

Focus on Results

by John Hadley



In this month's Chair Corner, Kevin advances three central tenets to being politically savvy: Visibility, Centrality and Relevance. I'd like to propose two more: **Challenges and Results.**

What do I mean by these?

We are all very adept at certain things, and for actuaries, virtually anything technical falls into this. These skills are so natural to us that we tend to forget that they are anything special. As a result, we tend to underplay them.

This was brought home to me in college, when I attended a Renaissance Fair and watched a performer eat the apple he was juggling. As I studied his act, I realized how easy this trick was. That night, I tested it out, and within a few minutes was able to do it myself.

Soon after, we had a talent show in my dorm. I did a juggling routine, incorporating my new shtick into the act. I practiced throwing balls under my legs and behind my back, bouncing them off the ground and my arms during the performance, and a variety of other moves that required a fair degree of mastery.

What did the audience remember afterwards? That I ate an apple I was juggling.

A key to achieving the visibility gained by those who are truly politically savvy is to keep a clear focus on challenges, so that those become visible to others. You want to be associated with making those challenges go away. I wrote an editorial exploring this in more depth in the January 2009 issue of *The Stepping Stone*—you can find a copy at <http://www.JHACareers.com/ArticlesChallenges.htm>.

Then come **Results.**

Those of us who grew up in the actuarial world, where for so many years getting ahead relied on our ability to excel at test-taking and academics, are often lulled into thinking that if we do good work, everyone will notice.

The world doesn't work that way.

I don't advocate putting your results on a billboard and wearing them at all times—that falls into the 'braggart' category. However, those who are politically savvy learn ways to make the results they have produced shine through in natural ways. When you do this, you are seen as the person others want on their team whenever a new opportunity arises.

For example, in 1996 my company was going through a merger, and most of the officers would be severed at year end. I was chief actuary, and knew there was no role for me.

A few months later, I was approached with an offer to immediately become an officer of our parent company, in a new role that would let me stay with the organization long term. I hadn't sought out the role, and in fact was already exploring the career change that ultimately led to where I am now. **The only reason the offer came my way was because I had been very naturally doing the things all along that ensured key people knew the results I was capable of producing.**

How do you do this? By always presenting an answer to the WIIFM question (*What's In It For Me?*) for the other person.

It's natural for us to think of WIIFM directed at ourselves when evaluating all of the opportunities around us:

"Should I go to this networking event? WIIFM?"
"Should I volunteer for this project? WIIFM?"

In fact, society helps condition us to think this way. However, true success comes from thinking instead about how to answer this question for OTHERS!

For example, consider a networking event where someone asks *"What do you do??"* The tendency is to answer the question literally, which is always a mistake. You want to reframe the question, imagining that the person has instead asked, *"Why should I pay your salary?"* This answers the WIIFM question **for them**—something that is about a result you can achieve or challenge you can overcome, instead of the details of what you do. This way the other person can picture a way in which you might be able to help them, or others with whom they could put you in contact.

Think of it this way. If you run into a senior executive at the annual holiday gathering, and are asked *"What do you do?"* you will likely say something like, *"I price universal life products."*

This may be accurate, but it doesn't make you at all memorable. If you instead explain that you developed a pricing methodology that helped the company's new line increase its market share 10 percent, you will be giving a memorable answer that advances your influence.

So, to be truly politically savvy:

1. Sit down for a few minutes and brainstorm a list of the key problems you have solved, or solutions you have provided, over the past five years.
2. Think about which of those you would like to get involved in again, or better yet would like to see as core elements of your next job.
3. Work on a simple statement—no more than one sentence for each item on your list—to clearly express that problem or solution.
4. Practice them until they become natural.
5. Use those as your answers to "What Do You Do?"

I guarantee you that if you do only this much, you will start to become more memorable to networking contacts and key players in your company.

For more on this concept, see these two short articles: <http://www.JHACareers.com/30SecondPitch.htm>. And if you are still struggling with your own statements, drop me an e-mail at John@JHACareers.com. ●



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