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“Morning, Ralph.” “Morning, Sam.”

Career Development



By the time this column is published, Hurricane Irma will have faded from memory for most of us, but it's certainly top-of-mind in my house right now. We're far from the eye of the storm here in Columbia, South Carolina, but our schools, government offices, and many businesses are closed, and the shelves were cleared of all bottled water days ago. If things do take a turn for the worse, I'll be brushing my teeth, and maybe brewing coffee, with San Pellegrino, while my spouse nobly refrains from reminding me that I could've avoided that outcome by heeding the warnings more promptly.

In the midst of this morning's shopping frenzy, with its last-minute crowds, wind, and rain, I missed a call from a company a couple of states away that wants to interview me for a position in their legal department. I was sad to miss the call, but delighted to receive it. A few conversations later, I received a plane ticket and an agenda for a day of interviews with the company's legal and compliance teams.

Those of you who are or recently have been searching for a new role know that submitting a résumé and cover letter demonstrating that you're highly qualified for the position is often met with only an automated acknowledgement of receipt or, just as often, no response at all. Good in-house jobs attract hordes of well-qualified applicants, and employers struggle to turn dozens (or hundreds) of them into a manageable handful of people to interview. ATS (applicant tracking system) vendors promise advanced tools to separate the great from the merely good, but they have yet to negate the value of the applicant having a personal contact or reference inside the organization. In my case, I'm

convinced that I owe the initial phone screening, and now interview, to a colleague I can appropriately describe as a former adversary.

My relationship with that lawyer, and with her law partner at the time we first met, reminded me of the US series of Looney Tunes shorts featuring Ralph E. Wolf¹ and Sam Sheepdog² in which the two adversaries go hammer and tongs at their respective tasks of stealing from or guarding over a flock of sheep — with all the comedic violence and gratuitous use of ACME products indicative of the era, only to stop abruptly when the whistle blows and settle down to exchange pleasantries over a shared thermos of coffee. We were on opposite sides of an enforcement issue: The company I worked for contracted with the government to investigate the companies they represented. I knew it was going to be a long week when I arrived to find a voicemail from either of them on my phone. They epitomized zealous representation, and the investigators in my office groaned at any mention of their names.

1 You always thought it was Wile E. Coyote, didn't you? I sure did, but Wikipedia disabused me of that notion.

2 If you have no idea what I'm talking about here, we may have a generational and/or media gap to bridge; go Google "sheepdog and coyote cartoon" and watch the first video that comes up. I'll wait...

Still, we managed to keep it cordial. We never let the fact that we couldn't reach agreement on certain fundamental issues, despite revisiting those issues over and over again with their many clients, cross into personal animosity or disrespect. When the company I worked for ceased operations this past spring, I didn't hesitate to include them with all the other folks in my email address book that I told about my upcoming departure, and I received kind and thoughtful responses from both. Likewise, when I saw the many connections between this lawyer and the employer's leadership on LinkedIn, I didn't hesitate to tell her I was applying, and to ask her to put in a good word. The first person I heard from at the company started by saying positive things about my application, but mentioned her name and the contact received in the same sentence.

The importance of building and maintaining a healthy career network has been addressed countless times. What's said a little less often is that our networks are basically everybody we know, whether or not we connect with them on social media. Perhaps our collective enthusiasm for networks, connecting, and cultivating one's personal brand should broaden to acknowledge and embrace their collective foundation, which is reputation.

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