

Understanding the Power of First Impressions

It's commonly understood that a good first impression makes a big difference to job interviews, business meetings and personal relationships. Our newspapers, blogs, magazines and social media feeds are littered with first impression tips, pitfalls and advice – much of which actually boils down to the basic elements of common sense, courtesy and politeness.

But can we really recognize excellence, or understand character, on first impression? Recent advances in cognitive science suggest that we may be far less skilled in this area than we believe, and this throws up an interesting range of challenges and opportunities for candidates and employers.

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Insight for Candidates

Most people instinctively place significant emphasis on the first impression, and this is particularly true in job interviews. As a candidate, a single mistake on this front can be devastating. Like it or not, first impressions are a powerful part of what it is to be human – and they definitely have a lasting impact.

In the world of interim management and executive search, we meet hundreds of people a year. In our experience, candidates make a solid first impression when they radiate either the X Factor or gravitas. Quite often, a strong first impression involves a mix of the two elements.

The X Factor

The X Factor is a mysterious quality. Many skaters can skate with the speed of Wayne Gretzky, and many are just as accurate shooting at goal, yet Gretzky has always been head and shoulders above the competition. Why? He possesses the X Factor. Similarly, a lot of people can hit a 19-foot jumper from the elbow, and most NBA players can dunk a basketball, yet Michael Jordan is different. He has the X Factor.

Few of us understand exactly what the X Factor is, but we all know that sometimes a talent so special comes along that entire companies, sports franchises, and industries are transformed. Thus, if a candidate displays the X Factor on first impression, he or she will be placed in an advantaged position to get the job.

Gravitas

Gravitas is also an elusive quality to define. It's a powerful attribute that can, in the immortal phraseology of Jerry Maguire, “have them at hello.” Commonly understood as a seriousness of purpose and stability of mind, gravitas makes people feel confident about the future.

In the 2000 American presidential election, it was said that Al Gore did not have the necessary gravitas. This was seen as enough of a problem that the Gore campaign hired consultants to try to artificially generate this rare quality. Equally, a company leader with significant gravitas can inject much needed stability into a struggling or growing firm, or inspire the same organization to follow a completely new direction.

The Center for Talent Innovation states that collectively, gravitas, communication and appearance define so-called executive presence. In fact, 268 executive level respondents to the center's Executive Presence research project identified gravitas as the most important quality of the three. The same project articulated the six key elements of gravitas. Candidates wondering about the importance of a good first impression would do well to pay attention to this list:

1. **Confidence** – the belief in oneself and one's capabilities
2. **Decisiveness** – the ability to be commanding and resolute, often in a crucial moment
3. **Integrity** – adherence to moral and ethical principles
4. **Emotional intelligence** – skill in perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions and feelings
5. **Reputation** – the publicly held estimation of one's character
6. **Vision** – the ability to anticipate a path into the future

Beware the halo effect

Clearly, candidates should do everything in their power to create a first impression that aligns with the insights articulated above.

First impressions become tricky, however, from the potential employer's perspective. In this context, important questions must be addressed. Can interviewers recognize greatness on first impression? Are hiring managers truly able to perceive gravitas and the X Factor in candidates in the first moments they meet them?

Cognitive scientists, such as Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, tell us we are likely to make quick judgments based on little relevant information. Often, our instincts let us down. Consequently, we easily attribute gravitas and the X Factor when they aren't there.

Cognitive science supports this assertion. In his seminal book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman calls this phenomenon the halo effect – one of many innate internal biases that apply to all humans. The halo effect says that we have a strong tendency to base our judgements of a person's character and specific abilities on our overall impressions of them. Kahneman explains that we use our emotional responses to the individual to fill in the gaps created by a lack of evidence.

The bottom line is simple: first impressions count, and instinct plays a role, but be sure to assess a candidate according to a clear set of criteria, removing biases through a structured interview approach.

Ian Brenner is a Partner with the Interim Management & Executive Search practice. Ian can be reached at 416.496.3666 or ibrenner@farberfinancial.com

