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Why Your First Hire Can Shape Your Startup's Culture for Decades

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Character, work ethic, and cultural fit matter as much as skill when building a startup team, especially in public-facing businesses.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Larry O'Toole is the founder and chairman of Gentle Giant Moving Company, a New England-based mover for more than four decades. He is the author of "Heavy Lifting: Building a Business With a Giant Heart."(https://www.amazon.com/Heavy-Lifting-Building-Business-Giant/dp/B0GWNGQTST/ref=sr_1_1?crid=GUJP7ERYA9AG&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.LwGJ-3ZxiYcK_TUGCXpfdA.-Pziq0ODldUXYkgf9fd06ZIpABKvDc0MCxHdKul2kow&dib_tag=se&keywords=heavy%2Blifting%2Blarry%2Bo%27toole&qid=1780574413&sprefix=Heavy%2BLifting%2BLarry%2Caps%2C185&sr=8-1) *A big part of that book is devoted to hiring the right people and preparing them for the physical and mental rigors of dealing with the public. In this article, adapted from his book, O'Toole shares his perspectives about the importance of choosing very wisely when building a startup team, especially for entrepreneurs in service-oriented, public-facing businesses. Despite the rise of AI – or perhaps even because of it – the human qualities of kindness, respect for others, positivity, and a strong work ethic are a competitive advantage, and more important than ever.*

The Best Advice on Hiring

In October 1983, I flew to Ireland to celebrate my grandfather's 100th birthday. I arrived early, which gave me plenty of time to discuss my new venture with "Dadden," as the family called him. I thought one of the things he told me was especially wise.

"It is the first person you hire and keep around: that person will set the stage for everyone that comes after them," he told me. "You hold them up to your standard. They must hold the next person to the same standard. And that must follow down through the years…If you hire a person who is not honest or lacks integrity or a great work ethic, that will spread throughout your company."

By that time, my friend Stephen "Rooty" Leonard had already come on board full-time. As my first employee, Rooty has always been a role model. I am so grateful to him for helping me become a better leader and for setting the bar for all who followed him.

My objective was, and still is, to train first-rate people and enable them to develop more first-rate people who, in turn, would develop more first-rate people. Great people want to join a team of fellow champions, with veterans as guiding role models.

Meeting the Moving Industry's Special Challenges

Dealing with people who are relocating can require patience and a cool head as well as physical strength. A sense of humor helps too.

We've moved grand pianos and priceless antiques from upper-floor condos, sometimes requiring that we deal with these logistical challenges on the spot. Our customers can be going through difficult transitions – a divorce, an unwanted job move, a relocation that requires uprooting their families -- and may not be in the best moods when our crews arrive. We've washed stacks of fine china that customers neglected to wash; encountered hoarding situations; and soothed people who are experiencing personal crises.

To meet situations like these you need to hire the right people and – importantly – treat them with the patience and respect that you expect them to show others.

Hiring Standards

Our approach has been to hire people who embody the "HEART" values that we have enshrined at our company since the very beginning:

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Honesty: No one who works for Gentle Giant should ever lie to a customer, another employee, or anyone else.

Enthusiasm: Employees should demonstrate that they want to be there, on the job, and to attack the work with energy.

Above and Beyond: We will go the extra mile to make the customer happy.

Respect: Our people are polite and considerate – always – to customers, to each other, and to everyone they interact with.

Teamwork: Employees are there for each other: backing up their colleagues and helping them succeed.

HEART, which we now refer to as the Giant HEART, is at once apt and elegant. Team members have only to conjure the word to know what to do in any given situation.

Finding the Right Candidates

I was lucky that Rooty, my first hire, was a dear friend who had those HEART values. Rooty has a wonderful way with people, always giving people the benefit of the doubt, and in those early days he always found a way to disarm even the most anxious and testy customers. I couldn't expect every hire to be as ideal as Rooty, but I wanted employees who could become more like him with the right guidance. So in building my team I looked for people who enjoyed pursuits that required strength, teamwork, a positive attitude, and determination.

