

Jake's Adventures

What a Nightmare! Jake did everything right in picking his computer sales team. Interviews, testing, background checks, schmoozing. So, how did it all go so horribly wrong?

The 'Perfect' Manager Selects the 'Perfect' Sales Team



By Jake Satin-Jacobs

Some years ago, fairly early in the computer revolution, I was charged with opening a new computer sales and service facility in San Diego for the Tandy Corporation.

I was as enthusiastic as I could get. It was a new building. I was hiring and training my own staff. The money was good and going to be better. I was determined to do everything right.

I not only interviewed and selected candidates, but I paid to have their personalities tested. I checked their credentials, spoke with their references and even interviewed them in groups with candidates for other positions.

Finally, I had selected the ultimate staff. I had done all my homework. Everyone's personality profile fit his or her position. I was confident that I had a team to beat all teams. I was the perfect manager. I was going to be the best boss with the best staff. I was ready to crack the whip, but I was also caring and concerned.

There were five people on the staff initially.

People liked Ray

I had worked with Ray in a previous job. He was fortyish, about 5-feet, 8-inches tall, 200 pounds of pure, thick muscle, a former boxer with an odd digestive disorder that caused him to regurgitate food for re-chewing like a cud. His breath was not always pleasant, but he always had a mint in his mouth and people liked him.

Ray knew nothing about computers. I wondered at times if he could find the power switch. He had a great twinkle in his eye. He always looked like he was keeping a very funny secret. When he smiled, his teeth filled the room and people believed anything he said.

He was the perfect salesman – all sizzle, no heat. In the three years he worked for me, he sold almost \$2 million worth of computers and never had a return.

Ken was a green, naïve-looking recent college grad. He was very tall and weighed about 120 pounds fully dressed for a severe winter. He was intelligent and articulate and had good potential in sales and management. I liked and trusted him.

During his second year of employment, Ken managed to steal about \$50,000 dollars worth of equipment from me. I think he works in the stock market now.

Richard was a nerd

Richard was our service technician. He was a nerd and said so himself.

But he was, of course, incredibly bright and he understood computers with a sort of intimacy that made the hair on my neck stand up. For Richard, everything could be turned into a pun. His puns were occasionally humorous, but mostly annoying. He could have been a mime.

Marlene was a very pleasant, middle-aged woman whose profile said she had an academic orientation and was attentive to detail. She was quiet and always well-dressed. Marlene was going to work all our school accounts. In the six months she was employed, she sold nothing – not a little – NOTHING.

I had hired Gary to head our training center. He had been in the Air Force for four years, had worked as a programmer for several years. He had a solid training background. Gary was very pleasant and smiled all the time. It should have been a warning sign.

A long weekend in the woods

I arranged for us all to spend a long weekend prior to the actual store opening, up in the mountains, isolated, getting to know one another and the operation.

The first night of our intended three-day stay started well. We all went out to dinner in the town of Idlewyld, then returned to our secluded cabin to drink some wine, talk and generally get to know each other.

Ken had brought his guitar and strummed gently in the background as people began to open up.

Ray talked about his tour in Viet Nam. He made us laugh. We all drank wine. Ken strummed his guitar.

Richard giggled while he told us about his childhood in Montana and what it felt like to move to the big city of San Diego. He made several puns and we all pretended to be amused. We drank more wine. Ken strummed his guitar.

Marlene spoke candidly about the failure of her twenty-five year marriage and her estrangement from her adult children. We empathized and drank a lot more wine and Ken strummed his guitar enthusiastically.

Gary told his story

And then, it was Gary's turn to speak. He thanked us all for being as candid as we had been. It had made him feel more comfortable telling his story. Everyone had drunk a lot of wine and Ken began to play a little Blues riff.

Gary said that, when he was stationed in Alaska, he had decided to go out one day and take a walk in the woods. He had gotten lost and had lost half of each foot to frostbite. He showed us his feet. Someone opened another bottle of wine.

Ken didn't pay much attention. He was plucking the guitar with a vengeance. He was Eric Clapton.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about this with most people," said Gary. "But I tried to kill my first wife and was committed to a mental hospital for about a year."

The last chord Ken struck rang through the otherwise silent room and everyone was suddenly sober. Mouths hung open. No one breathed.

"Actually," said Gary, "I wasn't released from the hospital. I just decided I had been there long enough."

Silence filled the room

Five of us stood silent in the living room of a cabin in the woods, outside Idylwild, surrounded by the darkness of night, with an escaped lunatic.

Gary sensed the discomfort. "I think I'll go for a walk in the woods before I go to sleep," he said. "Anyone want to come along?"

Everyone politely declined and Gary walked off into the night. We all slept with one eye open and we decided to return to San Diego immediately in the morning.

A few days later, I walked into the training room. Gary was playing "Midway" on his computer and didn't know I was there. Midway was a computerized reenactment of the WW II Pacific Theatre battle.

Gary was jumping up and down and screaming, "Tora, Tora, Tora!" Then he struck some keys, made the whistling sound of an incoming round and hollered, "BANZAI!!!"

When I terminated Gary, I had two guys waiting outside my office, just in case. He just smiled broadly and left.

Moral of the story: Hiring is a crapshoot. There is no test for morality. Knowledge and experience can never substitute for good attitude. A smile is a great thing, unless it is permanent and unrelated to the reality that surrounds it. And, most importantly, there is no urine test for sanity.

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