

# Management Mistakes I Made With People

By Carolyn B. Thompson

The email said: “Carolyn, can you write one page on the management mistakes you’ve made with people?” The issue wasn’t going to be writing one page, it was going to be writing only one page! So in an effort to fit this on one page, I searched through all my “ugly memory” files, looking for the single most repeated people management mistake and found — hiring the wrong people.

I know it’s hard to believe this of an HR professional. It’s hard for me to understand too, so I looked for the reason and discovered that each and every time I did it, I’d been in what I termed at the time “a desperate staffing situation” — obviously in good company with the Israelites, not believing the manna was coming and God would provide all (Exodus 16:4, 27 – 29).

## Hiring the Wrong Person – Take 1

He was a current employee and handled his training facilitation duties wonderfully – including being on time for all the deadlines. The project coordinator position opened and I asked him if he wanted it. There was a bit of hesitation (but did I listen? Of course not, not while I was seeing an easy training time with an already seasoned employee!), and he asked a lot of questions. We ran him through the same assessment process we would with anyone from outside the organization, and he was the right fit (ok, there were red flags but, come on, he was already an employee doing a great job!).

You can imagine he wasn’t the right fit after all, or he wouldn’t be in this article, under the heading of Hiring the Wrong Person. It took about a month and lots of sleepless nights on my part, lots of work not getting done and an amazing amount of pain on his part, as he was unable to handle the volume of work or the level of attention to detail it required. Luckily he was able to go back to his facilitation work with us and our relationship didn’t suffer. That really is lucky, as it rarely works out for others I’ve known.

## Hiring the Wrong Person — Take 2

She was recommended for the project coordinator position by a client who had tried to hire her, but the HR job he’d offered wasn’t quite what she was looking for. He was so impressed with her interpersonal skills and her attention to detail and the sheer volume of work she’d handled in other jobs (and I was thinking God is so good, he has answered my prayers so specifically!). She participated in the revamped assessment process, and was everything he’d said and more!

In fact, in one of the parts of the assessment where she was

to take verbal and written information about a new project and write the agreement letter, it was perfect. No one had ever captured the information this accurately on the first try. I was elated until I realized she’d had access to the real agreement letter, which left me wondering if she’d used it. She was so perfect there’s no way she would have cheated. So we hired her.

And yes, she cheated, again and again – and in fact was caught by a client as she stole some of their materials. She denied everything. We had a hard time getting our equipment and supplies back from her, and it was painful. And there we have wrong fit number two.

Had enough? While I could tell you more and, in fact, with worse outcomes, it may be more useful to you to look at what these mistakes netted me and our organization.

## What I Learned

Would I ever make the “hire the wrong person” mistake again? Yes I would and did, and many times. Fortunately though, each time the reason for it was different – I did actually learn from the prior mistake. I’d learned to refine our hiring process by adding trials of tasks that were like real work tasks. I’d learned to list the behaviors we needed instead of the questions I was going to ask, and to devise ways to look for those behaviors (asking them to tell about a time they cheated is just not going to get you the info you need!).

But the real learning took place once I was closer to my goal of integrating my Christian beliefs and actions with my at-work people management actions. I’d been looking for people, instead of working up methods for doing without them until the right ones came along.

This isn’t to say you should sit and wait for God to shower you with the right people from heaven. God gave us brains to think and bodies to carry his work out in the world, so we must look but we don’t have to leap until we find the right fit. Armed with Exodus, Matthew 6:31-34 and Luke 11:9, I’ve learned to *ask*, *seek* and *knock* while waiting for that right person. Oh, by the way, I’m not just waiting, I’m putting things in place to do without that position if we have to until we can find that right person.

**Carolyn Thompson** is president of Training Systems, Inc., Frankfort, Ill. Visit [trainingsys.com](http://trainingsys.com), or contact her at [cbt@trainingsys.com](mailto:cbt@trainingsys.com).



**Carolyn Thompson**

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