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Who

The A Method for Hiring

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

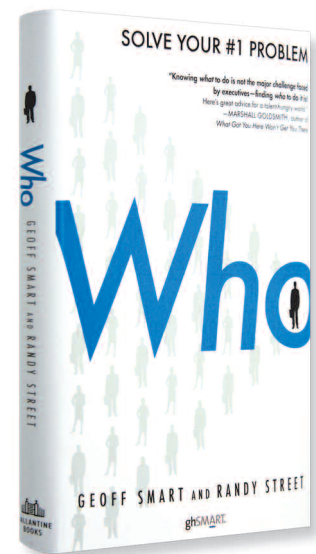
Every manager knows that hiring people is a tricky process with little room for error. After all, one bad hire can lower productivity, drive away customers and poison morale. In fact, the average hiring mistake costs a company \$1.5 million or more in hard costs and countless wasted working hours. This statistic becomes even more startling when one considers that the estimated hiring success rate for the typical manager is only 50 percent.

But bad eggs can be hard to detect during the interview process. Candidates can exaggerate or be less than forthcoming, and hiring managers often rely on outdated interviewing methods that seem effective but don't produce enough reliable information before it's too late.

That's why Geoff Smart and Randy Street developed their A Method for Hiring, which is the focus of their book, *Who*. Based on more than 1,300 hours of interviews with more than 20 billionaires and 300 CEOs, the A Method explores the fundamental elements of the hiring process. It also offers step-by-step interview methods that help managers clarify their hiring needs and expectations, reveal more information about candidates, and help weed out B and C Players quickly. This ensures that new hires have the right skills and are cultural matches who are there for the long haul. The A Method helps source A Players, offers strategies for convincing A Players to come aboard and ultimately helps companies focus on *who* decisions as often as they focus on *what* decisions.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to avoid common “voodoo hiring” methods.
- How to clarify what you need.
- How to ask the right interview questions to dramatically improve your ability to quickly distinguish an A Player from a B or C candidate.
- How to attract the person you want to hire, by emphasizing the points the candidate cares about most.



by Geoff Smart
and Randy Street

CONTENTS

Who, Not What

Page 2

Scorecard: A Blueprint for Success

Page 3

Generating a Flow of Candidates

Page 4

The Four Interviews for Spotting A Players

Page 5

Conducting an Effective Topgrading Interview

Page 6

Marshall Goldsmith's Behavioral Warning Signs

Page 7

Your Greatest Opportunity

Page 8

THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: WHO

by Geoff Smart and Randy Street

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Who, Not What

Who is your No. 1 problem. Not *what*. *What* refers to the strategies you choose, the products and services you sell, and the processes you use. *Who* refers to the people you put in place to make the *what* decisions. Ultimately, *who* failures infect every aspect of our professional and personal lives.

Who mistakes happen when managers:

- Are unclear about what is needed in a job.
- Have a weak flow of candidates.
- Do not trust their ability to pick out the right candidate from a group of similar-looking candidates.
- Lose candidates they really want to join their team.

These *who* mistakes are pricey. According to studies performed by the authors, the average hiring mistake costs 15 times an employee's base salary in hard costs and productivity loss. Decide to make better *who* decisions, and you will enjoy your career more, make more money and have more time for the relationships that matter most. ●

Your #1 Problem

The techniques you will learn in the pages that follow will help everyone — boards, hiring managers at every level, even parents hiring a nanny — find the right *who* for whatever position needs filling. Before the method can work to its optimal level, though, chances are you might have to break some bad hiring habits of your own.

Voodoo Hiring

If you find yourself time and again wondering how a misfit got on the payroll, then it's possible you are using one of the top 10 voodoo hiring methods:

1. *The Art Critic*. A good art critic can make an accurate appraisal of a painting within minutes. With

executive hiring, though, people who think they are naturally equipped to “read” people on the fly are setting themselves up to be fooled big-time.

