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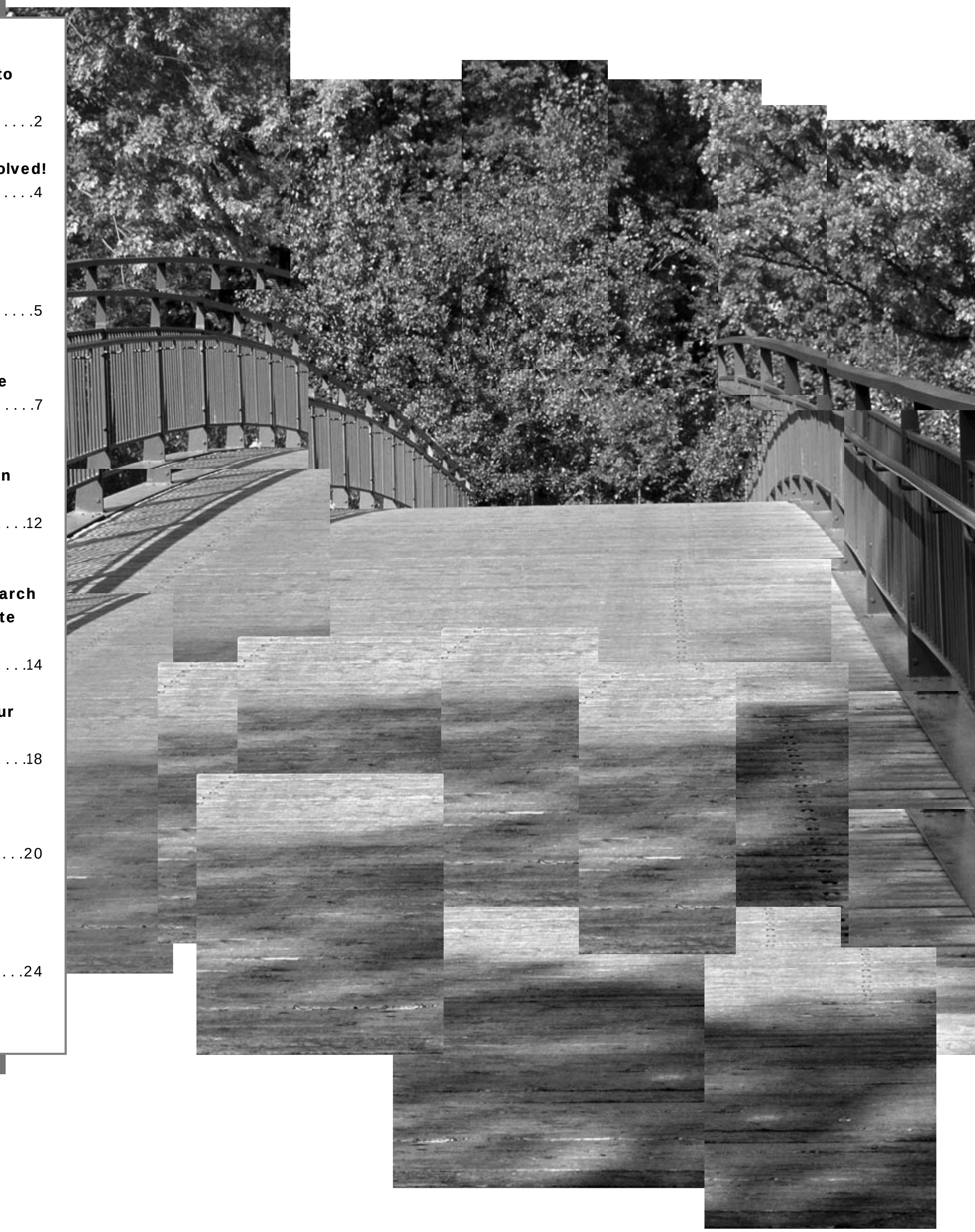

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From the Editor

Five Secrets to Success

by David C. Miller

David C. Miller, FSA, MSCC, is a professional business coach who works with actuaries, consultants and sales professionals who are struggling to attract enough clients. He conducts seminars and one-on-one coaching in business development, influence, leadership, team building and communication effectiveness.

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Whether it's attaining success in getting that promotion, masterfully leading your organization or acquiring clients, I've found there are five factors that will all but guarantee your success.

I work with these five areas when I coach professionals to help them attain their most inspiring outcomes. In this article, I want to give you an overview of each area and **encourage you to assess how you're doing in each area** with respect to the outcome your working on achieving.

Here are Five Secrets to Success:

Secret #1: Get Clear on Your Outcome

Before you do anything else, you must get crystal clear about the destination you want to get to. What **exactly** does success look like for you? You need to be able to describe it specifically and in measurable terms for it to be effective, otherwise you'll never be sure if you've achieved it or not.

You will more likely achieve the success you want if your outcome is truly inspiring to you. If your goal isn't exciting and scary, you're shooting too low. Goals that resonate with us are the ones that will pull us toward them.

Rate yourself on a scale of one to 10:
How clear, specific and inspiring is your desired outcome?

Secret #2: Implement a Winning Strategy

You need to put together a comprehensive game plan to achieve your success. You want to design a strategy (or set of strategies) that will get you to your outcome in the fastest and easiest way.

The key thing to remember here is that there are far more ways to reach a desired goal than most of us realize. We typically limit ourselves to one or two options, when **in reality there are hundreds of avenues** available to us.

Another important key here is to **release any perfectionist** tendencies we may have. Much of your strategy will be devised as you take action and, in most cases, testing will be required (this is certainly true of marketing strategies). Perfectionism will stop you from taking action and achieving your goal. Ask yourself, "What are three steps I can take that will move me toward this goal?"

Rate Yourself: ***To what extent have you defined your game plan and started taking action?***

Secret #3: Upgrade Your Skills

Razor-sharp skills are critical for achieving success. Even the best strategy won't work if your skills are inadequate. The first step here is to **identify the top eight to 10 skills, strengths or qualities you will need to bring forth to succeed.**

For example, if your outcome is to acquire consulting engagements, you might identify skills like prospecting, articulating your marketing message, performing a needs assessment, closing, handling objections, etc.

If your outcome is to more effectively lead your division, you might focus on skills like modeling the way, inspiring vision, coaching, taking risks, empathy, fostering collaboration, recognizing contributions, etc.

Once you've identified these, rate yourself on a scale of one to 10 and take note of areas to focus on to improve your effectiveness.

Rate Yourself: ***On your current skill level with respect to the eight to 10 competencies you identified.***

Secret #4: Optimizing Your Environment

This may be one of the most overlooked areas for achieving success. If you are in an unsupportive environment (for example, you have a boss that is determined to see you fail), achieving success will be much harder and more painful.

Environment involves such things as:

- Physical environment (your physical space, office, organization, etc.)
- Technology (laptop, pda, contact management tools, etc.)
- Time management
- People (coaches, mentors, support staff, team members, advocates, etc.)

Your environment can leverage your productivity level or it can drag it down.

Rate Yourself: ***How supportive is your environment?***

Secret #5: Mastering Your Psychology

Many professionals know what to do, but fewer actually commit and follow through by taking action. This is almost always due to having a psychology (*i.e.,* mind-set, belief system or attitude) that does not fully support what they are trying to accomplish.

