

# The interview process can present a perilous pit on the path to a promotion

## COMMON MISTAKES MAY SLOW YOUR CLIMB UP THE CORPORATE LADDER

BY KEN SANDERS, CPCU, AIC

**W**oody Allen once said, “90 percent of success is just showing up.”

We can take Woody’s quote to a more personal level when faced with an interview for a promotion or a new job in the career of a claims professional. In that case, “90 percent of getting a job is not saying something dumb to eliminate yourself.”

Getting promoted into management is a top priority for many professionals in the claims field. With promotions come more responsibility, greater recognition and increased compensation.

During my career I have seen qualified people miss out on promotional opportunities because of the way they prepared for the final interview. More specifically, how they did not prepare.

Most applicants go about the process as they would for any job they’ve applied for in the past. Landing that first job in management usually takes a great deal more than selling yourself and answering interview questions.

Most people take themselves out of the running in the final interview by

making basic mistakes. I’ll make my point by borrowing from a conversation I had with a former co-worker, Doug, who was devastated over being turned down for a Branch Claims Manager position.

Doug was a supervisor who I had worked with as an adjuster. He had applied for an open position as Branch Claims Manager at an office in another state. Doug became very distraught when he learned he did not get the job.

Doug was well qualified, had a great deal of experience and was ready to take this next step in his career path. I had watched him advance from a Claims Adjuster trainee to a Litigation Supervisor in a very short time. I had to admit I was curious. What had gone wrong? Had Doug totally blown the interview?

He continued, “I passed a competency exam during my interview with Human Resources. It must have been my interview with the director.”

I needed more information before I could offer Doug any advice.

“Maybe I can help you figure out what went wrong and coach you for the next time you interview for a promotion,” I suggested.

### **Serious concerns**

Doug sighed heavily and began, “You see, I wanted to start off the interview showing the director that I was an aggressive person and not afraid to take charge. I told the director exactly what I would need in the way of resources, staff and most importantly, my new salary. I wanted to make my demands and needs for success known right away. I figured that once I got the job, I would never have the opportunity to tell him what I needed again.”

I encouraged Doug to continue.

“Then, the director asked for my immediate and long term plans for this branch. I told him I want to take





Another big sigh from Doug, “He then asked me to talk about my strengths. I had no problem there. I talked about my accomplishments, qualifications and experience. I felt like I was on Late Night doing the Top Ten Reasons the Company Should Hire Doug.”

“But then the director tried to catch me in that old trap of asking me to list my weaknesses.”

“Maybe it wasn’t a trap, maybe he...”

“Oh, it was a trap.” Doug insisted. “I told him that I didn’t have any weak areas, and that’s why I was the best candidate for the claims manager position at the branch. But he kept pushing me by asking more questions about what I thought I could improve upon.”

“What did you tell him,” I asked.

“I couldn’t really think of anything. I mean, I know there has been stuff in some of my performance reviews, but they were either too little to worry about or dumb things. I just told him I didn’t really remember, but I could get him copies of my past performance reviews,” Doug said.

Well, there it was. The worst answer Doug could have given.

“Was there anything else,” I asked.

“I’m just glad I didn’t fall for that trap and stuck to my guns,” Doug said proudly. “Otherwise, the director might have thought that I was weak and couldn’t do the job. I can’t understand what happened; I thought I made such a great impression during the interview.”

Doug had made an impression all right; just not the impression he had hoped to make.

Doug had made what I believe are the three most common mistakes that claims professionals make when interviewing for claims management positions. Although there are

numerous ways to make a bad impression, these examples are my Top Three:

1. Starting an interview with a list of demands
2. Showing up without a plan
3. Failing to identify what you need to do, or have done, to improve yourself

#### **Starting with a list of demands**

By starting an interview with a list of demands, Doug was telling the director that he would always see himself as the most important person in the organization. He was also showing he will be unable to do what is best for the operation or the company as a whole. Doug should have presented any concerns he had about resources or salary as questions when given the opportunity.

His concerns should have been framed around his observations and assessment of the position and the operation.

Opening up with demands is a sure fire way to fail. One person I remember lost a position simply because he asked to be sent to a state-of-the-art training program. When he was asked why, he told the hiring manager it was so he could be more marketable for the future. (An obvious faux pas.)

Doug should have remembered that he was the one asking for the job.

