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This Seems Like a Job Interview

by Steve Gaspar

Years ago I had a conversation with another actuary about how her team approached their work. I was very curious about their performance because my area was directly affected by their work product. Following the end of a meeting I asked her some questions. After about 10 minutes of ‘Help me understand why you do it that way’, and ‘What would you do in this situation?’ she remarked “Hey, this seems like a job interview.”

Pausing, I considered her statement. Similar to a job interview I was asking her questions and forming an impression. I needed to understand her capabilities and to what degree I could count on her to deliver. In the course of the discussion she disclosed challenges and limitations that affected her group. The entire time I was drawing conclusions about her competence in a variety of areas. Eventually I responded, “I suppose this does seem like a job interview. But then it’s all a job interview, isn’t it?” By this statement I meant that everything we do is observed by others, and this continuous demonstration-observation loop is very much like an ongoing interview.

Whether an independent consultant or an employee in a heavily matrixed organization, we all depend on others to get our job done. This interdependency causes a need for understanding each other’s capabilities. We consciously and subconsciously form impressions of others all the time. This competency surveillance can influence one’s career trajectory.

Direct observation is one way we form impressions of others. Our appearance plays a role in how we are perceived. Image consultant Maureen Costello often writes in *The Stepping Stone* about the importance of one’s appearance (see the October 2007 and January 2008 issues). People draw conclusions from how we look, what we wear, how we stand and how much

we smile. They infer from our appearance what we must be like. In the same way, people draw conclusions from every interaction they have with us. So in a sense it is all just one big job interview.

Consider this issue from a *personal brand* perspective. One’s personal brand may be defined as the thoughts and images that consistently arise when others think of us. Personal brand is the residual image that exists when our name surfaces and we are not around. As such, we affect our brand every day by our words and our actions.

Personal brand is shaped by both “the what” and “the how”. What we get done is always important—was it done on time, was it accurate, was it on budget, were all the angles considered? How we interact with others—what we say, how we say it, what expressions and emotions we use when we speak—can also be a powerful influence on one’s personal brand. If we complete the task accurately and on time (the what), but alienate everyone in the process (the how) our brand suffers. If this sounds similar to Emotional Intelligence, it should (see “EI not IQ”, July 2007 issue of *The Stepping Stone*).

Much stronger than a reputation, a personal brand can influence how tasks and resources are allocated in a company. For example, if your personal brand conveys “rock solid analysis, clever insight and strategic thinker” you are more likely than others to be given opportunities that require those skills. Or suppose your personal brand is “TCOB”, i.e., Takes Care of Business. People with this reputation are trusted to get the job done when it counts. They are the business equivalent of a clutch-throw quarterback. The next time your boss needs someone to TCOB, guess who gets the chance? Think of the value of developing this kind of personal brand. Not only will such people get



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the opportunities that matter most, they will also be provided with resources to accomplish the task because of a proven track record.

What does your personal brand say to others? If you don't know, ask some trusted colleagues. Better yet, write down on paper what you think they will say to this question, "What skills do you think of when you think of me?" Then ask them that very question. Make sure you tell them that you want it straight—you truly want to know the good and the bad. Writing down your guesses at what they will say beforehand is important because it will show you something about your own self-awareness.

If you accurately predict their responses your self-awareness is relatively high. High self-awareness will be useful as you manage your personal brand. Conversely, if you guess incorrectly your self-awareness is not as high as it might be. Though not favorable news per se, such knowledge is useful in three ways. First, simply knowing that your self-awareness is not as high as you thought it was can be valuable. Such insight will make you pay closer attention to how you interact with others. Second, learning specifically how you are perceived by others can help you leverage hidden strengths. For example, you may find out that skills you took for granted are talents that others respect and value. And third, learning of weaknesses or things you should change is quite a gift. Just knowing isn't a cure, but you can't fix something until you know it is broken.

Once you have a better awareness of your personal brand you have two more questions to ask yourself: (1) what are the personal brands of those who are successful in the roles to which I aspire, and (2) will my personal brand carry me to my career goals? The first question seeks to identify what it takes to succeed. The second question involves sizing yourself up to see whether you have what it takes or that

you need to make some changes. If the answer to the second question is "no, it won't get me there" then you know you have to do a better job managing your brand.

Personal brand management is a discipline. One needs to have the discipline to take on every task, every encounter, every day with the same mantra in mind, "my actions are going to support my brand." This is a critical point because as we have seen, people form opinions about each other all the time. They do so based on the only information they can get—looking at you, listening to you, asking others about you, and watching how you do things. Understanding what you are going to do and how you are going to do it—every day—is critical to brand development and maintenance. Disciplined brand management will help you nail that big ongoing job interview every day. □

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