It's common for emotions like fear and self-doubt to sabotage success. Having a resourceful psychology is 80 percent of the battle in business.

Managing that "inner critic" can be the most effective thing you can do to achieve the success you want.

Rate Yourself: ***How effective am I at managing my mind-set?***

Now that the scores are in, let me ask you a question:

What would happen if you could improve your scores by two or three points? For most people, it will make a significant difference.

Now you know the areas to focus on to achieve your success. Take the necessary steps toward your most inspiring outcome every day and you will achieve it before you know it. ❑

Chairperson's Corner

Get Involved!

by Sudha Shenoy

Sudha Shenoy, FSA, MAAA, is a consulting actuary in North Haven, CT. She can be reached at *sudha.shenoy@anthem.com*.

Are you someone who would like to volunteer in the various initiatives and activities of the section councils? If so, we need you!

The sections have been receiving frequent opportunities to interact and communicate with members and assist various SOA committees. There are plenty of opportunities for you to get involved by sharing time and energy and providing thought leadership, even if only on a limited basis.

We need your help on tasks such as looking at emerging issues, identifying marketplace needs, writing articles and identifying methods to provide education on key skills. As a volunteer, you will gain much insight and many skills that will provide you with a broader outlook and enrich both your organizational and your personal leadership skills. Please contact your section council members to let them know that you would like to get involved.

Our section has been very busy with various initiatives, including assisting the Fellowship Admissions Course (FAC), arranging annual meeting sessions including networking receptions, communication seminars and a session on "Leveraging Professional Presence for Greater Visual Impact." For the FAC, we are designing a session on communication for soon to be new fellows.

This year's annual meeting will showcase a number of sessions to enrich your skill sets.

At the request of the Business Skills Task Force, we are presenting an embedded seminar on "Speaking for Success" as well another session on "The Influential Manager."

"Speaking for Success" is a two-part workshop focusing on best practices in organizing and delivering complex information. The first part will be a teaching session including a strategy to organize thoughts, adjust your message and effective presentation techniques. The second part will be hands-on coaching experience using an actual presentation/report that attendees will practice within a small group coaching setting.

"The Influential Manager" session will assist you in becoming a better manager and finding the best way to communicate effectively with employees and motivating them to perform with excellence. This full-day session is designed to build awareness of your own management style and the behavioral styles of those you manage and give you a repertoire of tools and strategies to better motivate, influence and lead your organization.

The session, "Communication Savvyness: Secrets to Becoming More Influential," at the annual meeting, will teach you about the four primary behavioral styles that have been identified. Once you learn how to identify styles of other people based on their behavioral cues, you can be more influential with people whose styles are different from your own.

The networking reception will you help develop a powerful marketing message and provide you with opportunities to practice it. You will learn how to avoid common networking mistakes and learn to express what makes you unique. You will also be able to create a powerful elevator pitch. As a reward, we will also have a sommelier on hand to introduce you to some of the fine points of selecting the right wines for business situations.

The session focusing on appearance and maintaining a professional image, conducted by an image consultant, should provide you with opportunities to do some self-evaluation and in the long run help you to achieve greater success in your future careers.

And, of course, the section breakfast is a not-to-miss event that will feature reviews of recent executive books to help you keep up-to-date on the latest techniques and newest books in the market.

As you can see, the section members have been working very hard this year to provide you with many opportunities to work on your skill sets and lead with confidence. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the section council members and friends of the council for their great contributions. And, to all our readers, I would like to say—please get involved! ❑

Once you learn how to identify styles of other people based on their behavioral cues, you can be more influential with people whose styles are different from your own.

Are You at Risk of Becoming an *Accidental* Criminal?

by Maureen Wild

The advent of Sarbanes-Oxley could put you at serious risk if your employees are uncertain of new reporting procedures or are unaware of the serious penalties that this legislation mandates. We've all read the headlines exposing the serious consequences of fiduciary recklessness, but there are many people who don't understand that even the smallest ethical breaches can have far reaching reverberations. Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) was developed in response to accounting scandals that rocked the corporate world. SOX is aimed at improving the transparency and accuracy of financial accounting and record keeping of U.S. publicly traded companies. With deadlines for compliance fast approaching, organizations clearly need to take action now. Surprisingly however, a recent poll by the Business Process Management Institute indicated that only 27 percent of those organizations polled are taking steps to comply with SOX.

Many white collar executives are facing federal scrutiny and penalties as a consequence of SOX violations. Even if non-compliance happens mistakenly, one may face a $1 million fine and 10 years in jail. If one knowingly certifies false information, that person can expect fines of up to $5 million and 20 years in a federal prison.

Sadly, there are still folks out in the workforce who do not perceive the seriousness of their sloppy habits. So often we suffer from some classic fallacies about workplace ethics. Somehow we have convinced ourselves that our behaviors are NOT unethical *IF*:

1. We rationalize that what we are doing is for a good cause.
2. We believe we are entitled to a particular perk or benefit.
3. Everyone else does it.
4. It's technically legal.
5. Other people we work with are far more unscrupulous.
6. We won't get caught.
7. Our actions will benefit our families.
8. We're just following orders.
9. Our jobs may be on the line.
10. We're just "fighting fire with fire."

Nonsense!! Ask yourself this question instead—*"If I am prosecuted for SOX violations, where will any of those dopey excuses get me?"* If you have a great attorney, you may get reduced jail time and a whopping financial penalty instead of long-term jail time and an extraordinarily whopping financial penalty, but none of those rationalizations will hold up in a court of law.

Those who manage others need to be crystal clear about ethical procedures, record keeping and reporting. The misstep of one of your direct reports could put you at serious risk. It cannot be emphasized enough how vital it is that everyone who works for you be drilled and drilled again about the seriousness of SOX violations.

Michael Josephson, founder of The Josephson Institute of Ethics, recommends that, when faced with a challenging situation at work, ask yourself the following questions:

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1. Is anyone being taken advantage of?

2. Am I using appropriate criteria to make this decision?

3. Does the conduct I am considering demonstrate my caring for the well-being of other people?

4. Am I breaking any laws or company rules or policies?

5. Am I causing any unnecessary harm to anyone?

6. Am I being disloyal to anyone?

7. Am I respecting the autonomy, dignity and privacy of others?

8. Have I made any promises that I may have to break?

9. Am I considering all the stakeholders in my decision?

Computhink, of Lombard, Illinois, recommends the following steps to protect your company from SOX violations:

- Know the Sarbanes-Oxley regulations, particularly those specific to your industry.

- Develop a strategy to plan for compliance and plan for processes and content.

- Be scrupulous about documenting your retention policies, procedures and schedules.

- Determine your specific requirements for a technology solution to enable you to implement your enterprise compliance plan and support your retention policies and your processes.

- Access your current technology to determine if it meets your requirements and where gaps may exist.

- Research the additional technology needed and procure and implement it as required.

The decisions you make minute to minute have lasting consequences—just ask the kids whose parents have wound up in jail for months, (or years), at a time who supposedly were tempted to cheat or engage in misconduct out of love and devotion to their families. ❑

The decisions you make minute to minute have lasting consequences ...