Therefore he should have focused his interview on what benefits he could offer the company. The interview was an opportunity to establish his ability to manage. Doug could have used the entire interview to set the stage to establish communications with this new boss that would allow him to be more effective, once he had the job.

Demonstrating that his interests were primarily personal did not work to his advantage.

#### **Showing up without a plan**

The most successful job candidates come to the interview with a plan of what they will do when they get the job. They come prepared with a plan that includes observed concerns,

the first 10 days to get my feet wet, and then I would start my plan”

I replied with a serious, “Hmmm.”

Doug continued, “Then he asked me what I thought the assets of the branch were, as well as any areas of concern. I told him I couldn’t answer that question because I have never worked in that branch. I explained that I preferred to assess the branch after I start working there.”

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Because I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t open minded.”

“Go on” I said.

I was quickly understanding why Doug didn’t get the job, but I kept asking questions.

improvement steps, success measurements and goals.

Doug should have gone to the interview with the mind set that he was meeting with his new boss on his first day to discuss his plans to improve the organization. This would have made Doug appear more confident and would have demonstrated that he is someone who will identify opportunities and take steps necessary to improve the department.

***The most successful job candidates come to the interview with a plan of what they will do when they get the job. They come prepared with a plan that includes observed concerns, improvement steps, success measurements and goals.***

—Ken Sanders

Example: A friend of mine went to an interview to head up a company that provided services to claims operations. Prior to his appointment, he contacted claims managers he knew from different companies to ask them about the company he was going to interview with. He asked about what they liked, and what they didn't like. He asked for suggestions and possible areas for improvement.

The day of the interview, he showed up with the names of 20 claims managers who all said they would start using their services if certain problems were improved. The candidate even offered some preliminary ideas on how he could accomplish upgrades.

Needless to say, he got the job.

Taking the time to write out a plan would have helped Doug prepare for the interview. It would have forced him to think about the position and forced him to focus on the issues that would be an inevitable part of the interview.

Making plans for developing people, achieving results or moving the operation to the next level is what managers do. Therefore, why not demonstrate a game plan while interviewing for the job? Doug could have included his concerns, solutions, goals and measurements in his plan to show that he is capable of viewing the entire picture from beginning to end.

Personally, I have interviewed many candidates for managerial positions in the claims field. The ones that come prepared with a plan for success, even if it's just in their head, usually succeed.

#### **Failing to identify areas of improvement**

This last area is where I have seen many candidates self-destruct in their interviews. Many candidates believe that when this question is asked, the interviewer is looking for items to help eliminate them from a job, or have a list of things to fix later. This is usually far from the truth.

Most interviewers are looking for varied characteristics, such as humility, the ability to be self-critical, a willingness toward self-improvement, a capacity to accept feedback and the ability to improve others.

Of all of the possible answers to this question, two stand out as the absolute worst. The second worst answer is not admitting there is room for improvement. To be a successful leader at any level a manager must be able to identify what he or she does well, and not so well, and be able to explain the difference.

Even better is the capacity to explain what steps you have taken to prepare yourself as a potential leader.

The worst answer is, of course, not being able to remember. This tells the interviewer that the candidate is not receptive to feedback to the point of what was said to them.

This answer also indicates forgetting what the candidate has no intention of changing. After all, how can someone change something they can't even remember?

The best answer to this question is, "I have been told I don't do some things well and this is what I did to improve. And it's working."

There were occasions that I was able to give feedback to people that I didn't hire. Usually I tell someone I eliminated him or her from competition for a management job over my concerns that they don't accept constructive feedback. Commonly, the reaction is, "That's not true." This is kind of the person who, when being told he has an argumentative personality, says, "No I don't," and proceeds to argue.

Doug sabotaged his chances by falling into all three categories, but really any one of them could have done him in.

The next time Doug goes into an interview, I only hope he will know the job; prepare a plan; demonstrate confidence to do the job; acknowledge his weaknesses as well as his strengths, and be engaged in something to actively improve himself.

Actually, I kind of wish I had more time to chat with Doug. If I had, you might be reading about the top six things to avoid.

*Ken Sanders is Executive Vice President of International Insurance Institute, Inc.; and has over 20 years of claims management and interviewing experience. Sanders heads up the Temporary Employee and Permanent Placement divisions of III and is based in Phoenix, AZ. He can be reached at (480) 705-4093.*

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