

The Importance of Self Image in the Business World

Insight from Personal Potential Job Advancement Experience

By: R. Renée Bembry

What happened when two women, one with more experience, the other with more confidence applied for like employment opportunities.

Self-Image entails everything about us from appearance, to mannerisms, to conduct, to our level of education, and our lifetime accomplishments. Wherever we go our self-images lead the way. As soon as others see us or hear us; whether in a park or a school or a movie theater, they begin to evaluate us based on images we present to them such as the way we dress, comb our hair, move across a room, the way we stand, the sound of our voices, our language usage, and topics of discussion. In that we respond to one another based on perceptions our images display, the images we present to others will likely determine or guide the manner in which others interact with us. These images or self-images are important in the business world because utilizing them to our advantage can help us to get ahead.

A few of the most important self-image attributes we should pay close attention to are (1) advancing ourselves academically, (2) communicating our ideas and getting along with others – especially in regard to working as team-members, and (3) perhaps the most important aspect of self-image – our appearance.

Studies have shown that appearance plays such a strong role in

the way others perceive us that our assessment “window of opportunity” to make a good impression can be as much as sixty seconds and as little as one half a second. Either way, the time-frame we have to make a memorable “first impression” is very minimal.

In order to encourage others to view us in the lights of our choices, we must first view ourselves in these lights. If we want to become scientists we must think, act and look like scientists. If we want to become dancers we must think, act, look, and “feel” like dancers. Likewise, if we want to become executives or otherwise work in white-collar jobs, we must think, act, and look like white-collar workers. If we don’t think, act, or look as though we belong in the fields we are pursuing, others won’t see us in those lights. Failing to represent even one of the traits necessary to move along in the business world can be to our detriment. This is where the personal portion of this insight becomes enlightening.

Years ago I witnessed a former coworker with a low self-perception blow a chance to get ahead after two like-opportunities for advancement opened in the field in which we worked. We decided to put in for the jobs believing we’d be shoe-ins since we were working in the hiring department.

At first, all seemed to go as planned. Our applications made it through the screening process. We were received calls for interviews. We attended the interviews that called for applicants to sit across from a panel of Department Heads for questioning.

As with any employment interview – the Department Heads asked “Tell me about yourself and why you’re the right person for this job” questions; and as with any interview, when I was the person in the “hot-seat”, I responded to employment questions the way I always do under “sell myself” conditions – with elaborate responses and asking questions of my own – including – what were they going to do for my “exquisite” services.

I remember having a great feeling about my performance once the interview had ended. I recall feeling more than confident the panel had been impressed with me. I also recall feeling shattered from the surprise and disappointment that overcame me when I learned my coworker had undergone a completely different experience.

She told me that she'd bombed the interview. "What do you mean?" I'd asked in disbelief. Then she proceeded to fill me in on how nervous she'd been. How she couldn't answer any questions correctly – said all the wrong things.

As she went on with her story, my mind drifted to the fact that "we" were supposed to get those two jobs. "We" were supposed to work together – not "me" and "somebody else". What my mind got stuck on, however, was how could she bomb the interview? She'd been working in the field for a number of years – many more years than I had. There had only been a few minor job-related questions asked by the panel – and they had been general – and most of all, I'd seen her in communications with personnel on all levels of the job. She'd never been nervous. In fact, she hadn't an unconfident bone in her body as far as I'd been aware of. Or had she?

That's when it hit me... Throughout the time I'd known her, she'd often told me of things about "myself" – positive things about me – and in the same breath told me contrasting things about herself "negative things". I'd follow up with her and she shouldn't talk that way about herself – putting herself down like that – that she was a highly intelligent and knowledgeable person. She'd just laugh and before I could turn around twice she'd belittle herself again.

A few days after the interviews, my fears of her not getting one of the jobs were realized when I received a call offering me a position but she didn't. Someone else took the other spot. This was totally unbelievable to me, because like I said, she'd been working in the field for years longer than I

had. In fact, it would be fair to say that I viewed her as a mentor – I mean she had a “wealth of knowledge” and she loved sharing it with me. The fact was, as far as self-image had been concerned, she had the “education” part down pat.

The more I thought about how this could've happened, the more I began to realize the fact that *I would be moving up but she wouldn't – despite her knowledge – because she had a “low perception of herself” and I had a “high perception of myself”*. Self-image had allowed me to succeed where she had failed despite the knowledge-based assets she could've given the company.