2. *The Sponge*. A common approach among busy managers is to let everybody interview a candidate to soak up what they can. The Sponge's ultimate assessment of the person he hires rarely goes deeper than “He's a good guy!”
3. *The Prosecutor*. Prosecutors aggressively question candidates, attempting to trip them up with trick questions and logic problems. In the end, trick questions might land you the most knowledgeable candidate, but knowledge and ability to do the job are not the same thing.
4. *The Suitor*. Suitors are more concerned with impressing candidates than assessing their capabilities. They spend all their time in an interview talking and virtually no time listening. Suitors land their share of candidates, but they take their chances with a candidate actually being a good fit.
5. *The Trickster*. These are the interviewers who use gimmicks to test for certain behaviors. They might throw a wad of paper on the floor, for example, to see if a candidate is willing to clean it up, or take him to a party to see how he interacts with other partygoers.
6. *The Animal Lover*. Many managers hold on stubbornly to their favorite pet questions — questions they think will reveal something uniquely important about a candidate. Not only do questions like this lack any relevance or scientific basis, but they are utterly useless as predictors of on-the-job performance.
7. *The Chatterbox*. This technique has a lot in common with the “la-di-da” interview. You're supposed to



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Summary: WHO

be picking up a future trusted colleague, not someone with whom you can bat around baseball stats.

8. *The Psychological and Personality Tester.* The *Handbook of Industrial/Organization Psychology* recommends against using these types of tests for executive selection decisions, and with good reason. Savvy candidates can easily fake the answers based on the job for which they are vying.
9. *The Aptitude Tester.* Tests can help managers determine whether a person has the right aptitude for a specific role, such as persistence for a business development position, but they should never become the sole determinant in a hiring decision.
10. *The Fortune-Teller.* Just like a fortune-teller looking into a crystal ball to predict the future, some interviewers like to ask their candidates to look into the future regarding the job at hand by asking hypothetical questions. Remember, it's the walk that counts, not the talk.

Finding A Players

An A Player is defined as *a candidate who has at least a 90 percent chance of achieving a set of outcomes that only the top 10 percent of possible candidates could achieve.* You need to initially stack the odds in your favor by hiring people who have at least a 90 percent chance of succeeding in the role you have defined.

How do you get an A team? The solution is called the “ghSMART A Method for Hiring,” or the “A Method” for short. You can think of each line in the letter A and the underline as four steps that build the whole method. The four steps are:

1. *Scorecard.* By defining A performance for a role, the scorecard gives you a clear picture of what the person you seek needs to be able to accomplish.
2. *Source.* Systematic sourcing *before* you have slots to fill ensures that you have high-quality candidates waiting when you need them.
3. *Select.* Selecting talent in the A Method involves a series of structured interviews that allow you to gather the relevant facts about a person so you can rate your scorecard and make an informed hiring decision.
4. *Sell.* Selling the right way ensures that you avoid the biggest pitfalls that cause the very people you want the most to take their talents elsewhere. ●

Scorecard: A Blueprint for Success

Scorecards describe the mission for the position, outcomes that must be accomplished, and competencies that

fit with both the culture of the company and the role.

Mission: The Essence of the Job

The mission is an executive summary of the job's core purpose. For a mission to be meaningful, it has to be written in plain language, not the gobbledygook so commonly found in business today. Here is a perfect example of what *not* to do: “The mission for this role is to maximize shareholder value by leveraging core assets of the NPC division while minimizing communication deficiencies and obfuscations.” You'll know you have a good mission when candidates, recruiters and even other members of your team understand what you are looking for without having to ask clarifying questions.

Outcomes: Defining What Must Get Done

Outcomes, the second part of a scorecard, describe what a person needs to accomplish in a role. Either a sales vice president can close \$50 million of business by the end of year three or he can't. Set the outcomes high enough — but still within reason — and you'll scare off B and C Players even as you pull in the kind of A Players who thrive on big challenges that fit their skills.

While typical job descriptions break down because they focus on activities or a list of things a person *will be doing* (calling on customers, selling), scorecards succeed because they focus on outcomes, or what a person *must get done* (grow revenue from \$25 million to \$50 million by the end of year three).

Competencies: Ensuring Behavioral Fit

Competencies define *how* you expect a new hire to operate in the fulfillment of the job and the achievement of the outcomes. What competencies really count?

- Efficiency
- Honesty/integrity
- Organization and planning
- Aggressiveness
- Follow-through on commitments
- Intelligence
- Analytical skills
- Attention to detail
- Persistence
- Proactivity

In addition, you might want to consider some of the following competencies:

- Ability to hire A Players (for managers)
- Ability to develop people (for managers)
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Calm under pressure

The Scorecard in Action: A Case History

Sewickley Academy, an independent prekindergarten to grade 12 school on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, engaged ghSMART to help it select a new head of school. The board decided that the mission for the role was to improve the curriculum for the students, strengthen the faculty and staff, and put the school on even stronger financial footing. They wanted someone who was professional, disciplined, caring, fair and diplomatic. They also wanted someone who would set high standards and hold people accountable for meeting them.

