Post Martha, Say Thanks with Just a Note or a Lunch

Dear Susan,

What is the etiquette around thanking people who've helped me get contracts? An acquaintance passed my resume on to someone at her office which resulted in an eight- week long project. Another person put in a good word for me and I got an interview. I'm so thankful that I would like to give them gifts. Is that appropriate? Is a nice card enough? If it's a significant contract, should I give a more expensive gift such as a good bottle of wine? I don't know when to give the gift since I often end up working with the person who helped me.

The Giver

Dear Giver:

A handwritten note or invitation to a business lunch beats a bottle of Beaujolais any day and I'll tell you why. Gifts beg reciprocity, and can be perceived as currying favor. A note or business lunch is socially acceptable in a work context. But a pricey object might shift your gesture from heartfelt gratitude to the perception of entitlement -- the expectation that the favour will be returned – even if that was never your intention. It would be humiliating if your thank-you gift were understood as graft.

In the post-Enron, post-Martha, post-sponsorship scandal business climate, even a hint of personal gain is seen as bad karma. The fallout is that many large companies now have policies preventing employees from accepting gifts. That's a shame. Had that been the rule years ago, I couldn't have enjoyed a plate of foil-wrapped walnut pastries that a struggling adolescent's family brought me as thanks – humbly offered, gratefully accepted. And a colleague might not have sent a thank you bouquet to an editorial assistant who assisted beyond the call of duty – a gesture that delighted its recipient. Your motives are just as honourable, but it's now

tricky to offer a gift at work except on designated donor days: birthdays and Christmas.

Even then, anything perceived as too personal, too lavish or culturally "off " can backfire. Add in any prickliness between colleagues or a suspicion of conflict of interest and your innocent gift becomes a portent. It would be awkward if your bottle were returned. Stick to hoisting a glass with your good fairy during a collegial business lunch. Saying thank you in person or on paper might be less tangible than a nice bottle of burgundy, but then, it won't come back to haunt you.

Dear Susan:

I am the co-owner of a growing computer consulting business. My domain is software and system support for small enterprise, and we pride ourselves on being able to solve any problem, any time. The one problem I can't seem to solve is staffing. The technicians with the most software experience are great with computers but not so good with clients. One of my best guys rolled his eyes when a client asked a question last week. It was not the first time a client complained about this kind of thing.

Tempted to Go Solo

Dear Tempted:

Change your hiring criteria. Target communication skills alongside software savvy when recruiting and you'll get fewer complaints. I admit that narrows the field, as a knack for understanding systems does not often overlap with an intuitive grasp of human signals. A guy whose head is stuck "under the hood," is more focused on deciphering the spaghetti of cables and codes than on the bewilderment or even overt dissatisfaction of the customer paying the bills. That's why many companies swallow the cost of four-legged calls: two people sent out to the client, one to interact with the person, another with the machine.
 "This issue is much more common than one might expect," said an engineer in the computer industry. "It seems as if people who are bright in one area find it unnecessary to consider others' feelings." When he recently queried a technician's drastic advice, this manager was told, "Just do what I

tell you, I haven't got time to explain." In a field where people skills are thin on the ground, even engineers get no respect.

Of course, pass on the clients' feedback to your staff, with the message that answering clients' questions is as essential as debugging their network problems. And if your pockets are deep enough, enroll them in communication skills training that offers pre and post program evaluations and follow-up sessions. But ultimately it's more cost effective to hire staff who intuitively understand the benefit of listening, paraphrasing a client's problem and explaining its solution, slowly, carefully, and while looking in the whites of his eyes.

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