So there you have it. My former coworker's self-image did not, in its entirety, match who she really was. Her lack of seeing who she was – of appreciating the potential she had – interfered with her ability to move up the ladder. In time, it became evident to me that each time she'd praised me and criticized herself – negatively – she'd been denying her own self-worth. It became clear to me that my efforts to get her to stop putting herself down had probably been a little too late for her because she had been belittling herself for as long as I'd known her.

Upon further analysis of the situation, I concluded that a major reason she hadn't been hired was that the positions we sought required frequent contact with multi-leveled employees – both within and outside the firm. During the interview process, the coworker had given the impression that she'd be incapable of dealing with workers in this regard. As I said, however, I'd spent many a times with her when she'd done exactly that. The interview panel however hadn't seen her in that capacity; and during her interview, what they saw was her inability to deal with all levels of workers because she was unable to deal with them. She'd presented herself as someone who was nervous and disorganized with her thoughts. Her low self-image had prevented her from “acting” the part they'd expected of her.

At this point, I must force myself to disclose a few details I'd been trying to avoid. However, in order to be helpful to others, I suppose I must reveal them. While the coworker was telling me about how she'd bombed the interview, we were sitting across from one another. I was sort of staring at the black mascara that had dotted her eye-shadow and how her eyeliner wasn't as straight as it could have been. This wasn't too long after the interviews had occurred so I was pretty certain her makeup had looked about the same way while she was being scrutinized by a panel of men. Not that it would have made a lot of difference if it had been women scrutinizing her – I don't know. What I do know however is that one's facial appearance is a portion of one's image; and that women need an extra edge to survive the workplace – if they want to advance – in any firm dominated by men.

In addition to the makeup thing – the coworker's clothes were outdated. I mean they were clean and pressed and all. But in my opinion, they were not “dress for success” oriented. They were more like Sunday dinner out. Considering the potential for advancement the positions we'd applied for were offering us – in a multimillion dollar industry – her clothes should've said things like: “I'm a business person at heart. I'm in control of myself. This job will be a piece of cake. Or even – hire me. I have good taste!”

Whereas my coworker had the education portion of self-image under control, she faltered in the areas of acting and looking like she belonged in the position for which she aspired. However, all was not lost, the coworker went on to improve in the areas she'd been weak in and eventually was hired in a like position that came up a couple of years later. Yes. It was “years” later. However, the point is self-image can be altered; and she'd altered hers.

Here are a few ways one can improve their self-image:

Looks: Learn to dress in a way that's the norm in your place

of employment. If you're seeking a job and don't know what others in the firm are wearing, wear clothes that are in between casual and dressy; at least until after you're hired and can evaluate your future coworkers appearances and dress codes. If you want to be taken seriously, not just as someone trying to pay the rent, stay away from colors and patterns that are excessively loud or noisy. Males keep your pants pulled up. Females go easy on cleavage exposure.

Women – if you wear makeup use it conservatively and make sure to freshen it up at least once during the workday if necessary. Keep your hair groomed.

Men – don't forget to keep those whiskers either shaved or neat and keep your hair groomed.

Knowledge: As with the dilemma my coworker had – impressions can be deceiving. This goes for knowledge-based impressions as well. When trying to fit-in with business professionals, don't try to get in on discussions involving topics you know little about. Let's face it – no one knows everything. You'll maintain a more favorable impression if you don't say anything than you will if you say something stupid. Remember, your image is at stake. If you say something stupid you may be ready to kick yourself but the kicking yourself attitude is bad for your self-image.

If a subject arises that you don't know about let those who know the subject discuss it. Later on after work, take a few minutes to research, and read about said subject so that if it surfaces again you'll be ready with your input.

Stay on top of what's happening in society. Read books and newspapers and watch the news. This will increase your chances of participating in office conversations the first time they surface.

Communication: If communicating – especially with high-level employees – is a problem take a communications class. Get to

know your boss and as many management figures as you can. Interacting with them now can be helpful later if you find yourself having to “tell them why they should promote you”.

If taking a class isn't your cup of tea, there are a lot of self-help books available in libraries and bookstores that can assist with improving one's self-image. Online info could be invaluable as well.

Prior to going on interviews, practice answering questions you think may be asked of you. The fact that the actual questions asked of you will probably differ from the ones you concoct won't be nearly as important as the fact that practicing will get you in the question and answer mode.

Another way to improve your self-image is to tell yourself something positive every single day; and like that hair care products slogan goes... “You're worth it!”