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Chapter One: The Favor Hire

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CHAPTER 1

The Favor Hire

> *"The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood."*
>
> *— Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in a Republic," the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910*

The final interview is going well, and that should worry you. The candidate went to the right school and spent fifteen years at a company everybody has heard of. He is calm, he is fluent, and he has an answer for everything. Somewhere in the second hour he leans back and tells you what he will need: the title, the car, the bonus structure, a seat on the leadership team, and a word about the reporting line, because he has always reported to the CEO. Then he says it, kindly, the way a man says something he believes: "I think I can bring some real discipline to a business like this."

You make the offer. Everyone on your team is relieved. A year later the numbers haven't moved, the people under him have stopped bringing him problems, and he is talking to a recruiter about a bigger job somewhere else.

He was never a bad person, and he was never unqualified. He was a favor hire. He came because of what your company could be on his résumé, and he believed, deep down, that he was doing you a favor by coming. Nothing in his life required him to win in your building. So he didn't.

The perfect résumé

Every CEO I know has made this hire at least once. I have made it more than once. The perfect résumé is the easiest hire in the world to defend.

Nobody on your Board will ask why you hired the man from the famous company with the famous degree. If it fails, it was bad luck. If you hire the counter rep from a small branch and it fails, it was your judgment.

So the perfect résumé is safe for the person doing the hiring. It is not safe for the business.

Here is what a résumé tells you. It tells you where someone has been and what they were allowed to do. It tells you which doors opened for them. It does not tell you what they did when no door opened, because most of the time, for the people with the best résumés, the doors kept opening. That's not a flaw in them. It's a gap in the evidence.

What I want to know about a leader is what he does with less than he needs, in a building where nobody knows his name, when the work is unglamorous and nobody is watching. A big company is built so that nobody has to find out. It has staff, systems, a brand that opens customer doors and a budget that covers mistakes. A middle-market company has none of that in the same supply. In a $150 million distributor, the VP of sales rides with the reps, takes the angry call, rewrites the comp plan on a Sunday and walks into a customer's plant without a slide deck. Some people from big companies do that gladly. Many have never had to.

There's a second problem with the perfect résumé, and it's about you, not the candidate. A great résumé makes the interview easy, and an easy interview is a lazy one. You stop asking hard questions because the paper has already answered them. You ask about strategy and culture and the last company's playbook, and you get polished answers, because a person who has sat in a hundred leadership meetings knows exactly how to talk about strategy and culture. What you don't ask is the question that would tell you something. When did you last win with less than you needed? Who were you trying to prove it to?

What the favor hire looks like

The favor hire is the candidate who joins because of what the company can do for his résumé, or who sees the job as a favor he is doing you. That's the definition we'll use for the rest of this book.

You can usually see it before the offer, if you know where to look. I watch for four signs.

1. **He talks about the title and the package before the problem.** Ask him what he'd want to know about the business before he takes the job. If the first questions are about the reporting line, the car and

the equity, and the questions about customers come later or never, you've learned what he came for.

2. **He references his last brand more than his last result.** "At my last company we did it this way." Fine. What happened when you did? What did you personally change, and what number moved? The favor hire describes the institution. The hungry candidate describes the work.
3. **He has never had to build with less than he needed.** Look for one stretch in his career where the budget was short, the team was thin, or the product was behind, and he won anyway. If you can't find one, it isn't proof of anything. But it's a question you have to answer before you hire him.
4. **"I'm here to bring big-company discipline."** I've heard this sentence, word for word, from more candidates than I can count. It sounds like an offer of help. What it says is that the candidate has already decided your company is the problem and he is the cure. People who start there rarely ask what your company already does well, and in a middle-market company that's most of what keeps the lights on.

None of these signs is a crime. Each one alone may mean nothing. Three or four together, in a candidate for a seat that matters, and I slow down. The Field Guide carries the favor-hire check, which turns these four signs into a short list you can run on any finalist.

Why it fails

Why does the perfect résumé so often fail in a company like yours? Not because the person is lazy. The failure is in the design of the hire, and it has three parts.

