

LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

Do you Possess an Exceptional Employee?

By Leyla Hussein • 30 December 2019



I once sat with a stack of CVs that all said the same thing. The right degrees, the right certificates, the right run of job titles in the right order. On paper every one of them was a strong hire. And not one of those pages told me the single thing I actually needed to know, which was what this person would be like at four o'clock on a bad Thursday when everything had gone wrong.

That is the trap in [recruitment](#). We screen hard for experience, skills and qualifications, and all of those matter, but they do not capture personality, values or how someone [fits a culture](#). After years of hiring, promoting and occasionally getting it wrong, these are the traits I have learned to hunt for. They are what separate a good employee from an exceptional one.

They finish things

An exceptional employee gets the job done and done properly, whether that means staying late, starting early or quietly stepping outside their job description. They wear several hats and put themselves wherever they can add value. They thrive on collaboration, and they will give everything to a company that looks after them in return.

They raise things before they fester

Nobody enjoys conflict, but when it turns up, the exceptional ones deal with it rather than letting it rot. They name the problem and talk it through until it is resolved. This is rarer than it should be. Most people expect their employer to read their mind,

quietly grow dissatisfied when it does not happen, and eventually leave without ever saying why. Make it easy for your people to come to you, and never make them feel that raising something is an imposition. Sighing about how long a conversation takes is the fastest way to build a closed-off culture.

They focus on what matters

With a dozen things flying at you, it is easy to spend a day being busy and achieve nothing. Exceptional employees hold their nerve on the priority even when the plan has to change five times before lunch. They will take work home rather than hand over something below their own standard, because they are their own harshest critics and it genuinely bothers them when a piece is not right.

They neutralise toxicity

Every company eventually meets someone difficult. Rather than letting that person poison the whole culture, the exceptional employee weighs it up, takes advice from people they trust, and only then acts. They feel the frustration as strongly as anyone, and they will say so to the right person in private, but it does not warp their judgement. If a hard decision is needed, they make it and carry the consequences with some grace.

They are willing to be vulnerable

There is real courage in admitting you were wrong. We all have our proud moments, but the exceptional ones swallow it first, back down when team harmony is worth more than the point, and keep their composure. They are conscientious and empathetic, quick to protect the people around them. And on the rare occasion they will not budge, it is worth listening, because they have already thought through every angle before planting their feet. Often they will let someone else take the credit for their idea, if that is what moves the company forward.

Nothing quite satisfies them

They are forever looking for a better way, to improve a process, to improve themselves, to help somewhere they are not even expert yet. They are not reckless with it. Everything is measured, planned and thought through. These are the people who comb through a process line by line and repeat instructions back to you to be sure nothing was lost in translation. Some managers find that grating and read it as negativity. It is the opposite. They are meticulous, sometimes maddeningly so, precisely because they know how easily a small mistake becomes an expensive one.

They are solutions oriented

A looming problem gnaws at them, so they get ahead of it. They look for new solutions at every level, try to put a number on the risk, measure the financial impact, and stay within budget or, better still, shave cost wherever they can. Picture a machine that never stops turning out ideas, big and small, all aimed at making the product, the service or the way things are done a little bit better.

They are accountable

You can rely on them to deliver, and when a mistake does slip through, they own it and set about fixing it. They are honest, sometimes more honest than is comfortable, owning up to things you would never have spotted. Expect to work the problem through with them, because they will ask questions until they understand how to avoid it next time. They have integrity, and they almost never bring you a problem without a solution attached.

They are brand ambassadors

These people carry your values whether or not they hold a title, and they are leaders regardless of the org chart. They represent who you are even off the clock, talking about the company as though it were their own, showing it in its best light without ever being asked. That is a rare kind of commitment. Invest in them, give them room to show what they can do, and feed them the drive and the praise they run on.

They know when to speak up

Speaking up is hard, and plenty of employers dislike it. But the exceptional employee will put an honest opinion on the table, not to undermine anyone but to make sure every angle has been considered. They do it politely, appropriately and consistently, and some people will always find it invasive. The gift is that they know when it matters, and they speak for the good of the company and everyone in the room.

In summary

Truly exceptional employees are hard to spot and harder to keep. Keep them happy with challenges big enough to stretch them, and give their talent somewhere to go. Companies lose these people all the time, usually because they were never set up to notice them in the first place, spread them too thin, and left them unable to see anything through. That starves them, and they leave. They need [real feedback](#), and they need to know they are seen, because recognition is the fuel for their next leap.

Hiring one starts long before the interview. Build a process that reads for personality, values and cultural fit, not just the tidy CV, because that is what actually predicts how someone performs. If you are serious about growing, fill your team with exceptional people, and then be worthy of them.

So let me ask you the question that started all this. Do you possess an exceptional employee?

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