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Corner Office: Kon Leong of ZL Technologies, on Encouraging Creativity

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Q. Tell me about some important leadership lessons you've learned.

A. One of my early jobs was selling computer hardware. What I learned about selling was probably more valuable than my M.B.A. I had seen selling as a process just about logic. Then I realized that has nothing to do with it.

Q. What was the insight?

A. You have to present your story in their context, not yours. They don't really care if you're standing on top of a robot and quoting equations. If they're in the deep part of the forest, you've got to talk the language of the deep forest. Salesmanship is more like a language unto itself. There is no right or wrong. It's what you make of it, and what's black can be gray, and what's gray can be white. It depends on your framework. The challenge is to share the same framework so that you're seeing the same page in the same way.

Q. How do you hire? If you were interviewing me for a job, what would you ask me?

A. I would want to know your goals for the job. Is it money? Learning? Fulfillment? What is it? I would try to figure out if our environment suits your goals. I would not try to sell you to get you to take the job. I also will ask, "How curious are you?"

Q. I imagine that most people simply say, "Very."

A. But then I'd ask, "Outside the headlines, what were some of the most interesting things you've noted in the last couple of weeks, and tell me why, and what did you do about it?" That would reflect what you think is interesting, and that tells me a fair bit. If you can cite many disparate topics, that's a step in the right direction. The point is, we're trying to find the right fit. In a fast-changing environment, you need to learn more and more and more. There's so much to learn, and you can't be taught all the permutations and combinations of the answers, so you have to learn on your own. And to learn on your own, you need curiosity.

Q. What other questions?

A. I'll ask: How willingly do you accept stuff, and how willing are you to question things? How creative are you in finding your own answers? For example, everyone knows in school that you cannot divide by zero. Why? I try to find if they've actually questioned things like that at any time. The point is, we're usually handicapped by our own borders, and we will not think beyond them. I think there's one rule of thumb in creativity: when you're brainstorming, you have to suspend disbelief. That's a key ingredient. There's time enough to challenge it and poke holes, but not at the time of generation.

I'll also change the subject to one where they have some expertise. So I'll ask what their passions are, and then I'll ask questions. If it's ornithology, I'll start talking about the evolution of birds and ask questions like, "How do you think reptiles got feathers?"

Q. What else do you look for when hiring?

A. Brains and drive. Those are the basics. Without them, it's probably going to be a long shot. After we work through that, then it's curiosity and attitude.

Q. How do you get at the question of attitude?

A. Are you willing to learn from your mistakes? Do you do that automatically? Are you willing to set the bar higher? Are you able to deal with failure? Can you bounce back from it?

Q. What's your take on the standard interview question about strengths and weaknesses?

A. I never really ask about weaknesses, because it's meaningless. I ask more about strengths, but I ask it from a

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different angle. I'm more interested in the answer in a professional environment. I'll typically ask: How do you consider effort, that your peers struggle with and can't explain? That really intrigued me.

Q. What's your natural strength?

A. I can zoom in, zoom out.

Q. What's it like to work for you day to day?

A. Certain aspects of my management style are different from me, many decisions asked of me. I try not to micromanage. I find the answer. It can be very frustrating to my employees. They understand and accept my approach, but...

Q. What is your advice for students who are going to college?

A. I tell all of them two things, and that goes for both undergrads and M.B.A.'s. First, experiment. If you're 22 years old as an undergrad or if you're 27 just out of your M.B.A., in both cases you've got a clean slate. You can go in any direction. So experiment. That can also mean taking a lower salary in order to experiment.

This is all in hindsight, of course, because I didn't do it. I went to Wall Street after getting my M.B.A. If you experiment in different jobs and functions in those two or three years out of school, you will have a much better shot at finding your sweet spot. And the sweet spot is the intersection between what you're really good at and what you love to do. If you can find that intersection, you are set. A lot of people would kill for that because, at 65, they're retiring and never found it.

So don't put so much emphasis on initial compensation. Don't listen to all the harping from the family. Try to find your sweet spot and, once you find it, invest in that. You don't want to get degrees just to do work you don't really like. If you're miserable, even if you make a lot of money, that's still 40 years of your life.

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