

Interviewing for the 'BIG PROMOTION'

by Nazia Zakir

After serving for almost a year in a Co-Interim leadership role, the day arrived. The day for me to formally interview for the Assistant Vice President position! With great anticipation, I *relished* the opportunity to compete. At Georgia Tech we often have extensive interview processes with a variety of campus leaders. My interview agenda included individual meetings with GT professors and staff leaders and would culminate with the Executive Vice President of Administration & Finance, my bosses' boss.

It was important to my immediate supervisor, VP for Facilities, that I be treated the same as the external candidates, which involved him chauffeuring the candidates around campus to their interviews in his golf cart. At 8:00 a.m., I left my building and walked to his building so he could drive me back to my building to meet the staff!

After interviewing with three men in academics, research and administration, I felt pretty good intellectually, but a bit weary emotionally so I headed over to my old stomping grounds at Boggs to catch a breath and prepare for my last interview with one of the senior most leaders. I asked Andrew (a student assistant) to "Play some good music to invigorate me and get me

psyched up. He put on "All I do is Win" by DJ Khaled and I felt properly motivated!

I headed over to Carnegie with the song playing in my head. "All I do is win no matter what...When I step up in the building every body's hands go up! ... Keep your hands up!" The Executive Vice President for Administration & Finance was no stranger to me. We had many occasions to review issues and solve problems over the last several months. I felt that I had developed a good understanding of him and a good rapport with him. Realizing that I was competing against men with many years of experience, there was no way that I thought this was a sure thing. I expected that he would have some tough questions for me, given the challenges we were up against in Environmental Health and Safety. I was ready. Armed with the knowledge of many years of experience, situations, and stellar performance. *I was ready.*

He greeted me at the door to his office, told me to sit anywhere, while motioning to his large conference table. As I was walking toward a seat near the head of the table, he asked me in an incredulous voice, Nazia, "Do you really want this job? Why do you want this job? Are you sure you really want this?"

Stunned. No shocked!! I kept moving toward my seat though his questions had just sucked the breath out of me. My heart sank into my feet along with my confidence. Surprised that he'd ask

me these questions at all - let alone before he even sat down - he triggered the sleeping critic in my head. Did he think I was so underqualified for this job that he couldn't believe I was interviewing for it? After our multiple meetings, where I thought I had demonstrated my abilities, my decision making skills, presented solutions to complex problems, did he doubt my qualifications to successfully hold this position? REALLY, he has no confidence in me?

In the few moments it took for him to cross the room and sit down, I somehow had to pull it together. I needed to climb out of the little box I felt thrown into, recover from the hack that just occurred on my insides and still show up. I managed to regroup from the outside, though my inner critic was still questioning me as if I were on trial. Once he was seated at the head of the table, I began slowly speaking, "In my time as an Interim, I learned so much..." As I was speaking to him, my inner critic whispered to me "You don't fit the profile of who he has in mind for this position. Come on, Nazia. Are you enough?"

You see, I've been advancing in a male dominated field for over 20 years, this is not new to me and it's no easier to stomach now. When I was 24 years old, I had to convince four men that I was capable of working as a Health Physicist at Princeton Plasma Physics Lab, and was the only female to work in the building

that housed the Tokamak Fusion Test Reactor. I could go an entire week without seeing another female! The recollection of what I'd endured flooded my mind. Will it ever change? Once again, I have to prove, please, convince that I am more than qualified and capable of handling it.

Now at 45 years old, and a resume full of successful projects and outcomes, here I am again. The sage voice in my head said, yes, you are, right back where you started. So deal with it, RIGHT NOW.

As I took a deep breath and began to recount my wins, I could see him relax a little bit. We then talked about management, and I discussed how I had to fire a new staff member within the first six months on the job. He stated, "That was one of the hardest things a manager has to do." The interview continued and I shared my vision to make our unit more efficient and more responsive to campus needs. Time flew by. He ended by sharing something that would have been an affirming welcome and beginning: He said he knew that my vice president and direct supervisor has a great deal of respect for me. Because he was careful not to affirm me during the interview, it felt as if he kept me, awkwardly on my heels the whole time. Still as I left, I thought maybe there is a chance.

Well the selection committee (4 men) voted unanimously to hire me. Once again I became a "first." The "first minority," the "first woman," and I'm pretty sure the "first Muslim," to be an Assistant Vice President and a direct report to the VP of Facilities who'd been at GT for over 15 years.

As I walked the around campus, I was congratulated by people I didn't even know. They were so happy I had gotten the position!! Women and minorities were thrilled and encouraged to see a minority woman internally promoted. It was treated as if it were indeed novelty. In one case, I was brought to tears by a new face, expressing the pride she felt through my achievement.

People I knew, expressed great surprise that I was selected. Not because of my track record and being completely qualified, but as one individual abruptly put it - "I have seen enough instances of people not getting promoted because of the color of their skin - I am so happy to see they did the right thing this time!"

When I go for my NEXT promotion, instead of incredulous questions, I'm imagining being greeted with recognition of my accomplishments and incredible affirmations. That will be the day...

