

CAN SKILLS BE LEARNED?

Robert Dilenschneider was CEO of the largest public relations firm in the world. When he became disenchanted and bored with having to manage 2,000 people, he decided to start his own boutique company.

He wanted to work more hands-on with clients and do less managing. The trouble is, his new firm grew. He's back to managing more than he likes.

His clients are now a select group of the nation's top 100 corporations. He is a personal coach to their CEOs, helps the company with their communications and telling their story, and tutors senior officers in developing their leadership skills.

He also serves on a number of nonprofit boards. That's what makes him such a perfect person to talk about the world of philanthropy. I visited him recently. Here's a transcript of part of our conversation.

JP: Bob, you work with some of the nation's top corporations. And you serve on a number of nonprofit boards. Do you find there's much they share in common?

RD: I honestly believe that the nonprofit is more difficult to manage. For one thing, it's harder to recruit dedicated board members. This is a problem. The other thing I find is that in a nonprofit, all on the staff are committed to making the organization successful and to serve as many as possible. In the nonprofit, the staff is devoted to making something happen. This doesn't always take place in the for profit.

JP: One of the services you provide, Bob, is to help corporations recruit new board members. What qualities do you look for?

RD: Let me tell you what's interesting. I do a great deal of corporate recruiting. I'm also chairman of the nominating committee of a major nonprofit. I pretty much look for the same qualities.

Integrity leads the list. Without that, you can't even consider the candidate. They have to be the kind of person who will develop a loyalty to the organization. The Board member needs to understand the organization and be willing to strongly advocate its mission. Finally, they must have long range vision.

I'm finding it harder to recruit good board members for corporations even though they get paid—in some situations quite handsomely. In the nonprofit, it's more honorific. But I'm quite clear when I recruit someone for my nonprofit organization, they must give financially as deeply as they possibly can, and they need to call on others for gifts.

I want board members who will play a significant role in supporting the CEO and the development staff. Finally, I'm convinced there is a huge universe willing to serve on the board of a nonprofit. They simply need to be asked. Most nonprofits have to go beyond the men and women who are most obvious. They need to get out of the box.

JP: What distinguishes the great and outstanding organization from the "just good"?

RD: I believe leadership is the key. A strong CEO is able to secure and motivate a powerful board. And a strong leader is able to sustain a vital, hardworking, and bold staff.

It all begins and ends with leadership.

I believe an advantage the nonprofit has is that their purpose is to make life different. They are driven by wanting to touch the lives of people. It's a higher purpose and a higher order.

JP: Can you think of one of the nonprofit CEOs you have worked with who stands out as being a strong leader?

RD: I was on the board of the American Red Cross for nine years. That's when Elizabeth Dole was the CEO.

I've never worked with anyone who was stronger— not in the corporate world and not among the nonprofits I know. She was a dazzling and powerful leader.

She helped make all board members believers. She had a way of motivating all of us to think higher and to jump fences we never thought possible.

One day she calls me. "Bob, this is Elizabeth Dole. I need your help. I want you to call Exxon, Shell, and Mobil. You know those CEOs. Bob, I need you to ask them for a gift for the Red Cross." I did! There's simply no way you can refuse Elizabeth Dole and that kind of leadership.

JP: You told me earlier, Bob, that you're Chair of the nominating committee of a very large nonprofit. You said they have to understand it is their responsibility to give. What do you say to them when you're asking them to join the board?

RD: It's easy. I look them in the eye and tell them that all of our board members give at least \$25,000 a year and I hope they will do even better than that. I'll tell you what's interesting. We actually have no trouble recruiting board members. We have a waiting list.

JP: When you are asked to make a gift, who do you like to have calling on you?

RD: If I believe in the cause, it almost doesn't matter. If a peer calls on me and lets me know how much he or she has given, that's pretty powerful. If it's really a large gift, it probably ought to be the CEO. But it could also be a member of the development staff.

Let me tell you about something that happened that I think is quite instructive. I support several universities. I won't tell you which one I'm going to mention. This guy from one of the schools calls and says, "We didn't receive your check." That's exactly what he said. I told him that I have been away a good bit and haven't had a chance to write it.

He says, "Then you won't get good tickets to the football games." I tell him that's a horrible way to ask for a gift and he can count on my not supporting the school now or in the future.

JP: Bob, you've spent your life in the communications world. Are these skills that can be learned? Is it an art you can work on and learn?

RD: I believe some people do have an ability to be more compelling and persuasive. There's something in their genes. But you can learn and it's something you really have to work on. I feel that anyone in the nonprofit world has to have high ability to communicate—in writing and in speaking. You have to motivate people.

I worry. In today's world of computers, texting, and tweeting—folks aren't learning how to write. They don't know how to use words. It seems to me that this isn't going to improve. It will only get worse.

JP: You know how strong my bias is on this next item I'm going to ask you about, Bob. I try spreading the word to our own staff and to everyone within earshot. I tell them there's nothing that takes the place of a hard copy letter or a personal note.

RD: I couldn't agree more. Yesterday I had about 150 e-mails. I spend my life deleting. But just yesterday I received a handwritten note and a very special hard copy letter. Just guess what made the greatest impression on me.

I write a lot of notes and almost all of my important correspondence is hard copy. I know that's what gets the greatest attention.

I worry that it's becoming a lost art. But with all of the e-mails, that's what makes a handwritten note or a hard copy letter all the more impressive and impactful.

JP: What are the qualities of a great communicator?

RD: That's easy. The message has to be compelling. You have to get a person's attention. Next, and of course, you have to tell the truth.

And finally, you have to know the person you are talking to. You need to know who they are, their passions and interests, and what makes them tick.

When you think about the nonprofit world, typically there are only 50 people, probably fewer than that, you really need to touch in a very special way. Know everything you can about them. That's the most important step in being a great communicator.

JP: This has been a great visit, Bob. It's always good to be with you. You are my hero and mentor. Let me finish by asking this question. You've worked with some of the most effective CEOs in the country— both in the corporate world and with nonprofits. What qualities do you see in these top staff people that you feel make them the most effective?

RD: Let me concentrate on the nonprofit in answering that. That is after all your own focus.

I want a staff member, and especially a CEO, who has the ability to motivate. They need to have a vision for the future. That goes for all staff and I put a high priority on that. And finally, they have to be compassionate and caring.

And let me give you a personal example of something. I am a graduate of Notre Dame and I love the University. I'll never stop supporting it. When one of their staff people call and ask for a gift, it's never about the money. It's always about the students. That's what really touches my giving-bone. And the staff person probably understands that.

One day he calls on me. He's talking about the naming of a new building. I tell him that I'm not interested at all in buildings. My great interest is in programs. So I ended up making a pretty good-sized gift for a special new program. Best of all, they let me know on a regular basis how the money is being spent and how valuable the program is to the students. That's a big pay-off for me.