

Could a tie have made the difference?

858 words

Many years ago, I interviewed for a Chair position at a major Cancer Center in New York City. My credentials were spot-on, my age was right and I, myself, was very keen on moving to the Big Apple. When asked about my reasons for wanting to move, my response was rather metaphorical, "I want to play for the New York Yankees". From that point forward, several negotiations transpired, and I quickly became one of two final candidates. I was convinced that I was the right man for the job and was even rumoured to be the front-runner.

In total, I had 3 interviews on top of presenting at a formal research seminar. The last interview, which was the final stage of the hiring process, was given by the entire selection committee and included the Institute's President and Nobel Laureate, the Chief of Medicine, and a dozen others with similar titles and positions. At this interview I was solicited to give a presentation, which would be followed by an interactive discussion. While preparing for this final step, I considered two options: (a) to present my natural self, which would include my signature flamboyant and humorous style, or (b) to be the serious, phlegmatic and calculated candidate who would tell the committee exactly what they wanted to hear.

To help decide, I asked my immediate advisors as to which one of the two approaches to use. My then 25 year old daughter, a Ph.D. graduate student at the time, advised me to go with the first option, i.e. skip the tie (I hate those), and give a funny, but informative talk by covering all the areas I would be ranked on (such as my vision for the Department). My wife, a Ph.D. scientist, suggested the exact opposite—wear a tie, present top content, and don't tell any jokes!

After weighing my options, I decided to listen to my daughter and gave a tieless, "smart" attire, and information-loaded, but amusing presentation. I was certain that the committee would appreciate my confidence in taking a risky approach, especially under such stressful circumstances. I was secretly hoping they would parallel my tactic to that of a Yankee baseball player pitching at a winning 3-2 game against the Boston Red Sox in the bottom of the 9th inning, with the bases loaded, two out and at full count. After all, it takes guts to throw a strike, but it could also win you the World Series.

As part of my presentation, I created two cartoon characters (referred to here as Peter and Paul), which represented the President and the Chief of Medicine. In the cartoon, Peter and Paul were chatting about me and asking questions about the needs of the Institute, my credentials, expectations for the job and the like—one was asking, while the other was answering, based on information contained in my CV. At the end, I summed up with a video clip containing Star Wars music that displayed a bright star rising from the Institute's grounds, and planting on top of the Empire State Building, as a way to represent the projected meteoric rise of the department under my leadership. Triumphant indeed!

To monitor how well I was doing, I carefully evaluated the faces of the two real characters during my talk. When presented with the cartoon characters, instead of cracking a smile as I had imagined, the Nobel Laureate bit his lip. When the star landed on top of the Empire State Building, the Chief of Medicine scratched his head. Worst of all, when the presentation was over, the Nobelist walked out of the room without asking a single question. And during the question period, the 12 Chiefs were more silent than the 12 Apostles during the Last Supper!

A few days after, I was notified that I was off their candidate's list, and later to my surprise, learned that the other candidate was not hired as well. Instead, an internal interim Chief was appointed, who eventually stayed on for years.

I will never know if a tie and a conservative presentation would have landed me the job, but a few remarks are relevant here. First, a tie will not get you a job, but the absence of it may be costly, depending on the audience and its expectations; so, better to wear one than not. Second, tasteful jokes are usually well-received at conferences and other presentations (as I know over many years of lecturing), but the so-called "sense of humor" is a relative term and varies a lot between people; in critical interviews, trying to be funny is a big risk. It is safer to keep some carefully selected jokes for dinner with the committee members, but never for the 'final round'. After all, there may be very few, or just one, big 'final round' in your entire career! And lastly, returning to the baseball metaphor—a heroic win with the last strikeout may well go into the books, but a lost game to a Grand Slam could also be very costly. What would I do if I could do it again? I would throw a curve ball instead!