The Value of Coaching: Three Coaches Share Their Experience

by Dave Duncan

Coaching. It hasn't been around, at least as a formal profession, for very long, but its use is now becoming commonplace in many organizations and businesses. Why is this?

Simply put, coaching is the most effective modality of growth, training and development available. Unlike "one-size-fits-all" training, ($200 billion expended annually, which *Training* magazine estimates 50 percent is "utterly wasted"), coaching engages a client where they are, as a unique and accomplished individual. It focuses on what clients most need to learn, and then keeps a structure of regular support so new knowledge, insight and perspective translates into new behavior.

Several studies on executive coaching (Manchester 2001, MetrixGlobal 2001) have demonstrated that a well-executed coaching program can achieve between **500 percent and 700 percent** return on investment.

In this article, *The Stepping Stone* interviews three formerly-practicing actuaries who are now professional business and career coaches: **Gerry Fryer, John Hadley and Dave Miller.** The goal: to discover their experience with coaching clients and the returns they see.

Duncan: Thanks to all of you for taking the time out for this interview. Would you each tell us a little about your coaching practice and how your coaching services add value to your clients?

Fryer: My specialty is people in business, of whom about 2/3 are actuaries. I start by collaborating with my clients to clarify their goals. Then I provide tools and continuous support and encouragement as the client works towards those goals. Finally, having worked through the coaching process, the client retains an ongoing capability to self-coach in future situations, as well as a lifetime resource in their coach.

Hadley: I help job seekers who are frustrated with their search. A career search is a sales campaign, and the product you are selling is YOU. To get the best job, you need to think of yourself as the CEO of your own company, You, Inc. I teach my clients how to become outstanding marketers of You, Inc.

The same mindset applies to managing your career. I apply similar strategies and techniques to help professionals unlock the doors that lead to career advancement.

Miller: I have a couple of niches I focus on. Mainly, I work with business owners, consultants and sales professionals to get more clients, larger engagements and a higher income. Entrepreneurs are experts at their "craft", but many struggle at the marketing and selling part. Unfortunately, you can't succeed without being able to convey the value you offer, so that your prospects buy your products and services. That's where I come in.

I also help professionals become inspiring leaders in their organizations. Leadership and selling are almost identical skill sets. They're both about having top notch people skills—understanding what makes a person tick and being able to relate to them in an effective way. A person can be a leader no matter what position they

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hold in a company. It's a matter of developing the emotional intelligence and strategy to be a person of impact in your organization. I help people with this.

As you work with professionals to improve their business and careers—many times personal issues come up (since you're coaching the whole person), so I also do life coaching with my clients when appropriate.

Duncan: John, what led you to transition from actuary to coach?

Hadley: Early in my career, I realized the value of networking for career growth, for tapping into the expertise of all of the people I knew so that I could bring more value to the table than the experience I had gained on my own. This led me to concentrate on building an ever-growing network of contacts.

When I was starting to think about moving beyond the actuarial sphere for my next career move, I had the chance to take advantage of an executive outplacement program, and to put my networking skills into high gear. I quickly realized that what I was learning about marketing myself came very naturally to me, and I began helping others who were going through similar transitions. Eventually, I decided to make this my full time practice, teaching others those marketing skills.

Duncan: Dave and Gerry, how about you two?

Miller: For me, it was a long journey of wrestling with my purpose. I'll try to give you the short version.

Throughout my career as an actuary, I always gravitated towards the people side of the business. I was a company actuary for nine years and my favorite assignment was working with distribution to discover their needs in terms of the ideal product, then figure out how to give it to them. Programming models and the other technical aspects were just a means to an end for me.

The same was true in my seven years as a consultant—preferring selling engagements and managing the relationships to doing the technical work. I remember about 10 years ago my firm sent me to a three-day workshop on how to develop business. I loved everything we did and was hyper focused on the trainers, thinking "Someday I want to do what these guys do!"

I really took to developing consulting engagements and managing client relationships. My firm had me train other consultants on how to develop business. I became skilled at helping professionals with this.

The straw that broke the camel's back was a question that I was wrestling with for years: "How will I feel if I spend my entire career as an actuary?" I felt a deep sense of regret, like I would have missed my calling. Pretty heavy, I know. I really wanted to do something that impacted people more directly.

I was working with a coach at the time who trained me and I also got my Masters in counseling—the rest is history.

Fryer: I had mentored many actuaries and students during my career. Many of these were rich experiences for both parties. Then came opportunities in management and facilitation of courses in personal and professional development. With this background, moving on to coaching was quite natural.

Duncan: It's interesting that you all are actuaries. What makes an actuary a good coach?

Fryer: Not all actuaries have similar attributes. A good coach has strong listening skills, is an

Human systems include all hiring, firing, promoting, development and reward systems and processes.

empathetic person and is willing to give up the role of the content expert in the relationship with his / her client. An actuary with a strong desire to support others as he / she discover his / her own potential can learn to become a coach.

Duncan: What types of clients do each of you serve?

Miller:

- *Entrepreneurs, business owners, consultants and sales professionals who are struggling to attract clients.* I've worked with people in many different industries: actuaries, CPAs, financial planners, architects, insurance sales people, etc.

- *Executives who desire to become more influential leaders in their organizations.* So we work a lot with communication skills, conflict resolution skills, strengthening emotional intelligence, developing greater work / life balance, etc.

- *Professionals who want to achieve more success in their careers.* The key to this is to help professionals become more entrepreneurial—to treat their career as their own business. So I help them to specifically identify their customer, their message, their value proposition to the organization, and strengthen their selling and influence skills, etc.

Fryer: People in business, primarily actuaries at this time. They come to me via the organizational route or on a personal basis. However my training as a coach does not limit my client base in any way—fundamentally, I facilitate change for individuals!

Hadley: I help people nationwide who:

- Are looking for a new job, or thinking about it and find the search a real struggle!
- Recently changed employers or positions, and want to make the most of that opportunity!
- Aren't thrilled with where their career is taking them and want to once again feel excited to go to work each day!

Duncan: What kind of results do you help people get?

Fryer: If an organization is involved, it's whatever the organization and the employee mutually agree is desirable for that person's development. If I'm dealing with an individual, then it's whatever he feels he needs in the way of change.

One client wanted to learn how to adjust to the different culture at the new company he had just joined. Another actuary was struggling with the amount of energy he could give his young family at the end of a long day. The range of life and work challenges that actuaries face is quite remarkable.

Hadley: I was contacted by one actuary who had been out of work for two years. I'll let her words speak for me: "I am still so very happy with my job. I think the company's great, my boss is super, my colleagues are bright and energetic, and my projects and responsibilities are fun and challenging. I'm so glad that I held out for the right job and that you helped me get what I was really looking for."

Miller: For me, I would say, in short, greater success and

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The Value of Coaching ... • from page 9

Common Myths About Coaching

1. Coaching is for underperformers.

If coaching is for underperformers, then why does virtually every professional athlete utilize coaches? Why would Tiger Woods or Andre Agassi use a coach? It's simply because these athletes aren't content to merely be good, they want to be great. They know to stay at the top, they need the edge that a coach gives them.

You may be a high achiever, but what greatness are you missing out on by not having a coach?

