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Building Influence in Interviews

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I started part 1 of this series¹ by sharing my definition of the goal you should have for any conversation where you want to achieve true influence:

“To help the other person succeed by producing a solution that best meets their needs.”

Notice that this statement includes *nothing* about what you want to achieve. It is entirely focused on *the other person*. Your goals need to take a back seat to helping others with their needs.

A clear focus on the other person’s goals builds the relationship so critical to achieving influence.

Many candidates struggle with applying this concept to interviews. They think, “I’m here about getting hired—I just want to get an offer!”

True, but the path to getting that offer is a deep exploration of the interviewer’s needs, which ultimately shows how you could be the solution that best meets those. (Or possibly to finding out that the needs are ones for which you either can’t or don’t want to be the solution, which can also be a valuable outcome.)

Consider these true-life situations:

Rich had the best possible credentials and experience I could have hoped for in my critical actuarial opening, but the instant I met him, I realized I would be cringing every time he walked into my office. Since I had flown him in from Boston, I went through the motions of the interview process, but knew I would not extend him a job offer. In fact, others who met him suggested I should have just put him back on the plane right away.

David was a number of years Rich’s junior, and was light in the type of actuarial experience I sought. But the recruiter told me he was sharp, and I decided it was worth exploring his candidacy. I instantly liked him and the way he carried himself. As we

talked, I became confident that he would fit well into my team and always have my back. I decided I could mentor David on his gaps, adjusted the job spec to fit him, and hired him on the spot.

How do you achieve David’s level of engagement? By aiming toward the objective I stated up front.

Exploring my needs shows you are curious, engaged and focused on the right issues. You will be asking the right questions, talking about things that are relevant and important to me, and keeping ME fully engaged in the conversation. Digging deeply into those areas, and not letting things lie at the surface, gains you the understanding that shows you what it is that the job is *really* about, and provides you the road map to showing that you are the solution that best meets my needs.

Notice that I referred to the interview as a conversation. The most successful interview is not a Q&A session, but morphs into a truly influential conversation.

The trick is that this focus on my needs has to be genuine: You can’t just be asking a set of questions you wrote down on a piece of paper ahead of the interview. If your questioning comes across like stock questions you read about in some book, you will likely do worse than if you asked no questions at all.

You need to be genuinely interested in the questions, and my answers. You need to be following the conversation so that the questions are natural and relevant to the point under discussion. You need to be thinking deeply about my answers to see where the conversation should go next.

Part of this involves tension management,² a concept few people consciously apply to the interview process.

Watch for the final installment of this three-part series in our next issue of *The Stepping Stone*. ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 “Building Influence” in the November 2017 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, <http://thestepingstone.soa.org/?issueID=2&pageID=17> (accessed January 11, 2018).
- 2 Read about this in “Manage Tension in Interviews,” *The Stepping Stone*, February 2011, which can be accessed at www.JHACareers.com/ManageTensionInInterviews.pdf.