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The Tombstone Test...



What's Your Answer?

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The Challenge:

One of my favorite columns in the *New York Times* is the "Corner Office" on Page 2 of the *Sunday Business Section*. The author interviews a leading executive (profit and non-profit) from a recognized organization. For consistency from week to week, the questions are generally in the same category, leadership, personal challenges and how to find the right people. In a recent interview with John Donovan, the Chief Technology Officer at AT&T, the question was asked; "What are some questions you ask when you're interviewing job candidates?"

"I always ask questions about what words people would want on their tombstone. So I'll ask, "If your professional colleagues



"It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men (and women) is a corporation with a conscience."
...Henry David Thoreau



"There is only one for of discipline, perfect discipline."
....General Patton



"Without passion man is a mere latent force and possibility, like the flint which awaits the shock of the iron before it can give forth its spark."
...Henri-Frederic Amiel



"The joy of giving is indeed a pleasure, especially when

were going to put three words on your tombstone - I mean literally three - what would those three words be?"

While the purpose of this issue of our newsletter is not about interviewing tips and techniques, I was struck but the profound simplicity of this question as a way to get to understand the soul of a candidate.

So in the spirit of open sharing, I hereby submit my "off the top of my head" answer to the question:

1. Conscientious - by which I mean meticulous, careful, painstaking and attention to detail to get the job done right the first time.
2. Discipline - to have the rigor, focus and commitment to act and behave in accordance with the rules of conduct. Discipline is often missing in the proper execution of strategic plans.
3. Passion - the fervor, zeal, love and compelling emotion for the task at hand and the belief in what you are doing and what you stand for and represent. Passion rules the day.
4. Giving - to generously support and acknowledge in money and/or time those who merit reward. Live generously. (yes, I know I gave 4 answers)

"And then the follow-up question is always the one question that surprises people. I will then ask, instead of three, what's the one word?"

Making a forced choice is always a difficult decision, but if I had to pick only one word, it would be a word that does not appear in the litany about, because this word transcends in my case all four. The word is "mensch" which literally means a person or man and represents a moral ideal for all people, men and women alike. It means being sensitive to other people's needs and seeking out ways to help them. It is acquired by living close to family and extending one's sense of obligation beyond family to the broader community. In the Jewish culture of Eastern Europe, where the term arose, to call someone a mensch was the highest honor that could be given.

Just Try It:

What is your answer to the two questions? Whether you are looking to change jobs or not, the exercise is worth considering. And please don't hesitate to share your thought on the topic. Remember, there is no right answer.

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you get rid of something you
don't want."
...Frank Butler