

It's More Than Getting the Certificate

We have all been in this situation. We are facing some challenge, or some opportunity, or something that simply needs to be done. When we are in that situation, we make a decision. After all, if you are a manager, that is what you are paid to do – make decisions. Sometimes the situation is pretty similar to other situations you have been in as a manager, or read about, or heard about. Sometimes they are situations that you never would have expected, and yet, there is an expectation that you, because you are a manager, will demonstrate high managerial skills. This is more than doing your job; this is making the right decision, at the right time, for the right reasons.

I have been involved in the hiring process for client companies in which the CEO will ask me to sit in on a hiring interview in order to offer an external perspective to this decision. In every one of these situations, I have been pretty impressed by the candidates CV. A nice selection of previous positions that show growth in organisations. A nice array of previously delivered performance. Often a nice list of other credentials. On paper, it is pretty easy to make a candidate look great. Even during an interview itself, a candidate can appear to be pretty great, largely because the answer questions well. Sadly, that is only the tip-of-the-iceberg of a candidate's skill/competencies, and doesn't even go near his or her beliefs.

Years ago, I was dating a woman who was extremely competent in her job and when she was up for a promotion, she asked me if I would help her prepare for the big interview...for the seriously big job. I said I would, and when one night she produced a pile of cards and asked me to help her 'role-play' the interview, which was the next day. I asked what the cards were for, and she said that they had questions and replies on them. I said okay, and soon we were sitting across from each other at her kitchen table. All I was supposed to do was ask the question that was written on each card, and then verify that her verbal answer matched what she had written down as a good response. By now, I was thinking that this was a bit of folly, but trying to be supportive, I read the first question. Her answer was exactly what was on the card. She looked at me to see my reaction to her response, and, of course, I gave her sort of a 'well done' look. I played this game for a few more cards, but then when I flipped over to the fourth or fifth card, the question I verbalised had nothing to do with what was written on the card. She began to say something, but then stopped and instead said, "that isn't what is written on that card."

Before she could say anything else, I asked her where these cards came from. "Did you get these cards from someone on the interview team for tomorrow?" Well of course not. She had made written the questions and answers based on what she believed would be appropriate questions for an interview committee for a position of this level. And after a few more minutes of her going through all the remaining cards to make sure

they were in a certain order, she explained that she had already been practising by going through the cards in order over and over again.

At this point, I explained why I thought this was a waste of time and effort on her part. First, she was competent. Competent as hell and had repeatedly demonstrated her competence repeatedly in previous positions. Second, what she was doing, she admitted, was learning just as she had done in university. Figure out what questions could be on an exam, and then memorise the answers to the questions. This might have worked for her in university, but in this job interview, there was no way that she would know what all the questions might be. And because of that, responding with something like, "oh, sorry, I haven't practised for that question" isn't exactly going to impress an interview committee. Third, whilst she did have a reputation for ensuring that her decisions would be highly appropriate, I always thought that she did her best by getting past all the technical, binary choice stuff and get into the passion she had about why her choices were what they were.

I can remember one time when I was advising a CEO of a seriously large European company and he asked me to sit in on an interview for a Senior VP position in his company. The interview committee pummelled the candidate with questions that sounded to me to delve into just about any contingency that they thought the candidate might experience in the position if hired. The candidate was pretty impressive. He gave answers that mirrored his equally impressive CV. And then the committee leader asked me if I had any questions. My job was not to do anything other than sit in to see how the committee – and candidate – did for this important position, but I did say that I had one question. My question was, "Could you please share with the committee a story that you remember that is important to you?" It was pretty obvious to me that this candidate had been practising his responses for days as they were spot on, but it was equally obvious that he had never experienced a question like this...and he stumbled. (The committee members, to be honest, all did look a bit flummoxed as well, as my question had nothing to do with the specific job the candidate was interviewing for, or so they thought.)

The reason I had asked the question was to see how the candidate would handle a totally and completely unexpected situation. You know, sort of like what managers can experience on just about any day of the week. He did have the right set of skills, but his ability to demonstrate the competency of dealing with the unexpected was sorely lacking.

Being a competent manager means that you need to do more than take the course, read the book, or get the certificate. It means you need to know what to do, when to do it, and why it is right...and then be ready for when the unexpected presents itself in front of you.

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