2. I don't need a coach.

This myth results from asking the wrong question. Instead of, "Do I need a coach?", ask yourself, "Do I want to play a bigger game?" If you're content with the status quo, you probably don't need a coach. If you want to raise the level of your game and get on the bigger playing field, a coach will give you a distinctive advantage.

3. A coach won't be effective unless he or she is a content expert.

There are times when having a content expert is helpful – these people are called "consultants." They tell you what you should do and will even do the work for you. A coach is there to help you tap into your greater potential and grow professionally and personally, doing things beyond what you thought you could achieve.

Great coaches are **process experts**. They know the questions to ask to help their clients get motivated, be creative and take action. Having one who understands the actuarial field is a nice bonus.

4. I'm effective coaching myself.

There's a saying that "You can't read the label from inside the bottle." You may be very self-aware, yet we all have blind spots and patterns that hold us back. A good coach will have your agenda at heart and shed light on these blind spots—something you're unable to do for yourself.

satisfaction with their business or career—in the way **they** want to measure it. I like to think about it in terms of helping clients maximize their **"return on time."**

Return on time has at least two facets. One is financial: earning more money while investing less time. The other facet is emotional: getting the most "juice" out of the time we have here on earth. Many are working so many hours that they're missing out on both facets.

Duncan: Would you give our readers one or two specific examples of ways you've helped clients?

Hadley: Sure. "Jim" was VP & Actuary at his company, hoping to create the visibility that could get him to the senior officer ranks. He was scheduled for a "skip level" meeting with the Chairman of the Board, and I asked him what his goal was for that meeting. Jim said it was to tell the Chairman what his operation did. I suggested a better focus would be making certain the Chairman knew clearly the value he and his operation brought to the company, and then strategized with him on how to make that happen. After the meeting, Jim reported that the Chairman asked to be kept informed of his next Latin American trip, because he might want to travel with Jim to pursue business opportunities!

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I'm particularly proud of these words from another VP & Actuary: "I began a job search last year having reached a point in my career where my work had become very tedious and unsatisfying. I merely dusted off my years-old resume, added new functions that I had performed, and contacted some recruiters. Well, my resume didn't open any doors and I really had no understanding of networking. It quickly became clear to me that I needed help and I am extremely grateful that I contacted John Hadley."

"After working with John to revamp my resume, I began receiving rave reviews from interviewers who had examined it. Most importantly, John taught me how to effectively network. In just a few months my networking produced three exciting jobs that were excellent fits for my interests and abilities. John was an invaluable resource in guiding me through the interviewing process and I received three job offers in three months! I am now working in a dream job that is a perfect fit for me and in my desired location! John is now helping me to make a successful start in my new position and I have already been complimented for "hitting the ground running."

Fryer: I worked with a very creative actuary who wanted to change jobs—we went from the outside in to discern his values, his multiple strengths and ultimately his personal vision.
Armed with this vision, he was then able to assess his career choices with a far keener sense of who he was and where he wanted to go. He now has what appears to be a very fulfilling role for the next phase of his career.

Miller: Recently, a consultant came to a session struggling over his pricing on a proposal. He was looking in the neighborhood of $10,000 to $15,000 revenue for the project after figuring out the time required to perform the work.

I helped him to think about pricing his services based on VALUE rather than "time and materials." We spent the session focused on how to do this.

He came to the next session saying, "You're value pricing idea worked. I told the prospect that my fee for this engagement was $68,000 ($35,000 up front) and the prospect didn't even blink!"

It feels good to know I helped him make an extra $50,000 for his efforts so that he will get paid what he's really worth. Most independent professionals underprice their value.

Another example that comes to mind is how I helped a company actuary lose 65 pounds in six months and get a promotion and raise. The really neat part was how it affected him personally—his confidence skyrocketed and it positively impacted his personal and professional relationships.

That's what's great about being a coach—truly walking with another and helping to draw out the greatness in that individual so they can impact their world. ❑

Great coaches are process experts. They know the questions to ask to help their clients get motivated, creative and take action.

The EXCEL Model: Excellence in Teaching and Coaching

by Vincent J. Granieri

In the "good old days," coaching employees meant telling them what to do and punishing them if something went wrong. Rumor has it that there are vestiges of this particularly autocratic managerial style remaining in some of our companies today. However, most modern managers understand that teaching is not telling and there are better ways to accomplish corporate goals. A concept of "servant leadership" has emerged, but what does that mean exactly? How does a manager serve his down line associates and still hold them accountable? As the pace quickens, the value of coaching rises and weaknesses in leadership are magnified.

While there is no cookbook approach or one-size-fits-all solution to teaching and coaching, there are several models that help a manager incorporate good habits into their daily routine. The EXCEL model is a straightforward, effective leadership tool. It has been used to improve relationships and performance both in individual situations and in group settings. The five steps of the EXCEL model are:

Engage—Building relationship

e**X**plore—Getting in touch

Communicate—Dynamic dialogue

Empower—Developing skills

Launch—Momentum and direction

EXCEL fits well with the servant leadership concept because it focuses the leader on the needs of his or her team and defines the leader's success by the success of the team members.

Engage

This is the foundation for every successful work day. Engage is the ability to successfully initiate communication with others. It occurs early in the work day and involves a positive affirmation of all members of your team. It could be a handshake or a greeting; something to let them know that they are a valued member of the team. Not only does this draw your team into a strong relationship, it sets an example of the kind of positive behavior that they should use with customers and other associates.

Explore

If Engage is the foundation of the work day, eXplore is the foundation of the day's work, *i.e.*, what needs to be accomplished. If the mantra of the servant leader is "I am successful when I help you to be successful," this is the stage where the leader discovers the immediate needs and concerns of his/her team. To successfully eXplore, one must listen well, show concern and ask open-ended questions. Since our team members are our customers, we provide a secure and non-threatening environment so that they feel comfortable sharing their needs.

Communication

In the Communication step, the rubber meets the road. This is where the leader's mettle is tested. In establishing a dialogue, the leader must facilitate the discussion, but also establish

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How do we go about modifying the system to work for us as managers and not against us?

a learning environment. Often, the team members are more receptive to learning if they understand the relevance of their assignments. It is the leader's responsibility to actively manage the process while being responsive and convincing.

Empower

To Empower means giving someone the ability to do something. In this case, the leader provides team members with what they need in terms of ability and skills to perform the tasks they identified in the eXplore stage. In the Communication stage, team members learn skills that they practice and apply in the Empowerment stage. The leader provides encouragement and support in a no-risk environment. The best leaders are able to look beyond the present and project a team member's skills into the future as they take personal responsibility to bring about the transformation. In the end, team members have the ability and the accountability to perform their current responsibilities.

Launch

As the word suggests, Launch involves force and momentum. Every interaction, meeting and work day should end with a positive push along the path of success. With respect to the accountability issue, this is where accountability is set. The leader summarizes the relevant ideas and events and gets commitment from the team members to use the skills or information they learned to meet the needs that were identified in the eXplore stage. The best leaders passionately motivate the team to meet and exceed their objectives at this point. Contrast this to the typical business meeting, which ends abruptly and leaves the team wondering what just happened and what to do.

