

Insider Hiring Guide

What top talent thinks but never says... And how thoughtful leaders respond.

Every hiring team wants clarity and confidence. Yet top talent often moves through a process thinking things they never say aloud.

This guide gives you a peek into those unspoken thoughts and shows the small, thoughtful responses that set strong leaders apart. Use it as a quick confidence tool as you prepare for the 2026 hiring season.



Five things top talent thinks, but never says

“Please don’t waste my time”

Top talent is discerning. Long delays or unclear processes send signals.

- A [2025 report](#) found that the average hiring journey now takes 68.5 days, and long, drawn-out processes, especially with little communication, cause candidate frustration and high abandonment.
- According to [recent data](#), 66% of candidates accepted offers because they had a positive candidate experience; conversely, 26% rejected offers because of poor communication or unclear expectations.

A [similar review of recruitment practices](#) shows that inefficient, overly long, or unclear recruitment processes lead to drop-off or negative candidate perceptions, harming employer brand.

Strong leaders: state timelines, stick to them, communicate early.

When your hiring process runs smoothly, and respects the candidate’s time (clear timeframes, prompt feedback, minimal unnecessary delays), that alone becomes a strong signal to top talent that your organisation operates with integrity and respect.

“I’m checking for red flags too”

Candidates quietly assess culture, leadership style, and values.

- According to [a 2024 study of New Zealand job-seekers](#), top drivers for people considering a role include work-life balance, good training, job security, and career progression — not just pay.
- A broader [global hiring-market review](#) found that, beyond salary, many candidates prioritise meaningful work and growth opportunities, indicating that they weigh how employers live their values, not just what they offer on paper.

- [Research on “candidate experience”](#) emphasises transparency about role expectations, company culture, and what life at the company is really like ('realistic job preview'). This is because mismatches in expectation vs reality drive early resignations and disengagement.

Strong leaders: show consistency between what you say and how you show up.

Top-tier candidates read not only words on the job ad but also between the lines: how leaders behave, and how consistent the messages are with actual organisational culture.

“I want to know the real challenges”

People want honesty so they can set reasonable expectations.

- The concept of a “realistic job preview” is [well studied and supported](#): organisations that clearly communicate both the positives and challenges of a role (e.g. work environment, expectations, potential stressors) see lower turnover, better retention and stronger “fit” hires.
- [Candidate-experience research](#) underscores that clarity about job expectations and “what you’ll really be doing” is a key factor in decision-making. Unclear or overly polished job descriptions reduce trust and can lead to candidate drop-out or dissatisfaction.

Strong leaders: name the tough stuff without defensiveness.

Transparency isn’t just ethical, it’s strategic. By naming the real challenges (e.g. workload, ambiguity, resource constraints, growth curve), you build trust, so the candidates who accept are more committed and less likely to leave because of surprises.





“I need to feel respected during this process”

Candidates track tone, warmth, admin accuracy, and responsiveness.

- A “positive candidate experience”, including respectful communication, timely feedback, and transparency, significantly increases acceptance rates (66%) and reduces decline rates due to poor experience (26%).
- When candidates perceive respect and fairness in the hiring process, even if they don’t get the job, they’re more likely to speak well of the employer, reapply in future, or refer others. Negative candidate experiences are often shared publicly, hurting the employer’s brand.

- Candidate experience reviews find that clear, honest, empathetic communication is a core element of what job seekers value. Especially in competitive markets where top talent has options.

Strong leaders: demonstrate partnership from the first interaction.

Treat every candidate as a valued human being. The tone, speed, clarity and empathy in your process communicates what kind of organisation you are. This builds trust before day one, and lifts your employer brand in the market.

“Tell me how I’ll grow”

Career progression matters as much as salary.

- Local NZ research from 2024 also shows that “career progression” remains among the top 5 candidate priorities (alongside salary, flexibility, job security, training/benefits).
- Employers who offer transparent development pathways, training and real opportunity for progression tend to perform better in attraction and retention, especially among younger or high-potential candidates seeking more than a paycheck.

Strong leaders: articulate what “success after 12 months” looks like.

When you position roles not just as static jobs but as potential growth journeys (with learning, career development, and mentoring) you address a core expectation of top talent.



What your process might be signalling (without you realising)

- **Slow response times:** “we’re overwhelmed”. This erodes trust early. Candidates often assume the pace they see now is the pace they’ll live inside later.
- **Vague job descriptions:** “we haven’t thought this through”. Ambiguity creates anxiety. High-quality talent is drawn to clarity because it shows alignment and decision-making maturity.
- **Disjointed interviews:** “this is how we operate internally”. Candidates experience your internal culture long before they join it. Fragmented conversations hint at unclear ownership and fuzzy accountability.
- **Over-selling benefits:** “we’re trying too hard to compensate for something”. When everything is framed as a perk, candidates instinctively look for the hidden catch. Over-polishing signals a lack of confidence in the core role.
- **No clarity on next steps:** “your experience may not matter here”. Silence post-interview is never neutral. It silently ranks your process below their time, which discourages candidates from continuing.

One small shift to make before Christmas

Run a 20-minute exercise to check in on the following things:

- What problem are we actually trying to solve with this hire?
- What outcomes do we need by March?
- What’s one step we can take now that makes hiring easier in January?

This reduces pressure and sets your 2026 hiring up with intention.



How strong leaders win the best people

- **Clear, simple hiring pathways:** Add a one-page “How our hiring works” PDF or webpage and send it automatically when someone applies.
- **Honest role realities:** Include a short “A week in this role looks like...” paragraph in the job ad, written by the actual hiring manager.
- **Fast, respectful communication:** Block 15 minutes in your calendar at the same time every day purely for candidate updates.
- **Purpose-led positioning:** Start each interview with a 20-second explanation of why this role exists and the impact it has.
- **Inclusive, values-aligned interview experiences:** Give interviewers a mini checklist: greet warmly, explain the flow, avoid acronyms, invite questions early.
- **Thoughtful onboarding planning before someone signs:** Draft the new hire’s first-week schedule before making the offer, so you can share it as part of the offer pack.
- **Career progression opportunities:** Add a simple “Where this role can take you” snapshot to the job ad or offer pack, showing 2–3 real pathways past hires have taken. Include timeframes and skills gained so candidates can picture their trajectory with you.