Reference checks are often a last minute, rushed step in the hiring process. Many hiring managers think of them as less than useful because they assume candidates are providing only references who will say something positive. Others look to references to simply give a rubber stamp on the hire, confirming what the hiring manager has already decided to do.

But short-changing the reference process may cause hiring managers to miss critical information that can help them not only make the right decision, but also ensure that the hire is successful in the long run.

Here are four tips for ensuring that reference conversations are both insightful and useful:

**Request a diverse range of references.**

In order to get a good sense of what a person would contribute to your organization, it's important to talk to a variety of people – supervisors, colleagues and staff. While a direct report can speak to management skills, a colleague might be better suited to speak to the person's ability to be a strong teammate or work cross-functionally. In addition, for some roles, it can be helpful to ask to speak to an outside stakeholder such as a funder or partner to really get a feel for how someone is perceived externally. A good rule of thumb is to request 4-5 references: 1-2 supervisors, 1-2 direct reports, and 1-2 colleagues. This will provide a comprehensive understanding of the candidate from a range of perspectives.

**Tactfully solicit critical feedback.**

Everyone who agrees to serve as a reference knows they will be asked to say something about the candidate that is less than flattering. You will have a much better chance of gathering helpful insight if you both couch the question in the right way and ask it in multiple ways. “Everyone has areas for potential growth. What are some of those areas for the candidate?” This approach takes some of the sting out of it and reminds the reference that it's okay and in fact, expected for people to have things they are not as good at. If you're not getting anywhere, you might ask, “What do you think the candidate would say are their greatest opportunities for growth?” Ask a supervisor what critical feedback he or she offered during performance reviews. If the reference glosses over a weakness, ask them to elaborate a bit more to see what you might find out.

**Customize your questions.**

Customize your questions to dig deeper with the right people. Ask a direct report how the candidate provided critical feedback, but ask a supervisor how they received it. If a person seems a bit timid for the role, ask for an example of a time when they had to step outside of their comfort zone and address a large audience. If a person does not bring fundraising skills, ask for examples of how they have sold the organization in the past to other partners.
Think beyond the hire.

References can provide useful insight into how to establish a strong working relationship with a new hire. Ask a former supervisor for their thoughts on what motivates and demotivates a candidate. Ask a colleague about the best way to provide critical feedback. Ask people to describe the kind of team environment in which the candidate will thrive. This kind of insight can jumpstart the process of onboarding a new candidate.