First, the job isn't what he needs. A favor hire takes your job as a stop on the way somewhere. He needs the title on his record and a story for the next interview. He doesn't need to win in your building, because the market will pay him either way. When the work gets hard, and in a middle-market company it gets hard in the second month, there is nothing in him that says, "I have to make this work." There's a voice that says, "This was a mistake, and I can fix it with a phone call."

Second, he has been trained by abundance. Fifteen years inside a big company teaches you to solve problems by adding things: an analyst, a consultant, a system, a meeting. Most middle-market problems get solved by taking things away and focusing on the few customers, prod-

ucts and people that make most of the money. That's 80/20, and it's the model this book assumes you run (Chapter 7 covers it). Abundance and 80/20 point in opposite directions.

Third, he is proving nothing to anyone, himself included. He proved what he had to prove a long time ago, at the school and at the famous company. What's left is maintenance. A leader in maintenance mode can run a stable business well. He can't turn one around, and he can't grow one that has been flat.

Put those three together and you get the pattern I've watched a dozen times. A strong first ninety days, full of presentations. A slow second half of the year, full of explanations. A departure in the second year, for a bigger title, with a gracious letter. And a business that is a year behind where it would have been.

Years ago, at a company I ran, I hired a general manager for our largest operation. He had the résumé you'd draw if you were asked to draw one. In his first month he gave the best presentation on our business I have ever seen, better than any I could have given. In his sixth month I asked him why the on-time number hadn't moved, and he gave me another presentation. In his eleventh month he told me he'd been offered a division at a much larger company and felt he owed it to his career to take it. He was right. He did owe it to his career. He didn't owe anything to ours, and he never had.

What I should have asked in the interview was simple. What do you need from this job that you can't get anywhere else? He would have answered it well, because he answered everything well. But I'd have heard it. He needed a line on a résumé. My business needed a man who would sleep in the plant if that's what it took, and those are different people.

Count what that costs. Not the search fee and the salary, though those are real. The cost is the year. In a business that's being asked to grow, a flat year in a critical seat doesn't come back. Your owners have a clock, and the favor hire spent part of it.

This is not a ban on pedigree

Let me be careful here, because this is the part people get wrong.

This book does not say never hire people with the best of everything. Some of the best leaders I've worked with went to the best schools and grew up inside the best companies. Pedigree isn't a disqualifier. A great school means somebody worked hard at eighteen. A great company

means somebody was trained well. Those are good things. I'd be a fool to throw them away.

The rule is narrower than that, and harder. **Don't hire pedigree instead of hunger.** When the candidate with the perfect résumé also has something to prove, hire him and thank your luck. Some of them do. The man who left the conglomerate because he wanted to find out whether he could run something on his own, without the brand behind him, is hungry, and his pedigree is a bonus. The man who left because the conglomerate passed him over and your title is a way to show them is something else, and we'll come to him in Chapter 2.

What I'm against is the trade. The trade is when the hiring team sees the school and the company and stops asking questions. The trade is when the candidate who started on a counter, with a two-year degree and a record that beats everyone around her, never makes the shortlist because she doesn't "look like" the job. That's a trade you make in the first five minutes, usually without knowing you made it. And in my experience, it's the most expensive five minutes in hiring.

So the test isn't where someone came from. The test is why someone is coming.

Poor, smart and a deep desire

I'm not the first person to notice this. Alan "Ace" Greenberg, who ran Bear Stearns for many years, wrote a series of memos to his partners that were later collected in a short book, *Memos from the Chairman* (1996). In them he made a point he came back to more than once: the firm would rather hire PSDs than pedigreed MBAs. A PSD was someone poor, smart, and with a deep desire to become rich. His view was that the people who had to fight their way in would outwork the ones who had been handed a seat.

I think Greenberg was right about the first two letters and half right about the third.

Poor is a fair stand-in for something real: a person who didn't have the best of something and had to make do. Smart is non-negotiable. Hunger without ability is a wish. But a deep desire to become rich, on its own, isn't the filter I use, and here is why. Money is a fine motive. I have nothing against it. I grew up in a double-wide at the dead end of a dirt road, and I wanted money as much as anyone ever has. But money alone is a short engine. It runs hard until the person has enough, and then it

runs out, or it runs toward whoever offers more. Someone who joins you to get rich will leave you to get richer.