Competitive rowers were a natural pick. I was a competitive rower myself in college at Northeastern University, and I knew that devoted rowers had the right stuff to meet the challenges of the moving profession and the high standards of my company. Doug Dietz, another early hire who eventually became my business partner, had been a rower. Many of my early movers were rowers, and I also recruited Parkour athletes. For our seasonal work we have connections with high school or college athletic directors and coaches, who know which players have the right character and attitude and who might be looking for work during the summer.

Our employees have recruited people for us as well. Because we hire great people and keep them happy, they in turn spread the word to friends and acquaintances who would be a great fit. We are proud that about 70% of our new hires come through referrals. It's hard to go wrong if you design the kind of business that employees present to their friends almost as a gift. And it's not just friends…we've had dozens of workers whose parents were Gentle Giants 25 or 30 years ago.

Setting the Best Example

About 10-20 percent of our job candidates are people who, by their very nature, will give their best and only their best, whatever the task. I call these people "SDTJ," for "should do the job." Another type of candidate, approximately 20 to 30 percent, are to be avoided at all costs because their goal is to get away with doing as little as possible. Around 50-70% of our candidates fall somewhere between those two groups. For them, the primary goal is to fit in, be accepted, and secure a position. If they were to find themselves in a negative culture where people are whining and complaining, they could, without even realizing it, be pulled into it. Among these, however, are people who, when surrounded by positive energy and a culture of excellence, are genuinely thrilled to be a part of it. They will forge identities fully integrated with the values around them. And this is the secret of our success: We have built a culture within which people who did not necessarily join us as SDTJ people became SDTJ people.

Every new employee also goes through a probationary period, when they are closely observed and evaluated by veteran movers, who also serve as role models. Our criteria are clear and we give new hires many opportunities to show their determination, enthusiasm, teamwork, responsiveness to feedback, consistently respectful attitudes, the ability to make empathetic connections with others, and, above all else, forthrightness and honestly. For some candidates, we know on the first day that they're keepers. Others who are not a good fit often come to this realization themselves during the probationary period, sometimes after only a few days. At the end, we have great confidence in the people we are sending out on the trucks.

Keeping Them Happy

Before starting Gentle Giant I talked with owners of other moving companies. Hearing about their challenges helped me define the tenets of the business that I envisioned. These have not only been great for

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business, but have contributed to a work environment that has helped us keep our best people:

- We would seek out the best people and pay them as generously as we could.
- We make sure new hires meet our standards and we do not delay letting them know if they are not a good fit.
- Our salespeople make good salaries. They are not on commission. They are intrinsically motivated. This eliminates the temptation to "spin" when trying to clinch a deal and promotes full disclosures to our customers. It also maximizes teamwork within the sales department.
- Our movers are employees with full benefits – no contractors or workers from a labor pool.
- We hire and train our own people – we don't poach them from other companies.
- We create an environment free from slackers and whiners.

Advice for Companies in Service Industries

For service industries, the front-line employees who interact with the public help shape the company's image. Along with my advice above for keeping employees happy, here are some other things that I've learned from building this type of business myself:

Hire people with the right temperament. It's fine to start with a "profile" of the person you are seeking, based on what it would take to make customers happy. Some employers like to hire veterans, who they believe excel at executing when directed and can adapt in stressful situations. (We also value those qualities.) Some prefer candidates who have held leadership positions in their schools, churches, or communities. Companies that prioritize creativity may want folks who have started a business or invented something. For our hiring efforts, the key to success is learning how to recognize those who, under the appropriate conditions, will become stalwart supporters of a culture of excellence. Great employees are those who embody the values of the company leadership.

Give new hires a trial run. I believe that probationary periods – where the fit between the candidate and the company's values and goals can be objectively and transparently assessed – are key to entrepreneurial success. I have spoken with many business leaders seeking advice on how to address employees who may have great qualifications but whose behavior creates a toxic work environment. I am left wondering how such people managed to survive a probationary period.

Help employees through tough times. We know that even great employees sometimes encounter a rough period. We have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) through an outside agency that provides free and confidential for people with personal problems.

Provide growth opportunities. It is not uncommon for employers in service businesses to have low expectations of their employees. All employers, across all types of businesses, should see employees as "the talent pool." Employers in service industries, just like those in highly technical industries, should respect their workers – their talent pool – enough to discover and support their life goals.

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