



The Value of Truth and Respect

Truth and respect are the cornerstones of all enduring relationships whether with one's spouse, family, friends, or professional contacts. Honest communication and mutual feelings of esteem are universally accepted values.

After all, who wants their significant other to lie to them about anything, really? Who needs friends who repeatedly ask for favors and when you need them, they cannot seem to find the time to return your call? Who would tolerate friends or colleagues that constantly change scheduled meetings and expect you to continually adjust your schedule to meet their needs? Who wants business relationships where there is a lack of transparency and professional courtesy?

Unfortunately, "truthiness" and disrespect seem to have become more commonplace and almost acceptable behaviors. In the past year, some candidates have behaved as if truth and respect are optional parts of how one conducts life and business. It is reasonable to assume that one who chases a career opportunity with apparent enthusiasm, engages in multiple rounds of interviews, provides numerous references to be checked, outlines compensation expectations and provides positive feedback to the client and recruiter, is in good faith anticipating receiving and accepting an offer which he or she would accept. To do otherwise, raises concerns about one's honesty or integrity. Sometimes, a candidate elects to decline an offer to accept another opportunity, which is understandable. What seems confusing, lately, is when a candidate declines an offer for nothing at all. It makes the parties involved question the motives of the candidate moving through the process. One wonders what could be the deciding factor so late in a process.

My general advice to candidates is to undertake continual self reflection throughout the interview process. If you come to the conclusion somewhere in the search that you are really not interested in the opportunity, admit it. Don't continue the process, provide references, and go to dinner with the client just to receive an offer that you know you are likely to decline. Be honest with yourself, be honest with the recruiter and be honest with the hiring firm. There is no value in collecting offers, it only misuses everyone's time. Rejected offers are not collectors' items or notches on your belt, they create blemishes on your credibility.

If you do want to chase an opportunity to the offer stage because you are truly interested in working with that firm, then do so. If you decide, once you have received the offer that you will have to decline it, and then do so promptly and professionally. Having been a recruiter for over twenty years, I have had my fair share of client offers turned down because of competing offers and while it is disappointing, I accept it as part of our business. This is not a saga of sour grapes; it is sage advice for your career. Memories are long in this industry and the stench of burned bridges will linger on your professional coat for longer than you can imagine.

There is a protocol to declining an offer. It does not include letting a deadline lapse with no response. It is unacceptable to act as if you have “forgotten there was a deadline”. Every offer deserves a timely and definitive response – accepting or declining it. These offers are key elements of relationships and it is NEVER acceptable to simply send the client or recruiter an email or leave a voicemail declining an offer. Such actions are not only passive aggressive, they are rude and unprofessional. You owe it to yourself and to the other participants in the interview process to behave like a professional in handling the process – all the way through – and that includes how you accept or graciously decline an offer or withdraw from an interview process.

In 1992, I represented an Analyst who worked at Kidder Peabody who declined an offer with a Drexel spin-off. He handled the situation with maturity, respect and aplomb that I remember to this day. He called me prior to the deadline to extend me the courtesy to let me know that he would be calling my client to decline the offer. He explained he had received a more competitive offer and it was a better fit for him. He thanked me for the effort I put forth on his behalf, acknowledged that it was a tough decision and that he was grateful for my insight. Here is the important part; he concluded that he anticipated being in the business for many years and would hope to work with me again.

In the following years, he referred to me a number of outstanding candidates; one of whom we placed with another client. When he was promoted into a hiring capacity, he engaged our firm and we have this firm as a client today. When it came time for him to look for another opportunity a couple of years ago, he turned to me for assistance with his resume. Given the mutual respect that defined our relationship, I put forth considerable time and effort to make his resume look as professional as possible and to help promote his talents to client firms. He has always been truthful and respectful and we remain collaborative colleagues after almost twenty years.

Truth, as uncomfortable as it is at times, is always preferable to a lie. Anything less than the truth is, in fact, a lie. As Shakespeare said, “This above all: to thine own self be true. And it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” When you are truthful you will be respected and that respect will always reap untold rewards. It is a rare person who forgets when someone has told them the truth, or valued his or her effort and was given sincere and honest appreciation. Almost always, they will find a way, consciously or unconsciously, to return the favor, and in the rare circumstance when they do not, you have the honor of having conducted your life with integrity, and that is priceless.

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