The board found three candidates and was attracted to two who had recent classroom backgrounds. They initially disregarded their third candidate, Kolia O'Connor because he came across as too "corporate" and aggressive. Yet by comparing each of these three people's track records to the scorecard, ghSMART found that O'Connor was actually the best fit. The data gathered in the hiring process proved to the board that O'Connor was a strong fit for the scorecard, and they hired him for this challenging head-of-school post. Five years later, he has successfully reversed a budget deficit, reduced tuition increases, increased annual giving to record levels, hired nine A Player faculty members, overhauled the curriculum and even instituted Mandarin Chinese classes.

- Strategic thinking/visioning
- Creativity/innovation
- Enthusiasm
- Work ethic
- High standards
- Listening skills
- Openness to criticism and ideas
- Communication
- Teamwork
- Persuasion

Cultural Competencies: Ensuring Organizational Fit

Evaluating cultural fit obviously begins with evaluating your company's culture. That takes time and energy but often yields insights whose usefulness goes beyond the hiring process.

Try gathering your leadership team in a room and asking this simple question: "What adjectives would you use to describe our culture?" It won't take long

before a picture emerges.

Evaluating culture sometimes means removing people who are not a fit. Culture fits — or misfits — inevitably affect the bottom line, but they are about much more than money.

From Scorecard to Strategy

Scorecards ensure not just that you have A Players but that the A Players are delivering A performances. A good scorecard process translates the objectives of the strategy into clear outcomes for the CEO and senior leadership team. The senior team then translates their outcomes to the scorecards of those below them, and so on. Scorecards set expectations with new hires, monitor employee progress over time, objectify your annual review systems and allow you to rate your team annually as part of a talent review process. ●

Generating a Flow of A Players

Of all the ways to source candidates, the No. 1 method is to ask for referrals from your personal and professional networks. Talented people know talented people, and they're almost always glad to pass along one another's names. People you interact with every day are the most powerful sources of talent you will ever find.

As valuable as outside referrals are, in-house ones often provide better-targeted sourcing. At ghSMART, in-house referrals are a key part of not only staffing policies but also promotions. Organizations of virtually any size can achieve much the same effect by building internal sourcing into their employee scorecards. Try including something along the lines of "Source [*number*] A Player candidates per year," then reward the effort by providing a financial or other incentive such as extra vacation time for those who achieve and exceed the goal. When employees are turned into talent spotters, everyone starts viewing the business through a *who* lens, not just a *what* one.

The idea of extending the reach of your search through "deputizing" some of the most influential people in your network is a good one. Deputizing friends of the firm will create new, accelerated sources of talent, but you still need to pay attention to process, and you have to be disciplined. Make sure that the deputies are reporting in on a regular basis, and whatever incentive you choose, check and double-check that it's sufficient so that busy people will participate.

Hiring External Recruiters and Researchers

Think of recruiters much the way you would think of a doctor or a financial adviser. The more you keep them

Summary: WHO

in the dark about who you are, what's wrong and what you really need, the less effective they will be. In fact, great recruiters are unlikely to accept an assignment from you unless they have an opportunity to get that view.

Recruiting researchers won't conduct interviews themselves. Instead, they'll identify names for your internal recruiting team or managers to pursue. You can help tailor the flow of candidates to your needs by taking time at the front-end to orient recruiting researchers to your culture, business needs, and even management style and preferences.

Sourcing Systems

The final step in the sourcing process, the one that matters more than anything else you can do, is scheduling 30 minutes on your calendar every week to identify and nurture A Players. Here's a best practice that puts that 30 minutes to work. Pull out your list of potential A Players and sort the list by priority. Now, start making calls until you have at least one live conversation. Done well, you will find you can connect with 40 or more new people per year. ●

The Four Interviews for Spotting A Players

According to 4,000 studies and meta-analyses that were examined, traditional interviewing is simply not predictive of job performance. How, then, do you winnow the candidates whom you have found through referrals or whom your recruiters and researchers have identified? The best and surest way is through a series of four interviews that build on each other:

- The screening interview
- The Topgrading Interview®
- The focused interview
- The reference interview

The Screening Interview: Culling the List

The screening interview is a short, phone-based interview designed to clear out B and C Players from your roster of candidates. We recommend that you conduct the screening interview by phone and that you take no more than 30 minutes. Four essential questions will help you build a comprehensive fact base for weeding out clear B and C Players in a screening interview.

