

# How to Interview a Sales Rep Candidate for Coachability



**Coachability: the ability to absorb and apply coaching.**

Coachability is the most significant influencer of my hiring decision. As I think back to most of the rock stars we hired, their coachability was the personality trait that really stood out in their interviews. Evaluating this characteristic consumed the majority of my interview.

Here is the three-step process I employed to evaluate this characteristic.

## **Step 1: Set Up a Role-Playing Exercise That Models Your Buyer Context**

After some rapport-building questions at the outset of the interview, I would verbally set up a role-play with the candidate.

***[Hiring manager]:** "Jess, let's do a role-play. I am going to play the role of VP of Marketing at a security software start-up here in Boston. The company has about 20 employees. The marketing team is small -- only two people. As the VP of Marketing, I ended up as a lead in the CRM system, and I was assigned to you. As you review the lead details, you saw that I*

*visited the HubSpot website last night and downloaded the company's ebook on inbound marketing. We will role-play your opening call with me. Your goal is to do some light discovery and set an appointment to discuss my needs further. Do you have any questions? If not, please begin when you are ready."*

## **Step 2: Evaluate the Candidate's Ability to Self-Diagnose**

Once the role-play was complete, I would ask the candidate to self-assess.

**[Hiring manager]:** *"Great work Jess. How do you think you did?"*

Jess' response to this question represented the first insight about her coachability that I collected. I wanted to see how reflective and analytical the candidate was about her performance. If the candidate simply stated, "I did great," that was a bad sign. I wanted to see the candidate reflect on and analyze her performance. I wanted to hear specifics about what she thought she did well and what she thought she could have improved.

Next, I would build on some of her observations.

**[Hiring manager]:** *"Great reflection, Jess. I agree with many of your points. You mentioned that you could have done a better job handling my question on SEO. If we could rewind to that section of the role-play, what would you do differently?"*

A candidate with a high degree of coachability will reflect, self-diagnose, and propose improvements to her weak areas. At this point, I would provide the candidate with the opportunity to demonstrate these abilities.

## **Step 3: Evaluate the Candidate's Ability to Absorb and Apply Coaching**

Next, I would begin some proactive coaching to see how she would absorb and apply the feedback. Absorb and apply: these two actions represent the essence of strong coachability. Some people struggle to even absorb the coaching, perhaps because they are poor listeners or simply don't recognize

the importance of feedback. Others absorb the information but struggle to apply it, perhaps because they are less adaptable or less skilled at thinking on their feet. I want to hire candidates who can both absorb and apply coaching.

***[Hiring manager]: "Okay, Jess, in every interview I provide one area of positive feedback and one area of improvement."***

Both components of this statement are important. If I only offer opportunities for improvement, the candidate might think she is bombing the interview. I run the risk of her freezing up on me, preventing me from evaluating her true abilities. By leading with a bit of positive feedback, I strike a warmer tone. After hearing some praise, the candidate is more likely to feel comfortable and behave normally.

***[Hiring manager]: "I thought your opening rapport-building was great, Jess. I liked how you broke the ice and created an immediate connection when you talked about your visit to Wrigley Park as a child. The area in which I would like to see improvement is the depth at which you seek to understand the prospect's goal. Let me teach you how we deepen goal discovery here at HubSpot ... "***

I would then begin to coach the candidate. By this point, I would usually be up on the white board, coaching her and also closely observing the candidate during this process. Is she glassy-eyed or is she taking notes and asking good follow-up questions?

After a few minutes, I would ask if the process made sense. I would request that she redo the role-play, this time attempting to apply some of the coaching I had just provided her.

Now, most people really mess up the second pass. Their heads are spinning. They know the job is on the line. They are sitting with the VP of Sales. They've just received my feedback and must immediately apply it. In this situation, I am looking for effort, not perfection.

I will say that I have probably conducted well over 1000 interviews during my six years in the head of sales seat at HubSpot. Across the full population of candidates I've screened, perhaps only five people absolutely crushed

the second role-play attempt. Those who did so became absolute rock stars in our funnel. What's the takeaway? Don't expect perfection, but rather look for effort.

If you witness perfection, hire that candidate at all costs! You've just spent 10 minutes with a candidate and witnessed meaningful improvement over that short time. Imagine how much progress you could make in a day, a week, or a month!