The filter I use is different. I look for people who come not because of what I can give them, but because they can get something they need, something they believe will make them successful. And the success they mean isn't a number in a bank account. It's a life. It's becoming the person they want to be.

That sounds soft. It isn't. The person who is trying to become someone doesn't stop when the bonus pays out. He doesn't leave for a slightly bigger title, because the title was never the point. He stays for the work that makes him into who he wants to be, and he grinds at it every day, not for me and not for the money. That's how you win.

Angela Duckworth's research, collected in *Grit* (2016), found that passion and perseverance for long-term goals predict achievement beyond what talent alone explains. I take that as support, not proof. I'm not running a study. I'm running a business, and what I can tell you from three decades of running industrial and distribution companies is that the people who carried those businesses were almost never the ones I expected from their résumés.

Who comes for what

So the first question about any candidate for a seat that matters isn't "Is he good?" Most finalists are good. The first question is: **What does this job give him that he needs?**

Write the answer down. If the honest answer is "a title for his next job" or "a soft landing after a big company," you're looking at a favor hire, no matter how strong the résumé. If the answer is "the first chance anyone has given her to run something," or "proof, to herself, that she can build what her last company wouldn't let her build," you're looking at someone with something to prove.

Figure 01-01 puts the two side by side.

Notice what's missing from that figure. Schools aren't in it. Companies aren't in it. Neither is how polished the candidate sounds in an interview room. Every line is about motive and behavior, and every line can be checked against the record the candidate brings you and the stories the candidate chooses to tell. That matters, and Chapter 3 explains why: the only fair way to look for hunger, and the only lawful one, is in the work. You never ask about someone's childhood, family,

	THE FAVOR HIRE	SOMETHING TO PROVE
Why they come	What you can be on their résumé	What this job lets them become
First questions	Title, package, reporting line	Customers, the problem, the team
How they describe the past	The brand	The result
Experience with scarcity	Rare	Built with less than they needed
What they're proving	Nothing, or to someone else	To themselves
When it gets hard	A phone call to a recruiter	Another day at the work
Typical exit	A bigger title elsewhere	A bigger job here

Fig. 01-01: The favor hire and the person with something to prove often have the same skills. What separates them is why they came and what they do when the work gets hard.

health or anything else the law protects. You look at what they did at work and listen to what they decide to tell you.

Jim Collins taught a generation of CEOs to get the right people on the bus first and decide where to drive it second — "First Who ... Then What," in *Good to Great* (2001). I agree with every word of it. This book is about which who.

Your last ten hires

Before you change how you hire, look at how you've been hiring. It's the cheapest analysis you'll ever run, and the most uncomfortable.

Pull the last ten people you hired into roles that matter: vice presidents, general managers, the heads of sales, operations and finance, the

branch or plant leaders who run real money. For each one, write three things on one line. Why did they come? What were they proving, and to whom? And what happened?

You'll know most of the answers without looking anything up. You'll be surprised how often the pattern is obvious once it's on one page. The hires that worked will mostly be people who needed the job for something bigger than the job. The ones that failed, or drifted, will mostly be people the job needed more than they needed it.

Do it with your head of HR in the room. You want someone there who remembers the details you've forgotten and who will hold you to the facts. The Field Guide has a one-page form for it, Your last ten hires.

One warning. This exercise is about the hire, not the person. If a favor hire failed, the mistake was yours or your predecessor's, not his. He did exactly what he came to do. When you talk about it with your team, say so.

Tarrant

Marcus Hale started as CEO of Tarrant Industrial Supply on Monday 5 January 2026. Tarrant is a Chattanooga distributor of bearings, power transmission, fluid power and motion-control parts, with a hydraulic repair shop, 19 branches and a central distribution center, selling to manufacturers in five states. It had done $148.0 million of revenue in 2025 and $13.3 million of EBITDA (operating profit before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization), 9.0 percent of sales. It had 540 people. Brightwater Capital, the private-equity firm that bought it in 2024, wanted it to grow, and had hired Marcus to make that happen.

