

Becoming Indispensable

by Elisabeth Hendrickson

WE'RE IN UNCERTAIN TIMES. BIG COMPANIES are announcing layoffs and closing divisions. Small companies are shutting down. Some people have been laid off multiple times in the last year as each new job ended in yet another layoff. Scary, isn't it?

Given this environment, it seems that the best career advice I can give is on becoming indispensable. I offer this advice from the point of view of a manager who deeply valued my indispensable employees, of a consultant who sees indispensable folks in a variety of organizations, and of an employee who, once upon a time, achieved the status of "indispensable."

So how can you achieve this lofty status? I can promise you that none of my advice involves backstabbing, brown-nosing, or lying to curry favor with the boss. In fact, most of those tactics will backfire eventually.

What Indispensable Really Means

First, let's start with the understanding that no one is truly indispensable. When I decided to leave the organization that had deemed me indispensable, the walls didn't come crumbling down. The company did just fine without me. They knew they could get along without me even as they asked, "What would we ever do without you?" Further, had the financial picture been sufficiently bleak, they would have let me go even if they were saddened to do so. When I say "indispensable," I mean, "your manager will fight tooth and nail to keep you if at all possible," not "your job is 100% ensured."

Martin is indispensable. Motivated, talented, and articulate, Martin doesn't just do his job, he makes sure he does the

right things and does them right. Michael is also indispensable. He has skills that others don't, gets along well with everyone, and is always on top of his work. Amy is indispensable. Focused, conscientious, and passionate about her work, she's also diplomatic and a skilled communicator.

By contrast, Jane was not indispensable—as she discovered when she was fired. Jane did no more than was absolutely required, failed to ask questions about assignments she didn't understand, and demanded perks as though they were her inherent right. Jane is an extreme case and very few employees resemble her. However, there are less extreme cases. Jim was close to indispensable: he had a great can-do attitude and did whatever it took to get the job done. Unfortunately, he was also disorganized and forgetful. Similarly, George was talented and upbeat, but exercised poor judgment in how to use his time.

There are common threads in these stories. Let's see why Martin, Michael, and Amy succeeded where Jane, Jim, and George did not.

It's an Attitude

Martin could do anything. As his manager, that's the impression I had. Of course, I knew that he had human limitations just like the rest of us. Yet it always seemed that no matter what the challenge, Martin would come through for me. It wasn't because Martin knew it all: he didn't. Martin had less experience than many others in the department. It seemed like Martin could do anything because if he didn't already know how, he learned how. He was relentless in his pursuit of new knowledge and new opportunities.

Jane, on the other hand, seemed to be unable to do anything. She appeared to view work as that annoying distraction between phone calls to her boyfriend. She did the minimum amount necessary. When confronted with an assignment she didn't understand, she tried to hide her confusion rather than asking questions.

She didn't make progress; she made excuses. At the same time, she believed that the company owed her a nice office, time to chat with her friends by email, and various other perks of employment.

Martin and Jane demonstrated different attitudes. Martin conveyed an attitude of, "Let me show you what I can do!" while Jane might as well have said, "Show me what you'll do for me."

It's Also Ability

Michael was one of the best test programmers I've seen. Given the germ of an idea, he would flesh it out and write a test program in a stunningly short amount of time. He was self-directed and talented. He also worked to improve his abilities continuously.

Jim, while dedicated, didn't grow much as an employee in the time I knew him. He sounded like he wanted to improve. He asked for pointers to reading material and showed a tremendous interest in learning. Unfortunately, he didn't actually glean any new ideas from any of the references. It's impossible for anyone but Jim to know if he asked for the references to win points with his manager and then never followed through, or if he simply didn't understand what he'd read. No matter what the explanation, Michael actively developed his skills and Jim did not.

And It's Communication

Amy was passionate about her work and about the overall quality of the product. Just as important, she had learned how to temper her passion with diplomacy. When management made a string of bad decisions that led to poor quality, some of Amy's coworkers began yelling, stomping, and threatening management with walking out. Amy took a different approach. She made her point by demonstrating exactly how bad the software was. She didn't raise her voice and accuse the executives of incompetence. She simply documented reality. Her approach was far more effective than all the yelling and swearing. The executive staff modi-

QUICK LOOK

- Characteristics that make an employee essential
- 10 things you can do to increase your value

fied its course in part as a result of Amy's findings.

Communication encompasses a wide array of activities, from status reporting to making sure everyone's on the same page. Amy's diplomacy and choice of communication style are one way of communicating well. Two other ways are having information available when it's needed and checking assumptions.

Unfortunately, George had trouble with both.

When asked how his part of the project was going, George had only one response: "It's going just fine." If asked for details, George said, "Oh, I'll have to look that up." If asked again later, he said, "I couldn't find my notes. I'll have an answer for you in a day or so." Those were his responses. When asked to give a different answer, George became flustered.

When his manager asked for a written report, George failed to ask what needed to be in the report. He assumed he already knew. George's manager expected him to spend an hour or two writing up a page of results. Instead, George spent a week drafting a ten-page masterpiece.

Where Amy exercised wisdom in her method of communicating bad news, George demonstrated poor judgment in how to track information others might need and how to use his time.

Ultimately, It's Delivering Results

Martin, Michael, and Amy were indispensable because they got things done. Each of them made a difference every day they were on the job.

Jane, Jim, and George were not as effective. Jane's unwillingness to deliver more than the bare minimum required marked her as a problem employee. Jim had the right attitude and showed

promise, but he didn't grow his skills beyond a basic level. George couldn't provide requested information, and his priorities were not in line with his manager's.

10 Things You Can Do Today

Michael, Martin, and Amy shared similar traits that may help you. If you're seeking "indispensable" status, consider following this advice:

1. Adopt a positive attitude: anything can be done, it's just a matter of figuring out how.
2. Learn something every day.
3. Find new, more effective ways to do existing tasks.
4. Make sure you're always able to answer questions about what you're doing, how you're doing it, and what results you're getting.
5. Practice communicating in clear, concise, and non-threatening terms.
6. Make sure you spend your time on the things that are most important to your manager.
7. Ask yourself, "What can I do today that will make someone else's job easier tomorrow?"
8. When you don't know what's expected or how to accomplish an assignment, ask questions.
9. When you don't know what questions to ask, start with "Where do I start?"
10. Make sure you're delivering results every day you're on the job.

Answers for the Inner Cynic

At least one person will read this and think, "Oh sure. Companies would love that. Perky employees who want nothing more than to deliver results."

That's right. Companies do love that. And what's good for the companies is also good for the employees. Two years ago, companies were entering into bidding wars to snag hot candidates with up-to-date technical skills. That's not the case today. It was a seller's market. Now it's a buyer's market. Whether you're an employee or a contractor, your company is your customer. Customer service is back in style.

Everyone has within them the power to be indispensable. It takes focus, determination, drive, and a desire to exceed your customer's (company's and manager's) expectations.

And if economic realities force your company to eliminate even indispensable employees, your efforts at becoming indispensable will pay off in the recommendations you get for your next position. **STQE**

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