1. *What are your career goals?* You give the candidate the first word rather than telling the person about the company so he or she can parrot back what you just said. Talented people know what they

want to do and are not afraid to tell you about it.

2. *What are you really good at professionally?* We suggest you push candidates to tell you eight to 12 positives so you can build a complete picture of their professional aptitude.
3. *What are you not good at or not interested in doing professionally?* If a candidate comes up woefully short, if the weaknesses are all strengths in disguise or if you see any deal killers relative to your scorecard, then screen the candidate out.
4. *Who were your last five bosses, and how will they each rate your performance on a 1-10 scale when we talk to them?* Notice the language used in the question. Not "if we talk to them." *When.* Candidates will be thinking, "Uh-oh, I'd better be honest."

After a candidate answers one of the primary questions, get curious about the answer by asking a follow-up question that begins with "What," "How" or "Tell me more." Sample questions include What do you mean? What did that look like? What happened? What is a good example of that? What was your role? What did you do? Sure, it can seem like you are probing a lot, but this is a key step in an important *who* decision that can affect your entire company.

The Topgrading Interview: The Power of Patterns for Choosing Who

The Topgrading Interview is the key interview within the "Select" step of the ghSMART A Method for Hiring. It's a chronological walk-through of a person's career. You begin by asking about the highs and lows of a person's educational experience to gain insight into his or her background. Then you ask five simple questions for each job in the past 15 years, beginning with the earliest and working your way forward to the present day.

1. *What were you hired to do?* In a way, you are trying to discover what their scorecard might have been if they had had one.
2. *What accomplishments are you most proud of?* A Players tend to talk about outcomes linked to expectations. B and C Players talk generally about events, people they met or aspects of the job they liked, without ever getting into results.
3. *What were some low points during that job?* Don't let the candidate off the hook. Keep pushing until the candidate shares the lows.
4. *Who were the people you worked with?* Begin by asking candidates for their boss's name. Next, ask what they thought it was like working with John Smith. Now ask, "What will Mr. Smith say were

Summary: WHO

your biggest strengths and areas for improvement?” Be sure to say *will*, not *would*.

5. *Why did you leave that job?* It is an important piece of the puzzle to figure out if somebody decided to leave a job after being successful (an A Player clue) or whether he or she was pushed out of a job by a boss who did not value their contribution (a B or C Player clue).

Conducting an Effective Topgrading Interview

The Topgrading Interview takes three hours for a senior executive (and less for more junior people). The length of the interview will help you in two ways initially. First, it will encourage you to get really good at the screening interview so you are able to spend most of your time Topgrading the best candidates. Second, it will enable you to reduce your hiring failure rate by such a wide margin that you will never hire another person again without using this methodology.

That said, we also recommend that you conduct the Topgrading Interview with a colleague — perhaps someone from HR, another manager or member of your team, or simply someone who wants to learn the method by observing you. One person can ask the questions while the other takes notes, or you can both do a little of each.

Five Master Tactics

Based on feedback from first-time users, here are five master tactics to make the Topgrading interview as easy and effective as possible.

Master Tactic #1: Interrupting

You have to interrupt the candidate. If you don't, he or she might talk for 10 hours straight about things that are not at all relevant. The bad way to interrupt somebody is to put up your hand like a stop sign gesture and say, “Wait, wait, wait. Let me stop you there. Can we get back on track?” The good way to interrupt somebody is to smile broadly, match their enthusiasm level and use reflective listening to get them to stop talking without demoralizing them.

Master Tactic #2: The Three P's

The three P's are questions you can use to clarify how valuable an accomplishment was in any context. The questions are:

- How did your performance compare to the *previous* year's performance?
- How did your performance compare to the *plan*?
- How did your performance compare to that of *peers*?

