

7 clues ensure job success in corporate world



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AS AN EXECUTIVE SEARCH CONSULTANT, I visit many clients' facilities every year, and without fail, one person always catches my eye: the director of first impressions.

Think your company doesn't have one? Think again. Whether it's your receptionist, security guard or janitor, the first person I meet at your site or location sets the tone for the visit and my initial perception of your organization. You get only one chance to make a first impression. (Although you've heard it said a million times, this fact still rings true today.)

Is your director of first impressions disorganized, harried, sloppy or rude? Does he or she project a calm, friendly and collected air of professional competence? Is your voicemail system user-friendly? Do workers loiter outside the front of your building smoking, and then leave their cigarette butts as litter? It may take some due diligence and careful analysis to unearth exactly how well a company functions, but from these initial encounters the initial insight gained about company culture is invaluable.

First impressions count for a simple reason: Success leaves clues. Like Hansel and Gretel leaving breadcrumbs through the forest, these clues lead to a final destination — corporate success. Join me, then, as we follow seven clues to corporate success.

Clue No. 1: Practice absolute integrity.

Unless you're honest and trustworthy, nothing else matters.

Rock-solid character and integrity are musts, not nice-to-haves, especially in a tightly knit and family-dominated industry like produce.

On my list, integrity is the No. 1 attribute when evaluating candidates, regardless of talent. Why? Think about it: Have you ever known a long-standing leader whom you couldn't trust or believe? People may ride high for brief periods by bending the rules or shading the truth, but eventually lies and scandal will derail them. You have only one reputation — one professional résumé

— so protect it at all costs.

Practicing absolute integrity is the best prescription for long-term corporate success. Time and again, it's honest, salt-of-the-earth people who succeed in the produce industry. Vince Lombardi, who still holds the all-time NFL coaches winning percentage record, has excellent advice for all of us: "You don't do what's right once in a while, but all of the time."

Clue No. 2: Do what you say you're going to do.

If I have one management mantra, it's that you should do what you say you're going to do.

In my business, I have a hard time recommending a candidate to one of my clients if he or she doesn't attend to details. If the candidate's résumé contains typos or grammatical errors, how does that reflect on the candidate? If it takes someone days to return a phone call, then how can they possibly handle multimillion-dollar responsibilities?

In my opinion, executing on the little things is essential to ensuring the big thing, like corporate success. Ketchup-maker Henry J. Heinz emphasized, "To do a common thing uncommonly well brings success." Little things send big messages, whether the task is returning messages, sending thank-you notes, maintaining an orderly workspace or projecting a successful appearance (with shoes always shined, etc.).

Clue No. 3: Be patient and persistent.

The average retained executive search project takes 90 days from start to finish. That process may seem interminable, but it mirrors two realities of the business world: First, that anything worth achieving takes time; and second, that corporate success is a marathon, not a sprint.

Our projects' 90-day timelines allow me to evaluate the candidates' patience, persistence and work ethic. How do these individuals react when roadblocks or obstacles arise? How persistent are they in wanting to complete the process? How well do they work with me to ensure a successful outcome?

A candidate who is overly hurried or frustrated may lack the patience and persistence necessary to complete a long-term business deal (like the six months it may take to land a new large account). On the other hand, a professional who remains patient and persistent will likely flourish in the business world. Achieving corporate success is an arduous journey with no shortcuts or work-arounds. So

remember — be patient and persistent.

Clue No. 4: Work hard.

One of my top qualifications for candidates is a strong work ethic with a bias toward results. The produce industry doesn't run on empty words and vain promises. Instead, it's fueled by day-in, day-out, nose-to-the-grindstone hard work.

Résumés offer a revealing glimpse into candidates' work ethics and/or priorities. Do they list tangible, positive and measurable accomplishments? Have the candidates' scope and responsibilities increased over time? Was the candidate promoted sometime within their last two companies? Did the candidate stay loyal to one industry and/or firm for several years, or does the résumé show job-hopping and, therefore, instability?

In order to identify top talent, I have a simple yardstick for judging candidates — past performance is the best indicator of future success. An employee whose résumé indicates he or she has been stable, loyal, hard-working and accomplishment-centered will usually remain so. Likewise, a job-hopping or grass-is-always-greener type is unlikely to change past behavior.

Clue No. 5: Be flexible but goal-driven.

Flexibility is essential. If our client has to reschedule a meeting at the last minute, the candidates who can readily accommodate are usually also the ones who can best handle the unforeseen, rapid shifts and timely responses necessary to survive in our business.

The fresh produce industry is unpredictable. If a rejected load occurs at a retailer's distribution center when that customer is "on ad," schedules and priorities must change instantly.

While remaining flexible, the best candidates must also be goal-driven. As the axiom states, "If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time." Know what your true goals and objectives are. That way, even when you're even reacting to minute-by-minute changes, your vision and long-term priorities will remain clear. I suggest that you clarify and quantify your personal and business expectations for success by setting measurable, performance-based objectives, and then remain committed to their execution.

Clue No. 6: Think positively.

There's a simple reason why Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale harped on the power of positive thinking. It's because

how you think affects everything you do.

I search for positive candidates who always take the high road. Although I present several finalist candidates to a client for each position, only one will get the job. How the other candidates react to rejection spotlights their true character.

Those who respond graciously, even in defeat, also are winners; a positive, professional attitude is one of the best tools for surmounting inevitable temporary setbacks.

Thinking positively reminds you that life often comes full circle. In 2001, Pete Carroll, the football coach at the University of Southern California, was the school's fourth choice to lead that team's program. Three other candidates declined the job before him. However, he didn't let his disappointment at not being picked first derail his positive mindset.

As a result, Carroll has already built a USC football dynasty and is attempting to win three national championships in a row. That's what I call positive thinking in action.

Clue No. 7: Step up to slip-ups.

The best candidates are those who take responsibility for mistakes or missteps. Success usually springs from learning from your mistakes. As a result, the buck must stop with you.

Even in the worst circumstances, saying, "I take responsibility for what happened" bolsters your credibility. No one respects a finger-pointer, blame-evader or spin master. Successful individuals exchange the philosophy of excuse for the philosophy of personal responsibility.

My heroes in this industry are down-to-earth, plainspoken professionals who tell it like it is. They acknowledge and fix their errors; they don't dispute their very existence. Admitting mistakes clearly demonstrates that you are wiser today than you were yesterday.

In the final analysis, there's no doubt that corporate success is hard to achieve and harder still to quantify. In fact, it fits the old Supreme Court justice's maxim perfectly, slightly paraphrased here: "I don't know how to define it, but I know it when I see it." In reaching for success, leave your own clues. You'll be amazed where they lead.

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