

- CHAPTER 5 -

**TAKE CARE OF THE PEOPLE,  
THE PRODUCTS, AND THE PROFITS—  
IN THAT ORDER**

**O**nce we pushed the Opsware stock price back above \$1, the next problem was to rebuild the executive team. We had cloud services executives, but now we were a software company and needed software executives. In enterprise software companies, the two most important positions tend to be VP of sales and VP of engineering. Initially I'd attempted to take the VP of professional services from Loudcloud and make him the VP of sales. That didn't work. The next head of sales would be the fourth one hired since we had founded the company three years earlier—not a great track record. More important, the next mistake I made on a sales leader would be my last. The marketplace, not to mention Wall Street investors, did not leave me with much rope.



To better prepare for the hire this time, I decided in the interim to run sales myself. I managed the team, ran the forecast calls, and was the one person responsible for the revenue number for Opsware. I'd learned the hard way that when hiring executives, one should follow Colin Powell's instructions and hire for strength rather than lack of weakness. By running sales, I understood very clearly the strengths we needed. I made a careful list and set out to find the sales executives with the right skills and talents for Opsware.

After interviewing about two dozen candidates—none of whom had the strengths I sought—I interviewed Mark Cranney. He wasn't what I expected; he didn't fit the stereotype of a hard-charging sales executive. For starters, Mark was average height, whereas most sales executives tend to be rather tall. Next, he was a square guy—that is, he was as wide as he was tall. Not fat, just square. His square body seemed to fit rather uncomfortably into what must have been a custom-tailored suit—there is no way an off-the-rack business suit would fit a square guy like Mark.

And then I looked at his résumé. The first thing I noticed was that he went to a school that I'd never heard of, Southern Utah University. I asked him what kind of school it was. He replied, "It was the MIT of southern Utah." That was the last joke he told. Mark's seriousness was so intense that it seemed to make him uncomfortable in his own skin. He made me uncomfortable, too. Ordinarily, that vibe would rule out a candidate for me, but the strengths that I needed were so critical to the business that I was willing to overlook every weakness. One interview technique that I'd used to sort the good from the bad was to ask a series of questions about hiring, training, and managing sales reps. Typically, it would go like this:

Ben: "What do you look for in a sales rep?"

Candidate: "They need to be smart, aggressive, and competitive. They need to know how to do complex deals and navigate organizations."

Ben: "How do you test for those things in an interview?"

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Candidate: "Umm, well, I hire everybody out of my network."

Ben: "Okay, once you get them on board, what do you expect from them?"

Candidate: "I expect them to understand and follow the sales process, I expect them to master the product, I expect them to be accurate in their forecasting. . . ."

Ben: "Tell me about the training program that you designed to achieve this."

Candidate: "Umm." They would then proceed to make something up as they went along.

Mark aced the profile and interview questions, and then I asked him the training question. I'll never forget the pained look that came across his face. He looked like he wanted to get up and leave the interview right then and there. I felt like offering him an aspirin or maybe some Abilify. His reaction surprised me, because he'd done such an excellent job up to that point. I later realized that for me to ask Mark Cranney to describe the proper way to train sales reps was like a layman asking Isaac Newton to explain the laws of physics. Where to begin?

After what seemed like five minutes of silence, Mark reached into his bag and pulled out a giant training manual he had designed. He said he couldn't possibly explain what I needed to know about training in the time we had left, but if I wanted to schedule a follow-up meeting, he would explain the nuances of training sales people to be elite across a broad set of disciplines including process, products, and organizational selling. He explained further that even with all those things, a successful sales leader still must inspire courage in the team. He sounded like General Patton. I knew I had my guy.

Unfortunately, nobody else knew that. Every member of the executive staff (with one exception) and every member of the board of directors voted thumbs-down on Mark Cranney. When I asked Bill Campbell what he thought, he said, "I won't lay down on the railroad tracks to stop you from hiring Cranney." That wasn't the ringing



endorsement I was looking for. The reasons for voting "no" never referred to Mark's lack of strength, but rather to his abundance of weakness: Mark went to Southern Utah. Mark made people feel uncomfortable. Mark did not look like a head of sales.

Still, the more time I spent with him, the more I knew he was the one. In talking with him for an hour, I'd learn more about sales than I had in six months running sales. He would even call me with details about deals my sales team was competing for—deals my own sales reps didn't seem to know about. It was like he had his own sales FBI.

