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Keep an eye open during interviews (part 2)

By Paperitalo Staff

Continuing from last week, we are ready to discuss what happens in conversations during interviews. If you are a newly minted graduate, you should be a bit intimidated by the process (if you are not, you have some ego!). This does not mean you should expect the conversation to all be one way. Those who have not had much interview experience or training often think of this process as a test, where they are asked questions and they must answer to the satisfaction of the interviewer. That is part of the process, but one need also keep alert, ask their own judiciously worded questions and listen, listen, listen. Due to the scope of this week's column, we are not going to talk about answering questions, that is for another day. We are going to talk about the listening part.

Last week I stressed looking for clues in the culture as to what is most important: position or performance. We want to stay on the same subject here, and mix a little bit of looking with a whole lot of listening.

You will probably have multiple interviews in your visit. If you are new to the work force, you may be thrust into a situation where a number of candidates are brought in for a few days to go through some group exercises together. If you find yourself in one of these group interview situations, you are going to have a hard time discerning what the culture is really like, for the interviewers have placed you in a false environment for their purposes. In these cases, there will be group settings where someone will say something like this: "Ok, we have a few minutes, does anyone have any questions? Feel free to ask anything." You should have some well-prepared business questions (nothing related to salary, benefits, vacation, and so forth but real questions about the business). You will use these if they pointedly call on you. Otherwise, my recommendation is to keep your mouth shut and watch your unprepared colleagues ask silly questions. And being from their own recently narcissistic experiences, they will. When they do, observe the company people in the room--watch their faces as they react to the questions and listen very closely to the answers they give. Everyone else will be looking at the person asking the question--don't, they are not important to you--but what the company people do and say is. Consciously focus on them, not the questioner, immediately. Try to remember these incidents--how they (the company people) squirm, slightly giggle, give each other sly glances and what they say. Later, alone or hopefully with a trusted mentor (not your fellow interviewees), dissect these incidents and see if you can get anything from them. Again, we are looking for clues as to what is important in this culture: position or performance.

If you are the only person being interviewed, you will still have a gauntlet of people to pass through. Start by looking at the setting in which they each meet you. If it is their office, great. Look at it--is it well organized? Do you get the feeling that the materials you see are business related, personal or status symbols? If you can see their computer, what is on their screen saver? Try to discern what the interviewer does all day. Ask them about their responsibilities. Listen carefully to their answers--are they shallow and self-important or are they business-like, crisp and organized? In other words, do they have a grip on their job or are they faking it? Some do. If you have five interviews and find one or two that are faking it, there are problems. Everyone will tell you how busy and overworked they are--don't pay any attention to such statements, everyone makes them.

Ask about budgets and planning. From your own pre-work, you should know when the company's fiscal year begins. Ask about the budgeting process; ask if in your role you will be part of it. Listen carefully to the answers. If you are in a manufacturing setting, ask about maintenance budgets and capital budgets. Ask if they have been trending up or down the last few years and why. Ask if there is a formal process for product development and improvements. Stumbled and hesitant answers should give you pause.

I could go on, but you should understand the concept by now. You want to work for an organization that is primarily performance based. Position based organizations are deadly and doomed to failure. Position based organizations do present opportunity, but you have to be a very good manager with a dynamic personality and lots of energy to fight your way through them and turn them around. These days, there are plenty of jobs in our industry, look for a place where they are serious about succeeding.

For safety this week, I want to talk about confronting unsafe acts wherever you see them. On Friday afternoon, the 25th of April, I was taking my dog Fred for his usual walk. We live in a normal subdivision, just like hundreds of thousands of others around the world. As we were walking down the street, a go-kart approached us, driven by a boy and going as fast as it would go. The boy (I found out later he was twelve) did not have a helmet on and the vehicle was clearly not street legal. He darted in and out of parked cars and headed down the street. In a bit, he turned around and came screaming by us going the other way. In a few minutes, approaching us again was the same vehicle, this time with an adult male driving it, also going as fast as it would go. I stopped him. We had an altercation. He questioned my dear departed mother's species among other things and remarked about an act he suggested I do to myself (on more than one occasion). I told him I thought he was threatening me and I was going to call the police. I did. Two squad cars showed up. A number of things happened, but the end of the incident for me was that an officer took me aside, thanked me for my efforts and told me they had tried to catch this go-kart all last summer. We must recognize and confront unsafe acts no matter where, no matter the consequences, no matter how uncomfortable.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##