

Career Rx

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Staying on Message

Many people become frustrated with politicians because they tend to focus on the same two or three talking points and never seem to communicate the complexity involved in an issue. Focusing on talking points is different from staying on message. Contemporary speech makers rarely reflect on the lessons learned from experience or history. Historically, speakers discussed their policy alternatives, after rigorous debates that lead them to their ultimate choice. This allowed the public to understand their reasoning in getting to their final proposal. It provides us with an understanding of what knowledge and influences or biases, not necessarily negative, are filtered into their decision making on an issue. Today, politicians tend to refer to only mistakes made by their opponent with no true debate. This is speakers who "talk past each other" never addressing the principal premises.

Let's explore the difference between staying on message and talking points. When you are communicating during an interview, it is important to stay on message. Preparing for an interview involves crafting your message. What message do you want to share with the hiring manager? The messages that you are trying to communicate are most often your knowledge, your intuition, your drive and your character. The medium through which these messages are delivered can be woven in a story - the way you address a challenge, the compassion you show for others or your unwillingness to speak ill of others. The tangible accomplishments are your talking points that re-enforce your message. Essentially the message is who you are as a person of character. What are you know for, your reputation, your presence.

To communicate these messages you need to understand what they are. When the messages you communicate are part of your core values, it is natural to speak and behave accordingly. When you are trying to be someone you are not, or someone you put on for an occasion, it comes across as disingenuous. If the message you are trying to convey is difficult, then take some time to reflect on why. The message should consist of communicating the traits that are embodied in what you have done and who you would most like to be in the future. If who you are in the past does not match who you would like to be in the future, change. Don't pretend to be someone you're not, go out and actually work on becoming that person. This may not take overnight, but if you are committed to being that person and are willing to make the changes to see the world differently, it will show in what you say and how you say it.

"Early in life I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose the former and have seen no reason to change." Frank Lloyd Wright

This does not work for golf. If you want to be a PGA golfer, changing your outlook may not make up for a deficit of skill and years of practice. But you can become a better listener, more thoughtful, more sensitive to others, more focused or a better team player. In order for character traits to become part of your character, you have to believe them, work at them and live the values for which you aspire.

When answering questions during an interview, it is important to allow these values to surface. If you are asked to describe a difficult situation, pick one where you feel that you were able to live up to your best character traits, even if the situation did not go as planned. Good communicators are successful when they understand their audience's expectations, style and implore appropriate strategies. They may communicate that they do not fully understand an issue but leave an impression that they will approach a solution in a manner that is consistent with their values.

Some see the question of why you left your last job as an invitation to become cynical or vindictive. Come to terms with those issues in the past where you feel you were not treated fairly, come to an understanding of what you could have done differently, and take responsibility for your own actions. When you answer the question, be positive about the people that you worked with and what you

learned from the experience. The question about how you handled a difficult situation or managed a team should be treated with the same magnanimity.

The exact values that a prospective employer may be looking for can vary. You can tailor your message to those aspects of your character that respond to the culture at hand. You do not want to change your basic values to match a position as this will not serve you well. If one of your basic values is family, you may not want to consider a job that includes extensive long term travel. This will require you to consistently struggle with your value proposition. Interviewing and being true to your values and needs is important for a successful landing – for both you and the hiring company.

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Lisa's extensive human resources and coaching experience with Fortune 500 companies, small enterprises, medium-sized firms, and non-profit organizations gives her the unique ability to bring together wide-ranging perspectives on career transitions, executive and leadership development. She has consulted with a wide variety of sectors — consumer goods, financial services, healthcare, media and entertainment, pharmaceutical and life sciences, publishing, professional services, technology, and non-profit. Lisa has a passion for motivational speaking, conducts career forums, and provides executive and career coaching.

Lisa's greatest strength is that she enables individuals and organizations to see themselves in new ways, freeing them to achieve their goals. Lisa can be reached at Lisa@ChenofskySinger.com.