I decided to take a stand. I told my team and the board that I understood their concerns, but I still wanted to move forward with Mark and planned to proceed with reference checks.

When I asked Mark for his references, he surprised me again. He gave me a list of seventy-five references. He said he had more if I needed them. I called every reference on the list, and every one called me back within one hour. Mark ran a tight network. Maybe these references were the sales FBI. Then, just as I was getting ready to make the hire, another executive on my team called to say that a friend of hers knew Mark Cranney and wanted to give a negative reference.

I called the friend—I'll call him Joe—and proceeded to have the most unusual reference call of my career:

Ben: "Thanks very much for reaching out."

Joe: "My pleasure."

Ben: "How do you know Mark Cranney?"

Joe: "Mark was an area vice president when I taught sales training at my previous employer. I want to tell you that under no circumstances should you hire Mark Cranney."

Ben: "Wow, that's a strong statement. Is he a criminal?"

Joe: "No, I've never known Mark to do anything unethical."

Ben: "Is he bad at hiring?"

Joe: "No, he brought some of the best salespeople into the company."

Ben: "Can he do big deals?"



Joe: "Yes, definitely. Mark did some of the largest deals we had."

Ben: "Is he a bad manager?"

Joe: "No, he was very effective at running his team."

Ben: "Well, then why shouldn't I hire him?"

Joe: "He'll be a terrible cultural fit."

Ben: "Please explain."

Joe: "Well, when I was teaching new-hire sales training at Parametric Technology Corporation, I brought in Mark as a guest speaker to fire up the troops. We had fifty new hires and I had them all excited about selling and enthusiastic about working for the company. Mark Cranney walks up to the podium, looks at the crowd of fresh new recruits, and says, 'I don't give a fuck how well trained you are. If you don't bring me five hundred thousand dollars a quarter, I'm putting a bullet in your head.'"

Ben: "Thank you very much."

The world looks one way in peacetime but very different when you must fight for your life every day. In times of peace, one has time to care about things like appropriateness, long-term cultural consequences, and people's feelings. In times of war, killing the enemy and getting the troops safely home is all that counts. I was at war and I needed a wartime general. I needed Mark Cranney.

As a final step in making the hire, I needed to explain it to Marc Andreessen. As cofounder and chairman of the board, Marc's opinion mattered deeply to the board and Marc was still uncomfortable with Cranney. Marc trusted me enough that he would let me make the hire whether he liked the candidate or not, but it was important to me that Marc be fully on board.

I let Marc open the conversation, because despite consistently being the smartest person in the room and possibly the world, Marc is so humble that he never believes that other people think he is smart, which makes him sensitive to being ignored. He opened the conversation by listing his issues with Cranney: doesn't look or sound like a head of sales, went to a weak school, makes him uncomfortable. I



listened very carefully and replied, "I agree with every single one of those issues. However, Mark Cranney is a sales savant. He has mastered sales to a level that far exceeds anybody that I have ever known. If he didn't have the things wrong with him that you enumerated, he wouldn't be willing to join a company that just traded at thirty-five cents per share; he'd be CEO of IBM."

Marc's reply came quickly: "Got it. Let's hire him!"

And that's how I took the key step in building a world-class software team out of the Loudcloud rubble. As I got to know Mark over the years, everything that I learned in the interview and the reference check proved out. He wasn't an easy cultural fit, but he was a genius. I needed his genius and worked with him on the fit. I don't know that every member of the team ever became totally comfortable with Mark, but in the end they all agreed that he was the best person possible for the job.

My old boss Jim Barksdale was fond of saying, "We take care of the people, the products, and the profits—in that order." It's a simple saying, but it's deep. "Taking care of the people" is the most difficult of the three by far and if you don't do it, the other two won't matter. Taking care of the people means that your company is a good place to work. Most workplaces are far from good. As organizations grow large, important work can go unnoticed, the hardest workers can get passed over by the best politicians, and bureaucratic processes can choke out the creativity and remove all the joy.

When everything went wrong from the dot-com crash to NASDAQ threatening to delist the company, the thing that saved us were the techniques developed in this chapter. If your company is a good place to work, you too may live long enough to find your glory.