

WHAT SIGNALS ARE YOU GIVING?

By Marilyn Lustgarten

When I was old enough to learn how to drive, I asked my Dad for lessons. The first thing he did was to buy me the book *"Defensive Driving."* He told me I had to read it, (and wouldn't let me behind the wheel until I did) but all I really needed to know about driving defensively, he said, boiled down to one thing: *"Just because a woman has her blinker on, doesn't mean she's going to turn!"* My Dad's advice about driving taught me two important lessons that I've found apply to just about everything:

1. **Pay close attention** to what others are doing and *not* doing - things may not always be obvious or what they seem to be.
2. **Use that information to control what you can** - your own decisions.

These lessons especially apply to business and the signals an organization sends about what is important and valued in its culture. If people are paying attention (and most people are) they are getting big hints from what is said and what is actually done. Mixed messages are dangerous if the organization is trying to attract and retain the talent it needs to thrive.

Red Flags

What every company should know and care about is that savvy prospective employees are doing their homework to evaluate whether they'd be a good fit before sending a resume. What they're looking for is evidence of a consistent message that resonates with their own values, as well as clues about the culture and what it might be like to work there. Red flags get raised when research and experience hints of conflicting messages. Here are a few examples:

Company website: Company proudly touts its commitment to diversity and promotional opportunities on the *Careers* page while the bios of the homogenous-looking leadership team shown on the *About Us* page indicates most of them recently came from other companies.

Financials: Annual reports are available to perspective investors, however business and financial information is not routinely and openly shared with employees.

Advertising and other marketing materials: Words and tone of messages to prospective customers are high-energy and creative conflicting with information from former employees who said they left because of a lack of challenging work and were discouraged from thinking "outside the box."

Media: Company appears on a list of top performing organizations and is at the same time involved in lawsuits for ethical improprieties and multiple EEOC charges.

Selection process: Applicants are told that the company does everything it can to ensure they hire only the best-suited candidates, yet assessments and background checks aren't part of the hiring process.

Other hints: Sources such as an applicant's own customer experience, the company's community affiliations, philanthropic and environmental record and stock value projections can positively or negatively impact a prospective employee's image of the organization.

Avoiding Disaster

Let's face it, during the "attraction and courting phase" everybody is trying to look their best. Neither a prospective employer nor a candidate can afford to send the wrong signals that could result in a regrettable mismatch. A friend recently told me he had been thrilled to be pursued by a well-known company for a position that seemed like a great career opportunity. However, because he had a good job, he wanted to be sure he was not leaving his current company for another unless it was the right move. The company trying to recruit him indicated the position would be "high visibility" and one where he'd have the opportunity to "make a difference" and be "appropriately rewarded for his contributions". After being wooed with all the right buzzwords, he ended up declining the offer when he found out their *actual* compensation practices and rigid approach to salary negotiations sharply contrasted with what the company *said* about paying top talent.

Besides prospective employees, it is just as important that current employees, customers, shareholders, suppliers, colleagues, and competitors also perceive that you "walk the talk". The decisions they make will be based on the signals you give them.

My Dad's advice still applies... *if your blinker is on - TURN!*



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