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Hiring? Never Oversell the Job

Jody Greenstone Miller

Co-founder and chief executive of the Business Talent Group, which provides independent professionals for project-based work.

Q. Were you in leadership roles or doing entrepreneurial things when you were younger?

A. From the time I was 12, I always worked, because I wanted independence. I wanted my own money. I did everything. I was a mother's helper. I was a receptionist. I worked in the public library.

I had one interesting lesson early on. I was in 11th grade and worked for an insurance company. My job was to sort premium payments. I had to separate invoices and checks and make sure the amount on the check was right, and that it was signed and dated, and then put them in a pile. If there was a problem, I put them in a separate pile. It was not the most stimulating work. There were a bunch of women doing it, and we were all next to each other. The only way I could keep myself occupied was to see how fast I could do it.

Then one day, the supervisor pulled me aside and said: "We've got to talk. You are causing us a big problem. You're here for the summer. We get measured on productivity. You are doing this much faster than any of us, so you are changing what the company thinks is possible. It's fun for you, but you're going to leave in two months, and we're going to be stuck doing this at this rate for the end of time. Just slow down." It taught me to have some empathy for an entire situation.

What was your first management experience?

The first job where I had direct reports was probably Time Life. I was hired to start a long-form documentary TV division.

Was that part of your background?

No. But they had tried with different people who had a television background and it didn't



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work out. I was coming off a White House fellowship, and I'd been a lawyer and an investment banker, and I'd done stuff in politics, but not in business.

The people who hired me said: "You don't know anything about business; you don't know anything about television. We just think someone who looks like they can figure things out may be our best bet." So they hired me because no one else had been able to figure it out. I found I'm good at taking nothing and making something.

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Any speed bumps early on with managing?

I had to hire people for the first time. I got impatient and hired somebody quickly. It was the wrong person, and I paid the price. You've got to wait and make sure that they're the right person, because the pain of hiring the wrong person is real.

I was also too risk-averse at first. I had this notion that everyone else knew the answers and I didn't. I felt that the bar for action was high, when in reality it's lower. If your bar is set too high for action, you're not going to do very much, particularly if you're an early-stage company.

When you look at other businesses, you think, "Wow, they've got it together." Then, as you get more sophisticated, you realize that everything's messy, and that even the most successful businesses are always reinventing and are never stable for very long. It's not that the emperor has no clothes, but the emperor has a lot less clothes than you realize.

What about more recent lessons?

When I started my company six years ago, I was afraid to put metrics down for people, because I didn't know what they were going to be. So even if I were to say to someone, "You've got to do 10 deals a month," I had no idea what was feasible.

I thought they would appreciate me not arbitrarily laying down metrics.

It turned out it was a disaster. People said: "Tell me what success looks like. Tell me what I'm shooting for." That was a huge lesson for me. I thought I was creating an environment that was less stressful. In fact, it was enormously stressful.

Any other feedback you've received?

Because I work out of a home office, a lot of people have no idea what I do all day. Even though I feel like it's obvious, it's not, so I have to make a bigger effort to make sure people understand how I spend my time. I also pick up the phone and call people all the time. I hate the fact that everybody schedules calls now, and I try very hard to resist that by reaching out more.

I also think a lot about the big picture, and the potential of the company, and I will talk a lot about that. But I think sometimes that frustrates the company, and I need to make sure I'm focused appropriately on what matters today and tomorrow.

How do you hire?

Most people I interview have demonstrated that they're successful at something. It's my job to figure out what they're good at, and that's how I

approach it. So it's not a "gotcha," but instead trying to understand, "Where are you going to succeed, and where are you going to be happy?"

I don't believe in talking someone into a job. I spend a lot of time trying to understand where the person will thrive and what they want. They have to want to do the actual job we're hiring for. So I like to paint a granular picture of the job — "Here is what you will do, and here are the hard parts and the parts that may not be so much fun." I don't want anyone to come in and say, "I didn't realize I had to do this."

A favorite question is, "Tell me the things that you didn't like about your last job." When you learn the things that get under people's skin and make them dissatisfied, you can make the judgment about whether they're going to work in your culture.

I think you want optimistic people who are problem solvers, not problem spotters. It's easy to analyze what's wrong, but if you come in and say, "I have an idea; here's something we can do," that's so wonderful. You want people who give you energy, and not take energy from you.