Master Tactic #3: Push Versus Pull

People who perform well are generally pulled to greater opportunities. People who perform poorly are often pushed out of their jobs. Do not hire anybody who has been pushed out of 20 percent or more of their jobs. After you ask, “Why did you leave that job?” you will hear one of two answers:

1. *Push*. “It was mutual.” “It was time for me to leave.” “My boss and I were not getting along.” “Judy got promoted and I did not.” “My role shrank.” “I missed my number and was told that I was on thin ice.”
2. *Pull*. “My biggest client hired me.” “My old boss recruited me to a bigger job.” “The CEO asked me to take a double promotion.” “A former peer went to a competitor and referred me to his boss.”

Master Tactic #4: Painting a Picture

You'll know you understand what a candidate is saying when you can literally see a picture of it in your mind. For example, a candidate might say she is an excellent communicator. Don't assume you know what that means. Get curious to truly understand.

Master Tactic #5: Stopping at the Stop Signs

If someone says, “We did great in that role,” while shifting in his chair, looking down and covering his mouth, that is a stop sign. When you see that, slam on the brakes, get curious and see just how “great” he actually did.

The Focused Interview: Getting to Know More

The focused interview is similar to the commonly used behavioral interview — with one major difference: *It is focused on the outcomes and competencies of the scorecard*, not some vaguely defined job description or manager's intuition.

For example, let's say you are hiring a VP of sales. The scorecard you created has four outcomes on it. In addition, let's say you have identified six competencies that define success in the job. Try assigning three members of your team to perform focused interviews based on this scorecard. Each interview should take 45 minutes to one hour, depending on how many outcomes and competencies you assign to each interviewer.

The Reference Interview: Testing What You Learned

There are three things you have to do to have successful reference interviews. First, pick the right references. Review your notes from the Topgrading Interview and pick the bosses, peers and subordinates with whom you

Summary: WHO

would like to speak. Second, ask the candidate to contact the references to set up the calls. Third, conduct the right number of reference interviews. You should personally do about four and ask your colleagues to do three, for a total of seven reference interviews.

The A Method uses five simple questions for the reference interview:

1. In what context did you work with the person?
2. What were the person's biggest strengths?
3. What were the person's biggest areas for improvement back then?
4. How would you rate his/her overall performance in that job on a 1-10 scale? What about his or her performance causes you to give that rating?
5. The person mentioned that he/she struggled with ___ in that job. Can you tell me more about that?

People don't like to give a negative reference. Your best defense is to pay very close attention to *what* people say and *how* they say it. A reference who hesitates is typically trying hard not to say something that will condemn your candidate or put him- or herself at legal risk.

Decide Who to Hire

Your goal after the Topgrading and focused interviews is to decide whether to continue the process with a particular candidate. Begin by examining skill. When you believe there is a 90 percent or better chance the candidate can achieve an outcome based on the data you gathered during the interview, rate him or her an A for that outcome. Next, evaluate will. Will has to do with the motivations and competencies a candidate brings to the table. Repeat the process for each competency.

How will you know when you have hit the skill-will bull's-eye? When (1) you are 90 percent or more confident that a candidate can get the job done because his or her skills match the outcomes on your scorecard, and (2) you are 90 percent or more confident that the candidate will be a good fit because his or her will matches the mission and competencies of the role.

With all this great data, the decision should be easy. Here is what you do:

1. Take out your scorecards that you have completed on each candidate.
2. Make sure you have rated all the candidates on the scorecard.
3. If you have no A's, then restart the process at the second step: source.
4. If you have one A, decide to hire that person.
5. If you have multiple A's, then rank them and decide to hire the best A from among them. ●

Marshall Goldsmith's Behavioral Warning Signs

Nobody has studied behavioral warning signs more than Marshall Goldsmith, named by *BusinessWeek* as one of the most influential practitioners of leadership development in history. Goldsmith identifies 20 behavioral derailers that can hurt an executive's career. When we asked him which of those derailleurs to consider during the hiring process, he offered this list:

- Candidates who boast about winning battles that do not matter much.
- A candidate who tries to add too many of his own ideas to yours.
- Starting a sentence with "no," "but," or "however" during the interview process.
- Telling the world how smart we are.
- Making destructive comments about previous colleagues.
- Passing the buck.
- Making excuses.
- Making comments that start "That's just me."

Sell: The Top Five Ways to Seal the Deal

Sell is the fourth and final step in the A Method for Hiring. It turns out that candidates tend to care about five things, so make sure that you address each of these five areas until you get the person to sign on the dotted line. The five areas, which we call the five F's of selling, are fit, family, freedom, fortune and fun.

