



THE BEST GIFT OF ALL

Most days my colleagues and I start and end our days talking with candidates about their careers and, indirectly, their lives. Of late, our days have been filled with a mix of conversations with candidates who either have been hit with layoffs, are worried about it or are otherwise looking to make a career move. Inevitably, the economy is part of our daily dialogue but so are holiday plans and lately the anxiety and uncertainty seems to have hit hard for many of our candidates.

A good recruiter is part career coach, part cheerleader, part parent and often just a good listener. Our role is to help bring candidates to their next opportunity and to build businesses by bringing the best candidates to our clients. But, our role is at its heart, about relationships. Sometimes that means giving a candidate hope when the market seems brutally harsh. And, other times, it means giving a candidate a dash of reality when his or her expectations are misaligned.

I recently spoke to a candidate who was worrying about what was happening in her firm. She referred to it as a “disaster” and said she simply couldn’t afford to take a pay cut. We talked about a variety of non-traditional roles she could transition to outside of the industry, but she said all of them were unacceptable. We talked about a number of ways she could change both her outlook and her career path. She insisted that there wasn’t anything other than her current job that she could do since she had been in the industry for more than a dozen years and it was all she knew. I told her this story.

There once was a man who received as a gift a beautiful horse. He was bragging in town about how lucky he was to have received such a fine gift. A wise man in the town replied “Perhaps.” The man shrugged his shoulders and assumed the wise man was jealous of his good luck. Weeks later, the horse pinned his only son against the fence and his son’s injuries were so severe the young man lost his leg. The man complained to all who he met of his terrible luck and how awful it was that he had been cursed with this horse who had injured his son. The wise man replied “Perhaps.” The man raged at the wise man, “Can’t you see how awful it is, that my son was hurt? His life is ruined!” The following month, a war broke out and all the young men were conscripted for the war, except the man’s son, who was spared because of his disability and the man declared it a miracle that his son’s life was saved. To which (you guessed it) the wise man replied “Perhaps.”

The moral of the story is, of course, that how we view the circumstances of our life depends upon our perspective.

I don’t mean to make light of the anxieties and troubles that you may be facing right now.

You may have lost your job in this maelstrom of financial crisis we are in. You may very well have gotten caught up in the leverage frenzy and are worried about having to downsize your house or take your kids from private school. It could also seem as though you'll never be able to make the next move in your career that you've been hoping for and you may have been dearly counting on a raise or big bonus this year. It may be that you're starting to think you'll have to transition to doing something outside of financial services and worrying that it will take you "off track" and that your career will never recover. I hear you, the uncertainty seems unbearable, but it can also be what helps each of us to regain perspective surrounding our work and its place in our life.

It bears a little repeating at this time of year that money and our careers aren't supposed to be the most meaningful part of our lives. It's easy to be fooled into thinking that our compensation, title, even our work, is critically important to our happiness or even our very lives. Yes, we need to be able to sustain ourselves and our families. For most of us in this industry, our compensation far exceeds that basic number (and is tens or hundreds of multiples of what most American families earn). For many in this industry, we confuse our self worth with how much we are paid. I have a couple of thoughts for you about what might be the best gift to yourself this year - perspective.

Last week, I was on the subway and sat next to a young woman who was having considerable trouble holding a tissue to wipe her nose. When I looked closer, I realized that her hands were terribly disfigured, perhaps with arthritis, and she was unable to do something as simple as hold the tissue to her face when she was suffering from a common winter cold. What would you need to be paid to suffer with a crippling illness or to lose the easy use of your limbs? Each day that you are able to go about your life pain and injury free, remember that money isn't everything.

Earlier this month, I heard a report on the news about how the food bank in the small town I live in was stretched to the brink and was pleading for food donations to help feed the hundreds of my rural community neighbors who were struggling just to keep food on the table as families were hit by layoffs in the local industry. How much money do you really need to earn to make sure you and your children are able to eat? Each time you sit down to dinner, remember that there are millions of families in this country right now who are sending children to bed without a full belly because they simply can't afford to feed them.

A client and I were sharing a tender discussion about his very ill mother and how he wasn't sure whether she would live to celebrate Christmas this year, and how it was her very favorite holiday so he dearly hoped to have this one last time with her. Tonight, I hope you will call your mother, father, siblings, spouse – whoever you hold dear – and remember with them the tender moments of your shared lives together. It won't be a huge bonus or an expensive trinket that you will miss when someone close to you moves on to their rest.

A candidate who lost his job several months ago when one of the bulge bracket banks failed has recently sublet his apartment in NYC and gone to coach basketball at an inner city school in the city where he grew up. He's basically breaking even since he's renting a much less expensive apartment and doing something he loves. He recently told me that he hasn't been this happy since he was 10 years old! What would you give to be as happy as you were when you were 10 years old?

My wish for you this holiday season is that you will find the peace of mind that comes from realizing that you are worth much more than just the number on your paycheck and that you will find other ways in this year ahead to create value in your life and the lives of those around you. Take this time of economic crisis and use it to retrench your view of your work and your role in the world. We're here to help you find your way and your perspective.

Happy Holidays,
Denise