

An Interview Gone Bad

Over the course of my career, I have had the opportunity to be interviewed by many people and to interview candidates looking for a job. Some candidates I've interviewed did their homework and researched the company prior to meeting with me while others had done nothing more than answer an employment ad. For those who knew nothing about the company and in some cases even little about the position they were applying for, well let's just say, their interview ended quickly. Those who came prepared and showed interest in the job are those that had a better chance of being one of the top 3 candidates.

Whether you are the one interviewing or the one being interviewed for a job or even a volunteer position, it is important to be prepared. Volunteers in charitable organizations are so valuable to our communities. Charitable organizations cannot fund all the positions necessary to keep the organization running so they must rely on volunteers to help them out, however, having a volunteer with the passion, desire and skills to help make the charity a success is essential. Many do not have enough people to help out with all the monetary and project needs, so when someone comes knocking at their door asking to learn more about their organization, their current volunteer openings and how they might be able to fit in and help out; it would be in their best interest to listen, give the potential volunteer their undivided attention and make a good first impression. Remember, we only have one chance to make a first impression so it's up to you whether that first impression is a positive one or a negative one. This holds true for the interviewer and the interviewee.

I was recently researching non- profit organizations in the Nashville area where I could volunteer my time and talent to help other women. I was specifically looking for programs that assist women with reaching their career goals and helping them become self sufficient. These women may be single parents with little or no education, living in the projects, or just don't know where to turn for help on making their lives better for themselves and their children. They may have grown up in or still live in an abusive home and want to find a way out and better themselves. Perhaps they never learned to socialize acceptably or have the self esteem or self confidence to make changes in their lives and need someone to encourage

them along the way and are looking for support and advice on what steps to take to improve their quality of life.

I was very excited because I found a place that seemed to fit most of the criteria I was looking for. I emailed them after researching their organization and was very excited to have the chance to interview with them as a volunteer mentor to women. I was impressed when they promptly responded to my inquiry. We exchanged a few emails and set up a time for me to come in and interview. Let's call the co-founder of this charity, Carolyn. I gave her a few days and times that I was available to meet toward the end of the day as I was trying to fit it in with my work schedule. I also mentioned that if those times did not work for any reason, to let me know what would be best and I'd try to accommodate her schedule. She informed me the later times (4 or 5pm) would not work for her but 1pm would. Well, my first thought was she should be accommodating my schedule as a potential volunteer, but after all I did leave it open for other times so no big deal.

I arrived on time to meet with Carolyn and the reception area was very crowded with bags of toys which I had to step over to make it through the room. Okay, no big deal because it's Christmas time and they obviously have some sort of program going on. But at the same time, why wouldn't someone put them aside so there's at least a path to walk through or why wouldn't she have moved them for me so I could walk through to meet with her? After walking over the toys in heels and work clothes to meet her, she received a phone call and proceeded to answer it. She talked to the caller, who by the sound of the conversation was one of the mother's in the program. I thought initially how rude it was of her to pick up the phone, but after realizing it was a mother, she probably needed something more important than me, so I was okay with that.

We walked to the conference room where we both sat down and she began telling me about the organization, how it got started, the challenges they faced and their successes. I asked her about the mentoring program and how it works, if they were in need of mentors, what their budget is for the year and how they get their donations; fundraisers, grants or through other means. So you can see when interviewing, whether it's for a volunteer position or a paid position, both parties should be asking questions and getting to know one another and the company/organization.

We were in the conference room for approximately 50 minutes and although I learned about the program, Carolyn had a blackberry as well as a phone sitting on the table in front of her. During our conversation and interview, she answered 4 text messages and 2 phone calls all of which were not highly important. I know they were not urgent because she told me about each conversation, not to mention I heard her side of the conversation while waiting for her to continue ours. I was shocked that this type of behavior was going on while I was with her. I also sit on the board of directors for a non-profit organization called Nashville RBI (reviving baseball in the inner city) so I understand how difficult it can be to get committed volunteers and keep them over a long period of time. So when someone is inquiring about a volunteer position, you should be appreciative of that. Give them your undivided attention; ask them questions about why they want to volunteer so you can discover their interests and see where they might fit in the roles you have available. Everyone's time is valuable regardless of whether you have a job to go back to, a child in day care or just going home. To insinuate that my time was not valuable by freely wasting it while she answered phones and text messages, was appalling and I was not impressed with Carolyn. Ironically, during our meeting, she explained that they teach the importance of social skills and interviewing techniques. I hope her example of both is not what is taught to these women otherwise, they will have a difficult time throughout their career path.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse there was a knock at the door. A gentleman stood at the doorway and she said "Oh, that's my husband" (her husband the co-founder). I sat looking at him waiting for him to introduce himself to me or for Carolyn to inform him I was seeking a volunteer position, you know, for him to make a good first impression. Well, that never happened. They discussed their lunch plans and she said that she would be with him shortly. Again, I was amazed and disappointed. We continued to talk for a few more minutes but I knew she was waiting for her lunch date so I began to wind down the conversation by telling her why I was interested in helping women advance in their career and become self sufficient. Even though I was there for about 50 minutes, she never once asked me why I was interested in the organization. I tried to explain what my background was and how I felt I could help women and why I would be a good mentor. She was obviously more concerned about taking phone calls and making lunch dates then wondering if I would be a good volunteer or not and didn't care at all if she was wasting my time. It was very apparent my time was not seen as valuable to her.

Then she started talking about their 2009 schedule, got up, and walked over to a nearby copier. I thought she was probably going to give me a copy of their curriculum or their schedule, but she sat back down at the table, proceeded to fold it in half and set her blackberry and phone on top of the piece of paper. She then explained to me that her reminder on her phone had just gone off reminding her to grab that piece of paper and work on that particular project so she needed to do it before she forgot. Again, I was amazed by such unprofessional behavior. I thanked her for telling me about the organization and let her know I'd be in touch.

I was so disappointed with this "co-founder," especially since the focus of this non-profit was on helping single mothers who are uneducated, have low self esteem, poor social skills and lost on what to do and where to turn for help. I would have thought her own actions would have shown good interviewing skills, social skills and appreciation for volunteers, but I was so wrong. I cannot emphasize the importance of paying attention to your surroundings and to the details. Had Carolyn paid attention to her own behavior and made a conscious effort to show me that my time was valuable and to show proper etiquette and social skills herself, I would have walked away excited about the chance to help change a woman's life. That was not the case, so I will continue my search for another non-profit that shows professionalism, caring and consideration for their women and their volunteers.