



Large Men In Tights

Sometimes Our Mistakes Deserve a Second Look

HAVE YOU DONE A CAREER retrospective lately? I am referring to some serious think time looking back on all the highlights, perhaps over the luxury of a good bottle of wine or a double cappuccino (whichever works for you). However, whenever we do an analysis of our past it is a real temptation to remember only the high spots. After all, these are our proudest moments.

But a career planning session isn't done to justify our paychecks (as in preparing for an annual review with the boss). Instead, this is the time to examine some of our previous career decisions to see if there are some fresh lessons that can be gleaned from the past. Because of this, remembering those guffaws and foul-ups that have trailed us along the way can be important. Sure it is painful—these are the episodes that you'd like to permanently brush under the rug. But there may be some real gems hidden in those memories.

At the moment you make a big career mistake, you are too close to the situation to get the full benefit of the lesson. While it might have been obvious to you the next day that your attempt to bypass your boss by speaking directly to the CEO about a raise wasn't a real good move, a short while later the episode gets clouded over and becomes painful to reexamine. That's when it slides into the category of a career relic, never to be seen or heard from again.

Consider talking openly with an understanding colleague, perhaps swapping a few stories about some of your career faux pas. This is valuable because you can pick up a lot by what is called "O.P.E.," an acronym which stands for "Other People's Experiences." The great part is that you can learn from O.P.E. without the pain of going through that particular scenario yourself. Hearing a colleague tell you about her embarrassment at being caught in a major career blunder not only helps that person in the retelling, but it sends a lesson home to you as well.

In "Managing Your Career," I usually relate stories that have been told to me by contacts and acquaintances, sheltered by a change of scenery to keep them private. In this issue, however, you'll find the lurid details of two of my own career blunders, and the lessons that I learned from them. My hope is that this will inspire you to think back upon your own career and see what fresh lessons that you might learn by reexamining your biggest mistakes.

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Lesson #1: "Ask the Right Questions"

In my rookie recruiter years I worked for a contingency placement company that focused on the computer industry. This was a "wham-bam" kind of placement service, where you didn't have a chance to meet every candidate before they interviewed with your client. One of the first projects that I was assigned was a Sales Rep position for a major company on the East Coast. Their Director of Sales and Marketing told me that it was a "critical hire."

After a week or two of hard work on my part, one of my candidates was asked to come in for an interview. Phyllis was an inside sales rep working in the telephone-marketing department of one of my client's competitors. Her references looked great. The position was attractive to her because she was looking to get out from behind the telephone and into a field sales job.

The tricky part was that Phyllis actually turned out to be *Phil*, a fellow wearing hose and a skirt, standing six feet tall and weighing well over 200 lbs. My client told me that it was the Adam's Apple that gave it away. My first question, after hearing this from a very patient and professional hiring manager, was why didn't I learn about this from one of the references? And in a moment, I knew why. It was because I didn't ask the right question. It had nothing to do with illegal discussions about sexual preferences or personal details that were none of my business. I had spoken with people who knew Phyllis in a specific capacity, and I had never thought to ask them how she might do out of that element. Every comment had been related to their perception of this person as a first-rate telephone sales rep.

From that moment on, I would describe my project in detail on each reference-check call, making sure to ask the right questions: "How do you believe that this candidate would do in the [specific job] that we are considering her for?"

Lesson #2: "Bluffing Is For Poker; Play It Straight With Your boss."

I remember this career blunder like it was yesterday, and yet for years I haven't wanted to bring it to mind. I was working at my first real job after college, and I had just gotten my annual review. There was a big bonus in my paycheck, an increase in job level, and a great note from the Director referencing my bright future with the company. And then, in a move that was nothing more than pure ego run amok, I went out for a beer with my boss after work and tried to strong-arm him into a manager's job.

"I've been offered another opportunity," I told him. "One of our competitors thinks that I might make a very good Regional Manager." While I had indeed had a preliminary discussion

with another firm, it wasn't even as official as a job interview. I didn't have an offer in hand — it was simply a light-weight discussion over lunch at a trade show. In hindsight, the other company was simply doing a little intelligence gathering. I had jumped in way over my head, trying to pull one over on a guy whom I liked and respected — a Manager with over twenty years of savvy leadership under his belt!

I really hadn't expected such a stern face. As it turns out, he wasn't so much mad at me for considering leaving, he was upset because the company that I had referenced was a firm with whom he had an unwritten agreement not to steal people. Unknown to me, one of his old buddies was his counterpart at that company. I sat in my boss's office while he called this friend who flatly denied that they had any "job offer discussion" with me. They were both laughing and recalling old times when he hung up the phone and asked me never to "play a bad poker hand" with him again. I lost his respect, and lost future opportunities because he never treated me the same way after that episode.

Sure, I've taken a few stumbles in my career. But as I do my career retrospective, and think about the people I've worked with and the experiences I've had, I count my blessings that one of the things that I did right was to work with great people. I've developed a knack for selecting clients and colleagues who would put up with an occasional glitch because they knew that I would work even harder for them while getting back on the right path. The final lesson to come out of my career retrospective was this: Work with people who know you are human, but who will count on your strengths.

Even if it stings a bit to dust off your mistakes and reexamine them, it can be illuminating because there is a great possibility that they won't seem as bad today as they did back then. In fact, you may laugh at the experiences, as I did. And at the very least, you'll be able to learn something about yourself. ■

IT IS MY HOPE THAT many readers of *CONTRACT PHARMA* will recognize this column from over eleven years of publication in another trade journal. I am very proud to have moved my column to this new venue. *CONTRACT PHARMA* is, in the words of one publishing industry insider, a "hot property."

It's hard to imagine a startup of any kind moving as fast as this one did. Within two years of first publication, the circulation and advertising revenue of *CONTRACT PHARMA* had exceeded that of other well-known journals with years of entrenchment. In my mind, any startup this successful must have something special going for it, and before moving my column I did plenty of due diligence to discover just what that magic might be at *CONTRACT PHARMA*.

What I found wasn't marketing mystique. Instead, it was a magazine staff who were paying attention to the details. First off, the journal hit a niche that was crying out for attention (the field of contract services and outsourcing to the Pharma/BioPharma industries continues to grow at an impressive rate). Secondly, the journal had early-on developed a reputation for editorial and technical integrity. The advisory board and editorial staff were considered by everyone that I spoke with to be the best in the business. Thirdly, and most importantly to me, the people whom I would be working with had the same philosophy as I did about mutual trust and respect. A simple handshake was all it took to get it done. In my previous situation, lawyer letters and contracts had replaced the handshake deal of eleven years ago.

What a refreshing change it is to be working with entrepreneurs of this sort — people who have inspired my trust and who have built such an impressive young magazine. I am excited to be a part of this venture, and can assure all of my readers of "Managing Your Career" that there will be many more years of these articles to come. Thank you for your loyal readership and please tell your colleagues where to find the column!

—Dave Jensen