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Manage Tension to Create Influence

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It's interesting how different audiences receive the same message.

I presented on "The Influential Conversation" at the New Jersey Risk and Insurance Management Society (RIMS) in October, and got a terrific response (rated 4.7 out of 5 in all nine rating categories). I've also received a good response from a diverse set of audiences over the past year and a half.

Then I presented the topic to a large group of job seekers in Princeton, and it was clear from the tenor of the questions that there were several people struggling with a core concept for building influence: tension management.

Tension management is critical to every discussion where you are trying to have influence, and it is often overlooked or downplayed.

In a nutshell, the basic concept is that there are two primary types of tension: relationship tension and buying tension. As the candidate in a job interview, you want to lower relationship tension, and raise buying tension. For details, see the article I wrote for the February 2011 issue of *The Stepping Stone*: "Managing Tension in the Interview."¹

While it seemed like most understood raising the buying tension, they struggled with the concept of reducing relationship tension.

I think the reason was:

- This critical concept doesn't get much press, so most haven't thought about it.
- Many candidates are so stressed about just giving good answers to questions that it is too much for them to think about managing the interviewer's psychology.
- Many approach the interview giving the other party all of the power, and are hesitant to attempt to level the playing field.
- Some need a deeper frame of reference to truly "get it."

So here's my attempt to address that last point.

Think about what happens when you first meet someone. You don't know Bill, and your focus is on trying to find out about him and establish some common ground. What level of conversation are you likely to have at that stage? Is there a lot of trust and a basis for deep conversation?

And if this is an interview, don't you think Bill (the hiring manager) is also feeling significant tension? He's got to decide if you are someone he wants to work with every day, and his success and professional reputation depend on good hiring decisions.

Once you and Bill get to know and like each other, the conversation moves to an entirely different level. Now there is a basis for trust, and you both are likely to open up much more. At this stage whatever statements you make are going to be seen in the light of that trust, and will have much more power and influence.

Isn't this where you want any influential conversation to be? Shouldn't your goal be to get there as soon as possible?

Here is another way to look at this: Imagine you have joined in on a conversation at a Society of Actuaries networking reception, with a group of actuaries you don't know well. Your discussions with them are likely to be fairly superficial and guarded as you feel your way through to the common ground where you can get comfortable.

On the other hand, when you are with people you already know well (and like), you are going to be much more open, and willing to share your deeper self. Your focus is going to be on the conversation, not the relationship.

So to have a truly influential conversation, you want the relationship side of the equation

to be completely comfortable, so that it's not even a question. You don't want either of you to even have to think about whether you can work together effectively, will enjoy seeing each other in the office, and will make a great team. You want this relationship "tension" to be so low that there is no issue at all.

I'm interested in your own thoughts:

Does this concept make sense to you?

What other thoughts do you have on how to express it?

Where else would you apply it?

Send your answers to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com. ■

ENDNOTE

² Available online at www.JHACareers.com/ArticlesSearch.htm.



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