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Winning Work at the Interview: It's All About Chemistry
by Richard N. Pollack, FAIA, FIIDA

In my columns in the past two issues, I wrote about developing great proposals. I made the point that the prime purpose of the proposal is to get you to the interview—and then to win the work at the interview. As a disclaimer, this approach is directed toward team-oriented practices. If your firm is all about the design principal as superhero, it will not work.

Your project team has been established and there is a proposal principal or champion leading the delivery of the proposal. Now, there is a need for an interview principal. Since you've been shortlisted, the team's focus and energy move into higher gear and decisions need to be made about who will be presenting and how to choreograph the interview. A side benefit is that knowledge gained in these areas can be of benefit to other parts of your practice, such as design presentations and public agency meetings, leading to similar successful outcomes.

Just as you create standards for construction documents and design sketches, and have templates for CAD, Word, and email, a similar rigorous framework needs to exist for interviews. When I was building my architecture practice, it was obvious that I was controlling every interview in those early days. That was not the right approach. Because the interview is the time and place to demonstrate the team's personal chemistry, it is inappropriate for the principal to dominate and not allow time for other team members to show how well they connect with each other and the client.

To fix that, I sought out the advice and training we needed from experts outside the office. I then identified an initial group of my staff that would be involved with new client presentations in the future, and set up an education schedule to get all of us trained. Even I was one of the staff members being trained. We had to give mock presentations and have them videotaped for analysis, and no one liked seeing themselves with all their twitches and tics! In the training, we learned how to:

- Be responsive to each other.
- Step in and save a colleague when they were about to drown.
- Not repeat what another team member had already said.
- Stand when presenting to a large client group.
- Not stare at boards or other images out of discomfort.
- Be focused on time and not exceed our interview time limit.
- Make eye contact and scan the group we are talking to—not only answer the person who asked a question.

One key element in the training was the development of a highly effective method of transitioning from one person to another in a seamless and "chemistry-building" manner. That is, not saying "OK, Ken, your turn." The method is called "sign posting," and it allows you to know when it's your turn based on key words or motions by a colleague. With practice, we all became quite proficient. This approach made interview preparation and rehearsals very efficient.

Yes, rehearsals are crucial. When I've taught these presentation tactics through my consulting practice, people still tell me, "We never rehearse for an interview; there is never enough time." My easy response is that you must rehearse, because without full preparation, you will not get the full benefit and therefore will have a lower success/win ratio.

In the preparation for a standardized 20–25 minute presentation, my formal part was only about five minutes, allowing the full team to strongly connect with the client for the majority of the discussion. After we were using this approach for some time, friends at other firms asked if we were getting acting lessons! Our success ratio improved dramatically, allowing us to win more than our fair share of projects. Incorporate these presentation techniques:

- Bring chocolate chip cookies.
- Have fun, smile, and make a joke if appropriate.
- Establish proper seating order for your team.
- Don't use PowerPoint.
- Understand body language, both yours and the client's.
- Use the "sign posting" method to signal between presenters.
- Designate an interview principal—typically the project manager listed in the proposal—who runs the meeting.
- Describe your understanding of the project and ask the client for any additional items they might want you to address.

In the next issue, I'll flesh out the techniques above, plus others, and continue with additional interview information.

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