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September 2, 2007

“Here are the things to work on over the next three years to improve your chances of getting one of these positions”

If I heard this “consolation” from the vice president of human resources, I would be rather distressed. Unfortunately this is exactly what the VP of HR told a candidate who was passed over for a position which was awarded to another individual with more experience (*HR Magazine*, August, 2007 pg. 49). Although the other candidate may have had better skills, in his attempt to counsel the employee and entice him to stay with the company, the VP undermined his own efforts and probably fomented frustration, at best, for the employee. Additionally, by publicly announcing his thoughts in the article, the VP may have inadvertently announced the condescending attitude of the company toward all of its employees. This statement, particularly if it reflects the mentality of the leadership team, indicates that the company is not supportive of employee recognition or decency. It certainly is not a place where people would want to work for any extended length of time.

One of the most difficult tasks is explaining to an individual why he or she was not selected for a position, non-withstanding discriminatory actions, particularly if the individual is a current employee of the company. In the case presented above, a better approach could have been,

“We’re sorry that you weren’t selected for the position but the other candidate increased productivity by 30% in the last two companies in which she worked. I know you feel upset and betrayed but we did what we thought was right for the company. If you wish, we can help enroll you in a management program that will teach you how to increase productivity so you can improve your chances of obtaining a similar position once it becomes available. We value you as a person and an employee and want you to remain here because you have shown your dedication and commitment to us. If we work together we can develop a program that will satisfy both of our needs”.

I would still be disturbed by the encounter but at least I wouldn't feel as though I was worthless. The difference in the two messages is monumental and it takes practice to deliver the right one. Early on in my career as a teacher I realized that not all the students were brilliant. Rewarding the great students with good grades and advanced activities was no problem, since their work warranted it. The difficulty was with the less-than-stellar students, particularly those who tried hard to excel. I couldn't give them the grades that the best students earned but I also wanted to keep them motivated so they wouldn't give up and quit. My solution was to meet with each one privately and let them know that although they didn't receive the best grades I was proud of them for working hard and trying. I also reminded them of something else in which they excelled, be it basketball, art, or even telling good jokes. My intent was to teach them that good grades were not the only important part of their lives, as long as there was something else.

In the business world this basic tenant holds true, which is to remind individuals with lesser skill sets in one area that they possess other attributes in which they excel. Additionally they need to be encouraged to pursue other goals that will provide more value to the company and to their careers. Unlike school, however, these individuals have the freedom to leave the company if they feel they are not treated according to their expectations and likewise, the company has the right to dismiss them if they become problematic. The bottom line is that if bad news is presented to individuals in a manner that demonstrates concern and provides a solution, both parties can be the beneficiaries. That's what decency is all about – providing options that allow individuals to maintain their dignity, not to denigrate them as did the VP.