Like acquiring any new skill, learning the EXCEL model will take time and effort on the leader's part. The effort pays off in the form of high performing teams that then are able to coach and teach others. Although we focused most of our attention in this article on what to do, leadership also involves who a leader is—the personality traits that either foster or discourage a secure, effective learning environment. By learning the EXCEL model, a leader signals that personal growth is for everyone, by using it, he/she is teaching it to the team. ❑

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Using a Retained Executive Search Firm, Part II:

From the Candidate Perspective

by Richard Dannenberg

Author's Note: This article was prepared by Richard Dannenberg, founder of R.A.D. Search LLC, a retained executive search firm that specializes in the recruitment of senior level actuaries.

In the January 2006 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, we covered the various aspects of what a company should expect when hiring a retained executive search firm. We first identified the key differences between the retained and contingency approach. Then we reviewed the criteria a company should use to decide which search firm to retain. Lastly, we identified the steps a company should follow to ensure a successful search.

To really understand what you, as a candidate, should expect when working with a retained search firm (whether the firms contact you or you contact them directly), a brief summary of the major differences between the retainer and contingent approach is needed at this point. (A more detailed explanation can be found in the January 2006 *Stepping Stone*).

Contingent Recruiting

- The recruiter earns his fee once a candidate he presented is hired.
- Contingency recruiting is generally not on an exclusive basis; the hiring company can have its open position listed with a number of recruiting firms.
- Candidates usually are presented or marketed to a number of organizations.
- Contingency recruiting is usually used for entry-level to mid-management roles.

Retained Search

- The search fee and expenses are negotiated up-front with the hiring organization. Search payments are made at the commencement of the search and at various times throughout the process. This is an exclusive arrangement between the company hiring and the search firm retained.
- Candidates recruited for and presented to the hiring organization are for that client only; they are not marketed to other organizations.
- Retained search firms aim to find the best-qualified candidate for a position. Many candidates presented are not actively seeking a new position when first contacted by the search firm.
- Retained executive search is typically used for senior-level positions.

The relationship between a retained recruiter and a candidate usually begins with either a phone call or written correspondence in which the recruiter identifies himself as a search consultant who would like to discuss a specific search assignment. If the candidate is not qualified or not interested, the search consultant may ask the candidate to act as a source of referrals for the search assignment. Unless it is a confidential search, a retained search consultant will

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Unless it is a confidential search, a retained search consultant will have no difficulty in identifying the client and should be able to share a detailed position description ...

have no difficulty in identifying the client and should be able to share a detailed position description and many numerous facts regarding the client and the position.

To better understand the relationship between the candidate and a search consultant, a summary of the search process from the search firm perspective is in order. Following each phase of the process is an explanation of what this means for the candidate.

Client Meeting

Those responsible for the execution of the search meet with the client company to discuss the position and develop a thorough understanding of the position to be filled. Additionally, the search consultants familiarize themselves with the company culture and people, business strategy and potential challenges that may exist in hiring the best-qualified candidate. The search consultant will ultimately walk away with the profile of the skills, experience and characteristics the successful candidate should possess. This is critical information for the search consultant since he evaluates all candidates before recommending them to interview with the hiring authority. A timeline with deliverables will also be outlined.

For the candidate: It is this information, as well as ongoing discussions with the client, that the search consultant will initially use to determine your qualifications for the open position. This will also allow the search consultant to answer your questions as to why the position is open, the experience required and any questions related to the overall search process (interview process, timing of hire, etc.).

Research and Sourcing

Using a network of resources including original industry research, proprietary databases, online sources and research into the client's competitors, a "potential candidate population" is developed. This list may number hundreds or may be as few as 50 people. It also may be reviewed by the client company to help the search firm prioritize its contacts or to delete names for a variety of reasons. In addition, this list will include contacts that the search consultant will use for referral purposes only.

For the candidate: When a search consultant contacts you, it usually means that you have been identified as someone with the appropriate work experience for his or her search assignment. Even if you are not actively looking for a new position, it may be in your best interest to listen to what the search consultant has to say. Search consultants remember those who provide assistance and will be receptive to helping you should you contact them for marketplace information.

Recruitment and Evaluation

The search consultant will contact perspective candidates seeking to develop their interest in the position or to ask them to nominate potential candidates. The person who is interested will undergo a series of

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interviews and evaluations, usually over the telephone, prior to his or her resumé being submitted to the client for review. Search firms usually do not present resumés one at a time to their client. They are usually presented in groups so that the client can compare backgrounds. Therefore, a potential candidate may not receive immediate feedback as to the client's interest in his background. The candidate should ask the search consultant when his or her resumé will be presented and when to expect some feedback.

The search consultant and client will discuss the resumés presented and agree upon potential candidates with whom to move forward. At this stage, the search consultant will conduct a detailed, in-depth formal interview of the perspective candidate (usually in person). These interviews serve to confirm the candidate's suitability for the role. Once completed, the search consultant will make final recommendations to the client as to who should be brought on-site for personal interviews.

For the candidate: This is when you have the opportunity to meet in person with those responsible for finding the best-qualified candidate for the search. This is your opportunity to find out as much as you can about the position and what it will take to be successful in the role. Additionally, you must be able to convey to the search consultant your level of interest in the role and how the client would benefit if you were selected. Be prepared to answer any questions regarding other opportunities you may be considering. You expect the search consultant to be open with you in terms of competition for the position; they expect the same in return.

This is also a time to have the search consultant lay out the timetable for the rest of the search/interview process. As a candidate, you should be prepared to answer direct questions relating to your current as well as projected compensation requirements and issues related to relocation (if one is required).

If a search consultant feels that the candidate is not a good match for the role or the candidate has not been cooperative in some way, the search consultant has the option of removing the candidate from consideration for the job. The search consultant is an extension of the client; a candidate should interact with the consultant as though he were the hiring authority.

Client/Candidate Interviews/Offer Negotiations

The search consultant will then work closely with both the client and the finalist candidates to arrange on-site interviews. At the conclusion of each interview, each party is debriefed. Once a final candidate is selected, the search consultant will act as facilitator in the offer discussions with the leading candidate and assist in bringing the project to a successful close.

For the candidate: At this stage of the search process, somewhere between 30-60 days have elapsed since the search consultant first contacted you. It may be as many as 90 since the search began. If the search consultant has been thorough and the candidate has been forthcoming in regard to his financial expectations, the negotiations should be a smooth and short process. Quite frankly, it is in everyone's interest to conclude the search on a positive note. The search consultants want their client to feel good about the offer being made as much as they want the candidate to feel good about accepting it. The search consultant will work with you and be there to advise with the process of giving notice and any other transitional issues as you leave one employer and join the new one.

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Even though the search is completed and the candidate has started, the relationship with the search consultant should not be over. Most search consultants will stay in touch with their candidates to make sure that their expectations are being met. As a candidate recruited, evaluated and ultimately placed with the client company, you should be comfortable in approaching the search consultant with regard to any questions or concerns that arise during your employment with the new company.

Having reviewed the search process and the search consultant's responsibilities to his client, what does this mean for the candidates? Who is looking out for their best interests? In my opinion, while the search consultant is contractually obligated to the organization that has retained his services, the former's primary responsibility is to identify and help the client hire candidates that will blend in culturally and provide long-term benefits to the company as well as the candidate. It is not in the search consultant's best interest to have someone he or she recruits be unsuccessful or leave an organization prematurely.