Marcus spent his first two weeks meeting the top 40 people in the company, one at a time, mostly in their own branches. He grew up in Gadsden, Alabama, and started on a counter at a bearing distributor, so he asked the same questions in every office: Who are your best customers? What do they buy? What's broken? Who here is better than their title?

The person he spent the most time with was Preston Whitfield, the VP of Sales. The previous CEO had hired Preston in June 2024: an elite MBA, fifteen years at a famous industrial conglomerate, and a line in his first all-hands meeting that people at Tarrant still quoted, that he was "here to bring big-company discipline." He had brought it. There was a new forecast template, a new territory model on paper and a weekly pipeline

review that ran ninety minutes. In eighteen months he had never ridden with a rep. Sales had been flat for 2025.

Marcus liked him. Preston was smart, organized and good company, and he had real ideas about pricing that Marcus wrote down. But when Marcus asked him which ten customers he'd visit first if the year depended on it, Preston named the ten largest accounts by revenue from a report, and couldn't say who bought there. When Marcus asked what he'd change about the comp plan, Preston said he had a proposal ready for the Board. When Marcus asked what he wanted to have built at Tarrant in three years, he talked about the next role.

On Monday 2 February 2026, Preston resigned. He'd taken a bigger title at a larger company. His letter was gracious, and Marcus meant it when he thanked him.

That afternoon Marcus sat down with Janet Ruiz, Tarrant's VP of People, who had been there twelve years and had run the search that brought Preston in. She expected to be blamed. Marcus didn't blame her, and he didn't blame Preston. "He did what he came to do," Marcus said. "The question is what we hired him for."

He asked her to bring the files for the last ten people Tarrant had hired into senior roles, and they went through them together on one sheet of paper, three columns: why they came, what they were proving and to whom, and what happened. Janet knew most of the answers from memory. It took them a little over an hour.

Marcus marked four of the ten as favor hires. Preston was one. Three of the four had already left Tarrant, each within two years, each for a bigger title. Of the other six, five were still there, and four of those five ran the parts of the business Marcus had already picked out as working.

Janet looked at the sheet for a long time. Then she pushed back, and Marcus was glad she did. "I hear what you're saying about hunger," she said. "But I can't run a search on a feeling. If you tell my recruiters to look for 'hungry,' I'll get a hundred different definitions and a discrimination claim. I need something we can score, and I need it to be the same for everybody."

"Agreed," Marcus said. "Help me build it."

That was the start of what Tarrant would come to call the proof process. Janet's condition stuck: anything they looked for had to be in the work record and in what candidates chose to tell them, the same questions for every finalist, written down, scored the same way. Chapter 3 shows the rules she wrote. Chapter 6 shows the interview they built.

Marcus also called Glen Avery, Brightwater's operating partner, the same afternoon. Glen's first question was whether they needed a search firm for the VP of Sales job. "Yes," Marcus said. "And I'm going to make some calls myself." Chapter 5 tells how that went.

Before he left that evening, Marcus wrote one sentence at the top of the sheet with the ten names on it, and taped it inside his desk drawer: *Don't hire pedigree instead of hunger.* Then he wrote a second line under it, because Janet had asked a fair question on her way out — if not Preston's kind of résumé, then what? *Find out who in this building is better than their title.* He already had a name in mind. It came from a sales report he had read in the Memphis branch eleven days earlier.

Do This

1. Pull your last ten senior hires and write one line on each: why they came, what they were proving and to whom, what happened.
2. Mark the favor hires. Count how many are still with you and how their parts of the business are doing.
3. Run the four signs of the favor hire on every finalist for a seat that matters, starting this week.
4. For each open senior role, write one sentence: what does this job give the right person that they need?
5. Tell your head of HR and your recruiters, in writing, that pedigree is welcome and is not a substitute for hunger.
6. Ask your leadership team, one at a time, who in the company is better than their title, and write down every name.

Hunger, then, is the thing to look for. But "hungry" is an adjective, and you can't hire an adjective. Chapter 2 takes it apart into three pieces you can see, plus one question that matters more than the other three.