- *Selling Fit*. Fit is by far the most important point to sell. Fit means showing the candidate how his or her goals, talents and values fit into your vision, strategy and culture.
- *Selling Family*. Sometimes sealing the deal takes more than asking about a would-be hire's family. So bring them to town and show them around. Hire a real-estate broker to give them a tour of possible neighborhoods and schools. Take them to dinner. Introduce them to other awesome families of your teammates.
- *Selling Freedom*. A Players want to operate without micromanagement, develop their own leadership styles and prove their own worth. Show them that both you and your organizational culture will support their need for freedom, and you'll go a long way toward sealing the deal.

Summary: WHO

- *Selling Fortune*. Research shows that while money can be a disincentive if it is too low or not linked to performance, it rarely is the key motivator. That doesn't mean you can ignore it. Scorecards define A performance and provide objective metrics for monitoring it. Linking bonuses to scorecard attainment ensures that you pay top compensation only when you get A performance.
- *Selling Fun*. What "fun" means, of course, is closely tied to corporate culture.

Five Waves of Selling

There are five distinct phases of the hiring process that merit an increased selling effort on your part.

The waves are:

1. When you source.
2. When you interview.
3. The time between your offer and the candidate's acceptance.
4. The time between the candidate's acceptance and his or her first day.
5. The new hire's first 100 days on the job.

Selling during the interview process typically happens toward the end of each interview. The question time at the end is when you put on your sales hat, assuming you still see potential in the candidate.

Backing too far away at the point between offer and acceptance can feel a lot like a cold shoulder. Stay in touch with candidates on a regular basis. Show them how much they will fit with and contribute to the company. Woo their families. Commit to giving them freedom and autonomy to do their job. Address financial concerns. And involve them in the fun your employees are already having.

Finally, the big day comes when your new A Player joins the company. But guess what? You still aren't done selling. People get buyer's remorse during these early months and are tempted to cut their losses. The good news is that all the work you have done up to this point — the scorecard, sourcing and selection process — should have given you enough insight to create a program to ensure the new hire's success. ●

Your Greatest Opportunity

Hiring is a serious business. The attempt has been made to demystify and simplify the process for you, but no one can ignore the legalities of hiring. Many managers get themselves and their companies into big trouble by ignoring basic principles. Work with your HR

people and employment legal team to gain a thorough understanding of all the issues to be aware of.

Legal Traps to Avoid

To stay well within the law, respect these four areas of caution:

1. *Relevance*. Do not reject candidates for reasons that are not relevant to the job.
2. *Standardization of hiring process*. A standard process ensures fairness across all groups.
3. *Use nondiscretionary language during interviews and in written forms*. Obviously, never use language that is derogatory toward anyone.
4. *Avoid asking candidates illegal questions*. In the United States, these questions include anything to do with marital status, intention to have children, whether or not candidates are pregnant, when they were born, where they were born, medical condition (unless specifically relevant to the performance of the job), race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, or physical or mental handicaps (again, unless directly relevant to the performance of the job).

Thoughts on Building Your Team

Over the years the thought of hiring a full team of A Players can make many managers nervous. There are even managers who express their fears explicitly: "Aren't A Players the athletes who don't work well together?" or "Isn't there an inherent conflict because they all want to be the star?"

A Players get the job done while embracing the culture *because the scorecard ensures that they fit the culture*. Collectively, they form an A team because they know how to pull the oars together. While the A Players you bring in need to be attuned to your culture, the culture needs enough elasticity to embrace the A Players who can challenge you in areas where you need to be challenged. Seeing it all come together is truly a beautiful thing. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Who: The A Method for Hiring*, you'll also like:

1. *The Talent Powered Organization* by Peter Cheese, Robert J. Thomas and Elizabeth Craig. Combining strategic insight with proven and practical methods, this book is essential for people at all levels in any organization.
2. *The Enthusiastic Employee* by David Sirota, Louis A. Mischkind and Michael Irwin Meltzer. Drawing on 30 years of research and experience, the authors explain why high employee morale is good for the bottom line.
3. *Deciding Who Leads* by Joseph Daniel McCool. The author reveals how senior management recruiters influence everything from executive compensation to profits, culture and the definition of leadership itself.