The best search consultants want to make sure that the decision you make is the best one for you, your family and your career. The conclusion of a search should be viewed as a win / win for all parties involved. Search consultants are very interested in developing professional relationships with their candidates as well as other individuals with whom they come into contact during the course of a search. A potential candidate today may be a consumer of search firm services tomorrow.

Bottom line, for a search to be successful, both the candidate and the search consultant should expect the following:

- Honesty
- Confidentiality
- Timely communication / feedback
- Professional treatment
- Realistic expectations ❑

Try This Game Plan: Play to Your Strengths

by Mark E. Green

We've all heard it before: "Play to your strengths." Yet in practice, few of us expend the time and energy necessary to identify and then meaningfully enhance our core strengths. Instead, we remain shackled by cultural patterns and habits that cause us to focus disproportionately on developing or "fixing" our weaknesses.

Before you call the men in the white coats to come and get me, you should understand that I'm not advocating that you ignore your weaknesses. Rather, my argument is for a more balanced approach that gives, at a minimum, proportional weight to developing your strengths. Before we can understand why, we need to shed some light on the overwhelming habit most of us have of focusing on our weak areas instead of on our strengths.

From a very early age, we are taught and conditioned to remedy our weaknesses, but not necessarily develop our strengths. For example, once you learned to balance on a two-wheeled bicycle (overcoming your weakness), how much time did your parents actively spend with you teaching you how to ride it better? Probably not much.

As we progress into the educational system, we see even more examples of single-mindedly pursuing perceived weaknesses—like in elementary school when we're asked to write misspelled words three times each after a spelling test. Were you ever asked to practice using the words that you spelled correctly on the test? Probably not.

As adults, many of us have been exposed to a variety of "assessments" of our performance, our behavior, our intelligence and our attitudes. Think back to the last assessment you took. The action plan that resulted probably focused much more on helping you focus on and develop your "weak" areas than your strengths. Even worse, many of us have come to take our strengths for granted.

We pay a price for this approach.

Let's consider baseball player Barry Bonds of the San Francisco Giants for some additional perspective. Barry's core strength is hitting home runs and long balls. Statistically speaking, one of his weaknesses is bunting. What if, at the end of the season, Barry met with his manager who—after assessing Barry's performance and choosing to focus only on his weaknesses as most of us tend to do—decided that Barry needed to address his weakness in bunting during the off season? As a result, Barry might be sent to bunting school.

Fast forward to next year's spring training and, for sure, Barry will be a better bunter. But he'll only be an incrementally better bunter, certainly not of world-class caliber. Much more importantly, it is likely that his big swing suffered while he was so focused on learning how to bunt.

Barry's story illuminates the steep, stealthy price we pay for this approach: if we single-mindedly pursue our weaknesses, our strengths will suffer. It's not a matter of merely stagnating—our strengths actually begin to weaken. Although learning new things and improving weakness are important, it shouldn't occur in a vacuum, and certainly not at the expense of those things we already consider to be our strengths.

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If we single-mindedly pursue our weaknesses, our strengths will suffer. It's not a matter of merely stagnating—our strengths actually begin to weaken.

Can you readily identify and list your strengths? In all likelihood, they are what enabled you to get where you are in life, both personally and professionally. So why not focus on them and try to improve them? After all, your core strengths will also be providing most of the propulsion to get you where you want to go. In addition, you'll have more fun when you get to do more of the things that you know you do well.

As you become more mindful of your own tendency to focus on weaknesses at the expense of your strengths, and come to understand the price you are paying as a result, it becomes easier to make choices to change your circumstances. For example, if you're a world-class actuary in a particular niche and you'd like to go into business for yourself, you might choose to find a partner who has deep sales and marketing expertise in the same niche. Too often, we try to "do it all," which forces us to focus disproportionately on our weaknesses (in this case, it's hard to pay the bills without sales!) instead of seeking to leverage our strengths in combination with the complimentary strengths of others.

Can you readily identify and list your weaknesses? Might it be possible to surround yourself with individuals who possess your weaknesses as their strengths? Could there be other, creative ways for you to overcome some of your weak areas without necessarily having to develop them formally?

Although you will ultimately deal with them differently, it is important to clearly understand your own strengths and weaknesses. We have blind spots, however, that often prevent us from seeing them as clearly and as critically as we should. For example, when there are no mirrors around, you might ask a friend how you look. Similarly, to better know ourselves it is often beneficial to ask those near to us for their input.

An assessment might be helpful as well, provided that you resist the temptation to only focus on your weak areas. If you have 10 minutes to spare and are interested in taking a free assessment that is solely focused on highlighting strengths, go to *www.authentichappiness.com* and take their VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire (just click on the link from their home page). You might be genuinely surprised to discover what you have going for yourself!

As with so many other things, balance and perspective are important as you contemplate your strengths and weaknesses. Our culture and forces of habit, however often prevent us from finding the balance.

For most of us, the concept of "playing to our strengths" is just that—an idea. In truth, and by default, we most often focus on our weaknesses, which actually cost us some of our strengths. Why continue to focus, strive and work to become a mediocre bunter when—through some different choices—you can further enhance your world-class standing as a home run hitter instead? In other words, what's good for Barry Bonds' career in baseball—in word and in deed, playing to strengths—would be good for you and yours too. ❑

Speak Your Way to Success

by John Hadley

When you accept an invitation to speak, do you simply assume that speaking will increase your visibility and generate business opportunities? Or do you take concrete steps to ensure that you make the most of the podium?

Even successful actuarial consultants often take the first approach. The assumption is that by increasing visibility (e.g., speaking), business opportunities will automatically come our way. This will sometimes happen, but it's very much hit or miss. And it's not very difficult to take some simple steps that dramatically increase the hit rate!

I've broken this down into five stages to ensuring that you convert your speaking engagements into business opportunities, which I remember with the acronym SPEAK:

Setting the Stage
Preparation
Execution
Action
Kick Off

Setting the Stage

Before you accept a speaking engagement, think about whether it is the right audience and venue for you. Will the audience be made up of people who might be interested in your services or your company's services—your "target market/client"?[1]

This is one of the most important steps and one commonly given short shrift. The temptation is to accept any speaking engagement because that helps "get the word out." If you are selective about getting the word out to the right people, in the right way, your engagements will be dramatically more successful, and you will quickly begin to be seen as a focused expert in that area.

Here are some of the questions you should ask yourself about any potential speaking engagement:

- How does the opportunity fit your niche?
- Are you speaking to just your target audience, or is it a mixed audience? And how big is the projected audience?
- Are you sharing the podium? If there are other speakers, are they also marketing products or services and how do those relate to yours? Are they competitive or complementary?
- What are the dynamics? Are people coming specifically to see/hear you, or is it a venue where people come for the event and you happen to be the current hired gun?

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1 For most of this article, I'm going to assume you are a consultant or marketing-oriented professional whose ultimate goal is to promote your services or products. The same concepts apply to actuaries who are simply trying to raise their personal visibility. For example, if you are an interest sensitive product actuary, think in terms of how to communicate the value you bring to the table in that role and your target market/client would be those whom you would want to have hear about that value—for example, people of influence who might one day want to hire someone with your talents.

