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Manage Your Career

The Candidate and His Earring

By Dennis M. Barden

A few weeks ago, it was parents' weekend at George Washington University, where my daughter is cultivating her budding political career (and presumably is a student, too). My wife and I were on the way to her apartment when she called, just to give us a little heads up: She had pierced her nose.

After I peeled my wife off the ceiling of the cab, we reluctantly agreed that the good thing about piercings is that they heal, and that she hadn't asked our permission in any case. Instead of righteous futility, we agreed to use this as a teachable moment.

"Honey," we began, "piercings go away, but tattoos don't. There are no cabinet secretaries with visible tattoos. Remember that those things are forever, and some day you will not want 'I heart Bobby' showing up from the podium on C-Span." So far, she seems to have bought it.

Having sold my daughter on that view of the world, though, I started to wonder whether I am just old school and the future will prove me wrong.

Much has been said and written about the differences between the Gen Xers currently in the marketplace and the baby boomers who hire and supervise them. We are now beginning to experience the phenomenon of Gen Xers who are hiring and supervising Gen Nexters. If history is predictive, the impact of working in the professional world will be homogenizing, and the executive work force of the future will look remarkably like the one we are so familiar with right now. After all, there are no college presidents I am aware of who wear love beads and open alumni dinners with the peace sign.

To be frank, though, I am just not sure that this traditional paradigm will hold. There have been revolutions in the past. The emergence of women in executive leadership, for example, may provide a better model for the changes we face in the future. With 40 years of experience behind us, it is pretty clear that the

executive marketplace has changed to accommodate the presence of women. If you don't agree with me, watch one episode of *Mad Men*. Today's is definitely not your father's workplace.

But will the executive workplace morph to accommodate people who inquire after one another's well-being by texting "r u ok?"

My daughter's story came into sharp relief when I remembered an incident that occurred recently in one of the presidential searches I was supporting. I had interviewed a terrific candidate via videoconference and touted him to the search committee—successfully, as it turned out, because they agreed to interview him in person. That conversation went exceptionally well. The candidate truly was outstanding in comportment and credentials, and he was recognized as such by the search committee.

I, on the other hand, was taken aback. The institution I was serving had a reputation for being a fairly conservative place—Midwestern, faith-based, dedicated to its traditions. As soon as the candidate left the room, I stood to address the search committee with what might only be described as a frightening combination of bemusement and real concern. "I want you all to know that on video I could not see the earring!" Happily, the room erupted in laughter. My candidate had the tiniest little diamond stud in his ear. I truly hadn't noticed it at all until he sat down next to me; some committee members at the other end of the table couldn't even see it. It was there, though, and it was discussed.

As far as I know, the earring is no longer an issue now that my onetime candidate is well ensconced in that presidency.

So if that search committee and board were not negatively disposed toward a candidate's earring, should I stop worrying about this? Should tattoos and piercings be filed with bow ties, red pantsuits, and lapel pins as quirky but ultimately irrelevant personal expressions?

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I just can't bring myself to go there, yet. After all, my fellow search consultants and I are still neurotic about things like shined shoes and jewelry that matches. The presidency in particular, and all executive leadership positions that require extensive contact with, and advocacy to, widely diverse publics, are still positions that are seen as personifying the institution. Especially in areas like fund raising and government relations, that means working closely and building sincere relationships with people of multiple generations with diverse political and cultural outlooks and sensitivities. The faculty and the campus community as a whole may well embrace such outpourings of personality, but the president still spends a lot of her time in the halls of the state capitol and in the dining room of the country club. Like it or not, there are simply different standards.

And it isn't simply the visuals that matter in that regard. Much has been written about the demise of proper English in the world of instant communication that we occupy. I can get my head around that in terms of everyday social exchange. What is worrisome, though, is that proper written and, especially, spoken English is not, in my observation, evenly distributed across society. It seems to me that this is more than a matter of educational inequity. I am no sociologist, but I sense a growing cultural divide in which the ability to express oneself articulately in the sort of language that predominates in the workplace will be extremely significant, perhaps even dispositive.

I am not speculating about split infinitives or dangling prepositions. I am anticipating an entirely different language that is spoken on the street and in the clubs but will be at best useless and at worst disqualifying in the executive workplace. Those who can speak both—like my daughter, with her suburban upbringing and access to a wide range of both popular and classical culture—will be fine. But about those who can't?

As the colloquial takes over the conversation at home, how easy will it be for less privileged young people to become fluent in what may well become a foreign—or at least a second—language? Do we risk raising a generation of people who cannot adjust to the ways of the workplace? Or will this simply mean that there is a new and different sort of social elite, one identified as much by language as by any factor?

Or I could just be an old foggy going the way of fedoras and sock garters.

I suspect that the sociologists and anthropologists out there will likely respond that it is ever thus. The young have always had their own language, much of which goes by the wayside when they join the working world, and some of which makes it into the accepted argot. The world—and the employment marketplace—evolve and progress.

I am not sure, though. Never before have we been so bombarded by images and sounds, so instant, so clear, so pervasive, so permanent. People can change their words, but some of their personal expressions are there forever. Tattoos are only one example; pictures on social-networking sites are even more pernicious, potentially.

Twenty years from now, will search committees be deciding how seriously to take that picture from the '10s with the then-underage presidential candidate brandishing a joint and displaying his posterior to the admiring throng? Or will there be so much of that out there that it is just expected? And how will that presidential candidate be conducting himself on the day that decision is made? Will he be speaking anything that we recognize today as standard English?

Yes, the more I think about it, the more I remind myself of my sainted grandmother. I remember that she was shocked when, early in my career, I grew a beard and wore it into the workplace. Such things were just not done in her day. "Relax, Grandma," I retorted sanctimoniously. "It's not like I got a tattoo or something."

And the world goes 'round, IMHO.

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