more limited?
2. View on deadlines – do you like to finish super early? Right on time? Do you sometimes exceed a deadline in order to improve the deliverable?
3. Personality assessments (DiSC, Myers-Briggs, etc) – Do you know your assessment?
4. How do you measure success?
5. What’s in it for me? What would you like to get out of this work experience?
6. How do you want to be managed?
7. How can I tell if you’re stressed?
8. How can I tell if you’re angry or upset?

As the manager, you should answer each question first, and then give your new hire or colleague a chance to answer next.

<click: take notes!>

Here’s the most important thing: write down your notes! This is your roadmap for how to behave in this particular relationship, so don’t trust your memory.

I have a OneNote notebook for each person on my team, and in this notebook I keep my Design the Alliance notes. About once a quarter, while preparing for a 1-1, I’ll refer back these notes and reflect on how things are going.

TODO: some sort of story?

**<click: back to agenda, #3 highlighted>**

Let’s fast-forward again and pretend that you placed your job ad, you found the ideal team player, and you’ve designed the alliance and developed a plan for how you’re going to communicate going forward.

The next step is to set up regular, routine 1-1s with your team.

<**click: effective 1-1s>**

Quick question: how many of you meet with your boss at least once a month to talk about how things are going for you?

Anyone meet with your boss at least twice a month? How about weekly?

TODO:

* Task Relevant Maturity – if someone is new in a role, or has a new responsibility, they need more help
* The employee drives the agenda
* Rotating list of questions (see Lighthouse ebook)
* Give feedback, especially to Milleniams (see Lighthouse ebook)
* Use active listening in last 5 minutes to take notes

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TODO

<https://getlighthouse.com/blog/the-elephant-and-the-rider-motivate-your-team/?utm_content=bufferbf72a&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer>

Flywheel concept: hiring for values makes it easier to hire for values

<https://getlighthouse.com/blog/11-meetings-value-make-most/> 🡨-- statistics

Graveyard

~~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.~~

~~So when you start writing job descriptions and posting on job boards, think about ways~~

~~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.~~

~~How do go about doing this?~~

* ~~Craft your job posting to appeal to the right people. If you want to attract people w/ a community focus, describe your team as community focused~~

~~TODO: More of this stuff~~

**~~<click: team players quote>~~**

~~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, which is why it gets a dedicated bullet point on this list.~~

~~<click: “go fast / go far”>~~