- To what extent can you promote your product or services at the seminar? Will you get the opportunity to present your marketing message, company, etc., beyond just having it on a slide somewhere?

- What are the goals of the persons or organization arranging the presentation / venue, and how can you help achieve their goals?

- What are the key problems they face?

- How will the event be marketed and by whom?

Now figure out what you can do to make it draw more people who fit YOUR target market, and to ensure that YOU can build the rapport you need with your targets.

Preparation

One of the most important things for you to do as a speaker is to build rapport with your audience. This is absolutely critical to have any hope of generating business opportunities. But why wait until you get up to the podium to do this? That limits you to the time you have in front of your audience. Think about how much more powerful your presentation will be if you have taken steps to build rapport in advance, so that people are already excited about coming and listening to you and hoping to actually meet you!

This is about "pre-marketing" your presentation. Don't assume that just because the organizers are going to send out a meeting brochure or flyer, that will automatically drive people to your session. For example, last fall at the local community college, I was asked to do a workshop on "5 Secrets to Getting a Job You'll Love!" This was an expanded in-person version of a very successful tele-class that consistently attracts 30 or 40 registrants every time I present it. I assumed the community college was very experienced in marketing these events; it runs a wide variety of career workshops all year long. When I arrived, there were four people in the room. They asked me if I would repeat the session six weeks later. This time I took charge of putting the word out in a variety of ways and 43 people showed up. The college's comment: "We've never had so many people come to one of our workshops!"

And even if the organizers will do a great job of marketing the event, you should still think about what you could do to encourage more people in your niche to attend, including ways you might promote the overall event (if your program is part of a larger event)! Some ways you might do this:

Marketing the Event

- Post announcements to your newsletter and to others' newsletters.

- Ask friends and business associates to forward an e-mail announcement that you provide to them.

- Alert people who have attended talks you've given in the past.

- Put announcements out to relevant Yahoo or other networking groups.

- Put up flyers in libraries or businesses near the location of the event.

- Hold tele-classes or webcasts that give a taste of what people will get from the event.

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Pre-Marketing to the Event Attendees

- Survey pre-registrants about key issues or alternate points that you might address in the talk.

- Call people who pre-registered—this could be to remind them to come, or to ask about one or two key issues they would want to see addressed. (This also gives you valuable information for any follow up you might do afterwards.)

- Send out postcard reminders, including a simple testimonial or key point attendees can look forward to getting from the program.

- Give a simple "homework" assignment.

People appreciate a speaker reaching out to them. Just a simple step like this can substantially decrease the number of no-shows. (One of the people I called for a tele-class I was running told me he was very sorry he wouldn't be able to make it. I asked if he'd like to set a time to just talk about some of the issues he was facing. He did and then became a client.)

Execution

Execution is about how you deliver your presentation to build rapport and encourage follow up.

- Ask questions.

- Identify challenges and get your audience thinking about them.

- Don't make your focus to answer all the possible questions people might have about the subject. Yes, give them good information. But if you spend most of your time giving me all the answers, I may recognize that you are very knowledgeable, but I will also likely conclude that I don't need to hire you now. I'll see what I can do on my own first with the information you provided.

- Make it interesting and involving; get as much audience participation as possible!

- Don't hand out printouts of the slides up front; you want people focused on you and what you are saying, not reading the information on the slides in their lap. Use a handout with highlights, or modified/simplified versions of the slides, so that they need to pay attention to you.

- Make sure you incorporate time for responding to the audience's specific questions. Many in the audience will consider the Q&A period the most valuable part of the presentation!

Action

You need to be very intentional about creating a **Call To Action** in your presentation. This is the best way to ensure that speaking generates business opportunities, and one of the most commonly overlooked steps. What are some ways you can do this?

- Offer some form of special deal—a way to take what they have learned to the next level. If you have a product or service you can offer on the spot, you could offer a special price or additional bonuses for signing up right away.

People appreciate a speaker reaching out to them. Just a simple step like this can substantially decrease the number of no-shows.

- Invite audience members to sign up for a free consultation

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- Offer to provide additional information on the topic.

- Provide a special report, the results of a survey, a newsletter or report or send a copy of the complete set of slides.

- Raffle off a copy of a product, recording or other item of value.

When you are offering something tangible such as a report, it is particularly powerful to hold a copy up and show it to the audience, describing key elements. But resist having copies there to hand out. Instead, offer to send it to anyone who hands you a business card or fills out an evaluation form (with contact information). This ensures that you get contact information and provides a convenient excuse for your post-presentation follow up.

One more point: To help you market your next event, why not ask the audience to fill out your own evaluation or testimonial form? This can provide you valuable testimonial clips to use in your next marketing letter or to provide to event organizers. And then the special offer you are going to make can be positioned as your thank-you for their feedback—an exchange of value for value.

Kick Off

What is this last step I call the Kick Off? This is perhaps the most critical step, where you now build on the rapport you hopefully created during the presentation. This is where the “sale” really gets started.

You need to follow up with everyone who came to the seminar! You need to add them to your ongoing, keep-in-touch strategy—e-mails, newsletter, mailing lists, etc. You need to take immediate action to continue the relationship building.

For example, if you offered a free report, follow up by e-mail with each person who requested it within 24 hours of the presentation. Then put them in your tickler list to follow up again a week later to make sure they received it, to see if they have any questions or to set up a phone appointment to answer any questions they may have.

And if you have a broader list of people who came to the presentation, e-mail everyone who didn’t request the report and offer to send it to them as well.

If you follow these simple steps, I guarantee your speaking engagements will generate many more business opportunities! ❑

Avoiding the Hidden Pitfalls of Business Dining

by Maureen Costello

Business dining is an effective relationship-building tool, and yet it's important to recognize and prepare for the hidden dangers and opportunities.

Business dining is a great way to build relationships, especially if you don't golf. It's an opportunity to spend quality time with a client in a neutral setting away from ringing telephones and "urgent" meetings. Offering clients a pleasant experience with good food and a nice ambiance can impress them and allow you to get to know them in a different way.

Of course, whenever you move a business relationship into a social setting, you have to be careful. Mixed signals or embarrassing events, for example, from over-serving, can damage your business relationship forever. With a little foresight and preparation, you can ensure that your business meal is a resounding success.

Here are several principles to follow that will help ensure the success of your business dining experiences.

Set Clear Goals for Your Event

For your business dining experience to be effective, you need to be clear on what you are trying to achieve. Are you celebrating a big deal or completion of a large project? Are you hoping to develop trust with a potential client? Or do you intend to discuss a delicate situation?

Before each event, you should set your objectives and determine what information you want to cover. Of course, one of your objectives should be that your client has a pleasant experience!

Be a Gracious and Generous Host

A gracious host's primary role is to ensure that the guest is comfortable throughout the experience. You have to think of everything, from parking to food to social interaction. That means you have to know what your guests prefer, including:

- What kind of food do they like?
- Do they have any food allergies?
- Is the location convenient?
- Is parking close, well-lit, and safe or is there a valet?
- What is their relationship to alcohol?
- Do they prefer quiet places where they can talk, or loud, bustling environments?

