

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN ANY JOB INTERVIEW

by Ronnie Ann ~ February 26th, 2007

IN THE FILM *THE GRADUATE*, BENJAMIN BRADDOCK IS ADVISED BY A FAMILY FRIEND THAT THE ONE-WORD KEY TO SUCCESS IS “PLASTICS.” AND WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CREATE PLASTICS? **CHEMISTRY.**

And that’s also what it takes to get the job in most cases. Chemistry. According to Wikipedia plastics are “polymers: long chains of atoms bonded to one another.” A lot like the workplace where different people are in effect bonded together to create something or produce a service of some kind.

That’s not to say that you don’t need some basic skills and/or experience for most jobs – but usually by the time you get to the interview, you’ve been screened for that at least to some extent. And it’s true that the employer will want to make sure you can do the job – and in jobs where there are specific high-level skills like in technology, you will be quizzed at a much deeper level.

But before you can get to any of that, there has to be a feeling that you would be a match for the company as well as the particular department interviewing you. And that feeling can be summed up in the word “chemistry.”

AND IT’S A TWO-WAY STREET. Not only is the employer trying to decide if you would be a fit for them, but you have to figure out whether you think the job would be right for you. You can get a lot of cues about the way a place operates and how you might be treated from the interview.

I’ve usually been pretty lucky when it comes to the chemistry thing in interviews. But there’s was that one interview a few years ago. Here’s the story:

I had heard about a job helping to improve public employment policies and, even though I hadn’t worked in a government agency in many years and



wasn’t quite sure that was what I wanted, I decided to apply. I figured it was worth a shot. When I arrived at the office, my instincts went off immediately – something about the environment felt cold and not really a place I’d want to be, but still I shook it off and just put myself fully into interview mode. You always have to do that, no matter what else you’re feeling. It’s a little like acting: energy up, smile...the interview must go on!

There was a preliminary interview with someone who worked there already and it just clicked for us. She was delightful and I could see working with her. And she was genuinely enthusiastic about me when her boss walked into the room, telling him what a great interview we’d had so far. I was feeling pretty good about the job at this point. But when the boss walked in, even before the woman spoke so glowingly about me, he glanced at me briefly and in that instant I could see he wasn’t interested. Seriously – his look showed it all.

Now not all bosses are that transparent, but as he looked at me you could see his eyes deaden. Could it be that I’m in my 50s? Or maybe I just reminded him of someone he hated. I’ll never know. Anyway...we shook hands and he sat down across from me. And then he proceeded to give me one of the toughest interviews I’d ever had – more like a grilling! “Exactly how did you perform that analysis?” he asked, narrowing his eyes. Now this was a complex analysis involving lots of proprietary details, so I assumed he meant I should give him the basic steps. But almost with anger in his eyes, he said “I asked EXACTLY how did you do it. Give me details.” OK. So you get the point. This wouldn’t work for either of us. I tried for a bit longer since I always believe in giving things a chance, but we both knew it was over. Mercifully we admitted it after only 30 minutes.

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Just like a blind date, the first few minutes of an interview can tell a lot.

It's a time to make the best impression possible and also watch for cues. Bosses are looking for people who show appropriate enthusiasm and a positive attitude. If you walk in with your head low and don't even look the interviewer in the eye, this is a big turn off from the git go. Sure you're nervous – that's ok – but make an effort to come in looking like someone who at least believes they deserve the job. A firm (not painful) handshake (if the situation permits) and a warm smile as you say hello always helps.

When I interview people, I like them to be as natural as possible.

Not that I'm telling you to take off your shoes and put your feet up on the desk (always a bad idea), but I need to see the real person behind the stiff, nervous interviewee so I'll know if there really is chemistry. By the way...it's ok to say you're a little nervous if that helps you relax. You'll see right away what kind of person you're dealing with. If they smile, that's a good sign. If they are turned off by your honesty, then that might reflect something about the company and whether you'd be comfortable working there. Of course it's not quite that simple, so no matter what the reaction, take a breath, ramp up your attitude, and keep your best interview energy going.

SOME FINAL TIPS FROM ME:

- 1 Before you go into the room, stop, take a few deep breaths, and try your best to relax.
- 2 As some of the experts suggest, if you're nervous about being interviewed, it really does help to practice a LOT with a friend or in a mirror ahead of time. I remember one time when I was asked to work with a woman who was incredibly nervous despite her excellent skills, and after about 3 separate sessions where I gave her some tough interviews and helped her know where she could be a little stronger (including that first impression) she got the job! I was thrilled for her.
- 3 Think of a few things that you've done in other jobs where you succeeded or helped improve the way things are done. If you prepare these ahead of time, you'll have them ready to use at the right moment in the interview.
- 4 Think of your best qualities and worst ones in case you are asked to talk about them. Never really give a "worst" one of course. You can always try "I sometimes am a bit of a perfectionist but I'm learning when to let go (smile)" or "I'm sometimes a little shy about giving my opinion, but I'm getting better at it (smile)" or "A few times I got so caught up in something I was working on my boss had to tell me to go home." (no smile) Well...you get the idea. And if the interviewer presses further for you to come up with something really bad...don't! Just say "I can't think of anything other than what I mentioned." (smile now)
- 5 Come prepared with some good questions that show you know something about the company or have really thought through the job itself and want to know more about what would be required.
- 6 Be present! I just heard Jennifer Hudson say this to Ellen DeGeneres when asked how she seemed to stay so calm at the Oscars. Basically it means stay in the moment, as they say in zen philosophy. Don't start thinking about other stuff during the interview – like what they might ask or what you are or aren't. Just shake off all those other thoughts and from the moment you enter the room, face each moment as it comes.
- 7 Show good energy (look alert and no slouching) and have a positive attitude.
- 8 Really let yourself believe that you deserve the job and can do it well. Most of the jobs I've held are jobs I had never done before. Don't let yourself think that you don't have what it takes even if you don't have all the specific experience. If you have a brain and the determination to dig in and get the job done no matter what it takes, then you deserve to be in the interview.

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- 9 If the interviewer actually says you don't have the exact experience, your answer should somehow convey that there have been other times when you've been in a situation like that and you dug in, learned what you had to, and did the job well. Maybe you even became the expert after that. Be prepared with a specific example!
- 10 If the interview feels like it's going badly, make a note of the cues you are observing and try to adjust. Is the interviewer looking bored? Don't give up. Try to liven things up. Maybe try to fit in some of the really good things about yourself you prepared. It may be a lost cause, but you never know when you can recover a fumble.
- 11 Keep your answers clear and on topic. Look your interviewer in the eye when speaking and try to speak as if you were talking to a friend you like and respect. Just make sure you are talking about what they asked you. And don't go on too long!
- 12 Leave with confidence, a warm firm handshake, and a smile.
- 13 And remember to follow up with a note as the experts suggest.

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Chemistry is not necessarily about personality. You can be shy and still come off as a good employee who cares about producing top quality work. Good work habits and a feeling that you would not only be someone who comes through no matter what the challenge, but also great to work with on a daily basis go a long way in any interview.

But in the end, it's still about the right match. And if it's not there, please remember that does not reflect on your ability for this particular job or any other one. It really is about chemistry.

One last thought: Each interview for a job you don't get is just practice for the right job – one where all the elements are in balance. So when you're ready to start looking, get yourself out there with a solid resume, a great attitude, and your best interview skills – and don't give up until you find the right match for you!