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Keep an eye open during interviews (part 1)

By Paperitalo Staff

My old boss and friend Joe Broz (see letters below) challenged me last week to provide some guidance for those considering joining an organization. His challenge was for me to give a prospect some signals that might ascertain whether the organization was one worth joining. I accept the challenge and offer the following.

You will find that sometimes I suggest that a centerline approach to an attribute is the appropriate place to be. I view this much like the old centerlining system of operating a process, for any enterprise is a process. So without further explanation, let's dive right in.

The first observation is how you are treated at a distance. What was your first contact with the enterprise? Was the contact(s) helpful? Did they arrange for your interview trip in any extraordinary way (good or bad)? In general, the more helpful and complete the arrangements are the better. If they have the foresight to prepare a check to cover your travel expenses and give it to you as you leave from interviewing, you are probably dealing with an exceptionally good company (unless they are so desperate for new employees that this is all they focus on--but you will discern that from other clues).

What is your impression as you approach the enterprise for the first time? I know of one urban recycling mill, for instance, that makes its presence known two blocks before you actually arrive on site--there is waste paper from the mill scattered around the neighborhood in that wide of radius. Not a good sign.

Assuming you get a little closer before you discern the enterprise's presence, what catches your eye? Is the facility neatly kept and well organized? The paint does not necessarily need to be fresh, but everything should be spotlessly clean. Does it exude a feeling of a fortress mentality where outsiders are not welcome? If the fortress mentality starts on the outside, you can be certain it will not be much better inside.

These first impressions are formed at small (tiny) enterprises, too. I once had an appointment with a head-hunter in the Seagram building on Park Avenue in Manhattan (this is the building that houses the famous Four Seasons Restaurant). The things I remember from the visit are (1) being kept waiting in the lobby while I heard the head-hunter on the phone with some big-shot friend whom he was trying to schmooze into helping him get his obviously juvenile delinquent child into Princeton and (2) the big wrinkle in his shabby office carpet. I should have known better

before I ever got to New York--he had sent me a packet of information about his head hunting company that included the résumé of a principal that was deceased! He didn't get me a job, either (thank goodness, I have had a lot more fun and experiences than his offering would have provided).

Back to larger enterprises. I hope you find reserved parking spaces, if any, to be for visitors and close to the door. If you find a row of reserved spaces with people's names on them, you may want to consider running the other way, for this facility has given you its first clue that position is more important than performance.

Once you get inside, notice the offices you visit throughout the facility. Are certain offices or groups of offices of a much higher standard than the rest? Are there opulent corner offices? Again, you are looking for a culture where position is more important than performance.

Let's stop for a minute and talk about position and performance. If you are a great politician, you may thrive in a position culture for a period of time. However, the problem is the position culture of a given enterprise must compete with outsiders who are performance based. Eventually, the position based culture will be crushed by the performers. It can't be avoided in the long term.

Notice in general what people are doing. Are they in their workspaces, actively working or are they in clustered gabfests that seem to go on forever? This is another clue as to what is valued. This is a centerline activity--don't expect huddle masses, but don't expect a party, either.

How is the overall housekeeping? Housekeeping, from fence line to fence line, says a lot. If the place is neat and orderly, it is likely well managed. If it is a sloppy pig-sty, it is definitely poorly managed.

When you talk to people, are they following the management fad of the day or have they been doing things the same way for years? This is another centerlining issue--management techniques must evolve over time; jumping too quickly to new or lingering too long with old ways are both danger signs.

We have barely gotten a chance to talk about talking to people yet--this column has been mostly about observing. We'll pick up here next week.

And you know what comes next--safety is only a performance issue. No place for showboating here. Be safe and we will talk next week. ##