Ask A Probing Question ...

And you just might get an answer that will tell you whether someone is right for the job. An occupational psychologist recommends these "killer questions" when you're hiring.

By John Parrish, Southwest Airlines Spirit, April 2000

That new sales VP you hired is winning orders faster than your supply department can handle them and back-slapping colleagues are congratulating you on your talent-spotting ability. But what if she'd been a dud and lost the company its biggest client? How would that make you look? Hiring the wrong person can put your career on the line.

The key might be making sure you get important information before a potential new hire is ever brought on staff. Peter Gerstmann, one of Britain's leading occupational psychologists, has spent 12 years studying job interviews to produce what he calls his "killer questions" -- questions that help employers tune in to what job applicants are really saying.

"You want the person being interviewed to be relaxed so you get a true picture of what they're like," says Michelle Taylor, human resources manager for Epson (U.K.) Ltd. in London. "These questions, although tough, are easy to ask without sounding ... aggressive."

Taylor has found that using questions such as Gerstmann's can penetrate the "interview mask" so many job seekers wear. "I often ask them how they handled a difficult staff situation, and find this question very revealing. It can show you someone who might be a bit of a difficult customer, maybe a bully."

Here are 12 of the queries that Gerstmann recommends:

WHAT'S YOUR GREATEST WEAKNESS?
In today's shark-infested corporate waters you'd probably think "kryptonite" is the only acceptable answer. But we mere mortals are closer to Clark Kent than Superman. "We've all got weaknesses," says Gerstmann, "although I've interviewed many executives who deny they have any. Answering 'none' is a fear response to a difficult question and I'd doubt that person's ability to cope when the pressure is on. It also shows a lack of self-awareness. A strong candidate identifies something they're good at, but which needs improvement." (RH: Follow with how you are working to overcome the weakness.)

WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST STRENGTHS?
If ever there was a "gift" question, you'd think this was it, a trap many applicants fall into. "Ideally, the applicant highlights strengths directly relating to your company, explaining the benefit you'll get from them," Gerstmann says. Somebody claiming strength across the board - it happens - is winging it. They've not prepared for the interview and thought about what they can offer. Either they're unfocused and lazy or they're not really that interested in the job." (RH: State something specific and give an example of how you have used that strength.)

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO AVOID IN YOUR NEXT JOB?
"She's not going to say, 'I don't want my performance measure,' " says Gerstmann, "but you're looking for anything hinting at that which you can follow up. I've often heard 'I'd like a more strategic input,' which can translate as 'I don't like hand-on management and don't want to be accountable for specifics.' Look out, too, for 'I don't want to get bogged down in detail' or 'I want to concentrate on the big picture.' It's all saying the same thing: 'I don't want to be accountable.' Always probe deeper if you get answers that raise a flag." (RH: Be careful about criticizing your former boss or colleagues.)

WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME IN FIVE MINUTES THAT WOULD PERSUADE ME YOU SHOULD HAVE THE JOB?
When it comes to Oscar-winning acting performances, Streep and De Niro can't touch your average Joe during a job interview. "Every applicant has a prepared script," says Gerstmann, "A pressure question like this one will force them to drop it and organize their thoughts on the spot while pitching for the job. With their guard down, you'll see the true self. Someone who becomes truculent or irritated, because this isn't what they prepared for, copes badly with pressure and
tackling problems. (RH: Focus on your strengths and/or experience. State what can you do for the company not what the company can do for you.)

**HOW COMPETITIVE ARE YOU?**
Business isn't just war nowadays; it's more serious than that. So, of course you want someone who plays to win. The applicant knows this," says Gerstmann, "but if he answers this question with references to his own personal ambition, he might be the type that sacrifices the rest of his team to get ahead. You want someone who identifies with the company objectives, not his own."

**WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BIGGEST BUSINESS FAILURE?**
"We've all experience failure," says Gerstmann. "The applicant who claims he hasn't is lying. If he admits to failing, he must understand why and have learned something. For example, he lost a contract but what he learned helped him win it back. Ask for figures to back this."

**WHAT FRUSTRATED YOU IN YOUR LAST JOB?**
Every job has frustrations, often of the why-in-the-world-can't-supply-back-up-my-sale-with-prompt-delivery variety. In short, communication breakdowns. "A bad candidate tells you about the frustration. Period," says Gerstmann. "A good candidate explains how she tried to change it and what resulted, revealing a can-do personality."

**HAVE YOU EVER BEEN FIRED?**
"A dishonest answer tells you all you need to know about the applicant. If someone admits to being fired but blames their boss or customers, he's the kind of person who doesn't accept responsibility," says Gerstmann. (RH: Follow up what you have done to ensure that doesn’t happen again, at least for the same reason.)

**WHAT RECENT ACHIEVEMENT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?**
Shooting a trophy white-tailed buck or finally getting along with a teenage daughter doesn't count. You want a results-oriented candidate who can point to a specific business achievement, explain how he did it, and back it up with numbers," says Gerstmann. "Achievements of a more personal nature suggest this person either isn't focused on the job or hasn't done anything worth mentioning." (RH: For first job, focus on an achievement in an organization or in college.)

**WHAT MISTAKES DID YOU MAKE IN HANDLING A DIFFICULT STAFF SITUATION?**
"People are complex. You can't get it right all the time, so if the applicant hasn't got an example, she's dishonest," says Gerstmann. "Either that or she's not very self-aware, meaning she could alienate staff and clients. The ideal candidate will identify a situation, explain how she went wrong, and map out steps she'd take to improve her performance now. Re-evaluating your own performance is an important management skill." (RH: If possible, follow-up with a success.)

**IF I CALLED YOUR LAST BOSS, WHAT WOULD HE SAY ABOUT YOU?**
"He'd hire me tomorrow," is the only correct answer, according to Gerstmann. Hesitation or anything else should set alarm bells ringing. "It hints at conflict between the applicant and his former boss. This suggests running away from a difficult situation, not a burning desire to do the job you've advertised."

**WHAT MOTIVATES YOU?**
"Money and the challenge are legitimate motivators, but when someone is overly interest in just one thing, you should be concerned," says Gerstmann. "Let's say he's motivated by the challenge to the exclusion of all else. It's a simplification, but psychologically you'd wonder if this guy was trying to prove to his father that he can hack it. That's okay. You've got a guy who'll pull out the stops, but you can get oddities along with that baggage. And what will be the impact of someone like this on the rest of the team?"