

Icy Attitude Can Freeze You Out of Job

By Amy Lindgren

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Is your glass half-full or half-empty? Or just frozen into a solid block of ice? With much of the country enduring a cold spell, the last option does seem the most likely.

For job seekers, the question of attitude is no small consideration. It's ironic, but the time when you most want to crawl under your bed is exactly the time when you need to be upbeat and optimistic.

Why should it matter if you greet the day with a grin? Isn't it enough to put on your game face for interviews and networking? You already know the answer to that. You have worked with Mr. or Ms. Cynical enough to know that someone whose habitual demeanor is downbeat is someone who will gripe in every circumstance. You could put this person on a beach in Tahiti with an endless supply of Mai Tais and the sun would be too bright or the water too cold.

Employers know this, which is why they avoid hiring candidates who show signs of being temperamental or discouraging. Never mind that the emotional distress might be situational — who wouldn't be discouraged in your shoes? The problem is that your interviewer or networking contact doesn't know you're really a cheerleader in disguise. All they know is what they see and if that's not "a frown turned upside down" their instinct will be to pull away.

Have you heard the saying, "Success breeds success"? How about "Confidence attracts (or begets) confidence"? These adages express the idea that successful, confident people are nearly irresistible to others. We want to have them around. In an interview setting, a person who comes off as positive will have the edge on a less-secure candidate, even if the second person has more qualifications.

Before you cry "no fair," consider the employer's point of view. Work skills can be taught, but attitude has to be generated from within. If you were the interviewer, would you rather train a confident worker in a new task, or change someone's attitude?

Anyone who has tried the latter would vote for training the happy candidate. It's just easier to be around can-do people than the are-you-kidding types.

Does that mean a personality change is in order? Hours of happy-therapy? Not so much. Like everyone, you already have a positive side to your personality. The trick is to let that side out into the sunshine where others can see it.

You don't have to be relentlessly cheerful, but you do have to make an effort to erase the half-empty-glass viewpoint from your language. In theory (and in truth, I believe), your attitude will follow your language. If you can develop the habit of speaking

positively, you may just start thinking that way. And if you start thinking positively, you're likely to project that view in your physical demeanor. Pretty soon you'll start looking as if you really believe things are good and getting better.

Here are a just a few examples of the comments I hear every day from job seekers. See if you can think of more positive versions.

1. I used to go on nice vacations, but I guess that's all gone now.
2. Employers don't seem to value experience anymore.
3. No one wants to return calls to a job seeker.
4. Most of the jobs go to internal candidates so there's no point in applying.
5. There's no way I can ever retire. I'll never have enough money to live on.

Got your positive-spin answers in mind? Here are the ones I thought of:

1. This year I'm going to try a different kind of vacation, and stick closer to home.
2. I've been working on ways to explain the value of my experience to employers. Any suggestions for me?
3. My current challenge is trying to get calls back from employers. Any ideas?
4. I've noticed that this company promotes from within. I might have to apply at a lower level to get in.
5. It's been hard to adjust my plans but I'm starting to focus on a longer career path than I'd originally envisioned.

OK, some of those might be a bit Pollyannish for you. But what a difference in tone! The first statements are all flat, declarative sentences that block any possible conversation. The second statements engage the listener and invite feedback. That's your goal if you're trying to build a bond and eventually gain the support of the person you're talking to.

Your homework? Listen to yourself over the next few days and note any negative conversations you participate in. Start the process of changing your language and see if it doesn't inspire other changes.

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