The Smart Way to Obtaining a Letter of Recommendation

by Jimmie Flores

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As we apply for different employment positions, we are asked for letters of recommendation. Interviewers and selection committees are particular about the validity and reliability of those references. Make sure you take the time to â€œcoachâ€• the letter writer about the job expectations.

Here are examples that appear important, but are common in nearly all letters of recommendation:

â€¢ â€œBob is an excellent team player. He gets along well with people.â€•

â€¢ â€œAndrea works well under pressure. In some cases, she can get the work done on the same day

â€¢ â€œMartin is a go-getter. He accepts any and all assignments.â€•

â€¢ â€œJanie is on the fast-track. She has been promoted every year, and we expect the ascension to continue.â€•

The statements above are canned, and a couple are even corny. You are looking for a testimonial that will differentiate you from the rest of the applicants. Being a go-getter is fine, but there are many energized and hard working people in the workplace. In other words, going 100 mph fails to make you unique.

Write Your Own Testimonial

When asking others to write an endorsement about my previous work, I offer to write it. I understand that people are busy, and I want to avoid waiting too long for the letter.

The conversation goes something like this:

Angela, as we discussed on the telephone, I need a letter of recommendation from a colleague who has a good understanding of my project management experience. You and I worked on the data migration project for six months, and you know my performance well. I can tell you are super-busy right now. Do you mind if I put together a rough draft of the letter? You can read it, and make any edits necessary.

The advantage here is that your letter will be specific to the position you are applying. You are going to focus on the key areas required from the successful applicant. Of equal importance, the letter will be done faster because you are doing the time-consuming work. You can expect Angela to be happy with this solution because you saved her valuable time. While she might be aware of your skills and competencies, there is a good chance that the information is not fresh. This is a win-win situation.

Comments that Differentiate You from the Pack

Your letter must go beyond the standard positive remarks. The selection team wants to read tangible examples. They want to know that you are accountable for the work, and that you understand how your role fits within the organization as a whole.

Here are few comments that are differentiators:

â€¢ â€œIn 2010, Adam became our Quality Assurance Manager. He implemented one program that reduced our defect rate by 20%. We estimated the cost-savings from this initiative at $1.5M.â€•

â€¢ â€œOur Service Desk was experiencing internal turmoil. We asked Jennifer to identify the problem areas, and make a presentation to our CIO. Within two weeks, the cross-functional team she assembled identified three areas that were causing the underlying problems. We implemented those recommendations, and today the culture is positive. We appreciated that Jennifer sought assistance from other key stakeholders. This approach resulted in buy-in when implementing the program.

An excellent letter of recommendation can make a huge difference. Take the time to write it on your own, and ask your colleagues to make any necessary edits. To differentiate yourself, ensure that you integrate examples where you demonstrate your understanding of the interdependencies of the organizational components. In short, reinforce your knowledge of the cause-and-effect principle.

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