Remember that in spite of all your preparations anything can happen, and you need to be flexible and open-minded. One time a client of mine showed up at dinner on crutches, with a massive cast on her right leg. The restaurant I had selected was small, so she had a tough time maneuvering around the table. She also had to have her foot elevated during the meal!

You may want to go to a restaurant you know well. That way, you ensure you will have a good table and will receive exemplary service. You may even want to special order a menu in

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advance, based on your guest's preferences and favorite foods.

In some situations, the host orders all the food as a way to impress or take care of the guest. It's considered an honor to be able to feed another person—in essence to keep them alive. If this happens when you are a guest, go with the flow and enjoy the bounty!

Many people have serious allergies. For example, someone with nut allergies may have trouble with a Thai restaurant, and a person with a gluten intolerance may be lost at a crepe restaurant.

Allergy surprises can come in the smallest of food items. One time I ate an appetizer the size of a quarter and it nearly sent me to the hospital. I have nut and buckwheat allergies and have learned that double-checking with multiple kitchen personnel is essential to avoiding an ambulance coming to the rescue in front of other diners. What a way to ruin a meal.

Another sensitive issue is alcohol. If a client doesn't drink at all, he or she may be a recovering alcoholic. While that is an issue you probably shouldn't broach, you may want to avoid imbibing in front of that person or taking him to a place that focuses on drinking.

If, on the other hand, your client is a big drinker, you have a host of issues to contend with. In fact, alcohol may be the biggest challenge you face in business dining.

Don't Get Drunk!

Granted, this tip is obvious, but it bears repeating. As the host, you are in control of the event. You need to be on your toes to deal with any problems that arise and to ensure that your guests are having fun and that your business objectives are being met.

Beware of Drinking and Driving

When you are entertaining clients, you have legal liability issues that could impact you personally as well as your company. There are several ways you can minimize your exposure when you are entertaining clients who like their alcohol, or planning an event that you know will be extra festive.

(1) Meet for lunch instead of dinner.
You can lessen the likelihood that a client will get drunk by meeting for a nice lunch instead of dinner. Most lunches are shorter, and if clients need to attend meetings or work in the afternoon, they will drink much less.

(2) Arrange for alternate transportation.
Provide a car to pick up and deliver clients, or pay for cab service if that is appropriate. If the client has driven himself and becomes intoxicated, pay for a cab or car to get him home, and deliver the car to his home or a safe place like the work parking lot. If clients insist on driving when they are intoxicated, try humor. One client of mine in this situation joked to his guest, "Hey, we're a full-service provider here—we get you and your car home safe!"

(3) Discuss expectations with the wait staff in advance.
Let the restaurant personnel know that you don't want your guests over-served. Ask the wait staff not to continuously refill glasses, and to refuse service if the client is getting out of control.

Avoid the Money Trap

Obviously, you should never bring guests to restaurants that will break your budget. Once you've chosen the restaurant, guests should feel free to

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order what they would like, within reason. Or you can ask them in advance what their favorite foods are and special order a menu to control costs.

At fine restaurants, be aware that top shelf after-dinner drinks can routinely run up to $150 a shot. I recently ended up with an extra $300 on top of an already expensive bill when I joined a client in an exotic drink, without realizing it until it was too late.

Also, it helps if you have a basic understanding of good wine. One client of mine allowed her dinner guest to choose a wine he enjoyed, realizing when the bill came that it cost hundreds of dollars! One way to avoid this trap is to ask your client in advance what types of wine he or she enjoys, and then have a couple of suggestions for good reds and whites in certain price ranges ready to go. You can also choose to work with the restaurant staff in advance to choose wines for the table.

Reserving a table at a restaurant where you are a regular patron is helpful when you need a special favor, like getting a sense of what wines are in house at a reasonable price range in both the white and red varieties. This way you can order knowledgeably and within your price range. To take this a step further, take a class at your local wine shop so you know what to look for in a decent bottle of wine.

Recognize the Importance of Etiquette

Basic rules of dining etiquette are important for a variety of reasons. Dining etiquette is a universal language. If you can speak it, you're part of the group that knows. And also, knowing basic etiquette provides you with personal comfort. You don't have to worry about how you're eating and can worry about the content of your meeting.

Most people exhibit basic table manners, such as placing their napkin in their lap, keeping their elbows off the table and not talking with their mouth full. However, many people lack an understanding of etiquette beyond those most basic principles. For example, do you know what to do if you sneeze? (Answer: Always bring a tissue to avoid sneezing into the napkin!).

As you ascend in your career—and especially if you work with people from other countries—it's a good idea to brush up on dining etiquette. The clients I work with on dining etiquette are amazed at what they didn't know, and often report that understanding basic American and European etiquette has had a surprising impact on their careers.

The Continental (also known as European) dining style is less cumbersome and quieter. Using the cutlery in both hands without switching allows more attention to go towards the client. In fact, when you are dining with a globally minded client, handling your plate in the same way your client does is a compliment and positively mirrors the way your client dines.

At the higher levels, business professionals make judgments about your attention to detail, how you handle yourself at the table, and—the most important facet of etiquette—how you treat others, including the hosts, wait staff and buspersons. The CEO from Raytheon, for example, has said he takes measure of a person based on how he or she treats the wait staff, asserting that the way you treat waiters is indicative of how you would treat his people.

And remember, turn off that cell phone!

Watch Out for Mixed Signals!

Now for a sensitive area … When business relationships are moved into social settings, especially when alcohol is added to the mix, situations can arise that are embarrassing at best and damaging or even dangerous at their worst.

If you are concerned that a business dining partner may have non-business intentions, here are some guidelines to follow:

(1) Always meet the client there.

One female colleague of mine always chooses restaurants with valet parking and insists on meeting clients there. A male client of hers once recommended an Italian restaurant near his corporate condo and suggested she park in his garage and they walk over together. She responded by recommending a similar, nearby Italian restaurant with valet parking (claiming a craving for their calamari), and said she'd meet him there. With this approach, she never ends up alone with this client and avoids any potentially uncomfortable situations.

(2) Watch the alcohol intake.

Many uncomfortable interpersonal situations arise when a little too much alcohol has been imbibed.

(3) Use humor and avoidance to deflect uncomfortable situations.

If a business dining partner is making unwanted advances, try giving him the hint by making a pointed joke or changing the subject.

(4) If that doesn't work, state your feelings clearly.

If the person you're with doesn't take the subtle hint, be clear about your situation, such as, "I'm not interested in anything but a healthy business relationship."

(5) If that doesn't work, leave.

Remember, your personal safety and well-being comes first. If you ever feel you are in danger, ask someone from the restaurant to walk you to your car or help disentangle you from the situation.

Prearrange Payment if There's Any Question About Who Pays

In America, whoever invites usually pays. If you want to avoid any discussion of it, prearrange payment with the wait staff.

In some cultures, especially in Asia, the person who is treated to dinner owes a favor to the person who paid, so when they're fighting for the check, it has a whole different meaning!

Another cross-cultural difference involves the end of the meal. In America, the host stays at the table until everyone leaves. In Asia, it is polite to wait for the host to leave before you depart.

In any case, you can see how a little preparation and thought goes a long way. So do your homework and enjoy! ❑

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