

Q&A Column

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Email Subject Line: How To Prepare Your References

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Headline: Prepping Your References In Advance

Summary:

I just came back from a job interview where they asked me to provide three references. I had figured I'd just give them two or three people of my choosing but instead they asked for my most recent boss, a colleague, and someone I had supervised. I'm wondering what the best way is to quickly help these people make me look good.

Joanna B., Red Deer, Alberta

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Headline: Prepping Your References In Advance

Dear Mark,

I just came back from an interview for a job I really wanted. The meeting went very well because I had done my homework and answered all the questions quickly and confidently. The problem came at the end of the session when they asked me to provide three references. I had figured I'd just give them two or three people of my choosing. But instead they were specific and asked for contact info on my most recent boss, a colleague, and someone I had supervised either directly or informally. Now I have to scramble to get in touch with these particular people and I'm wondering what the best way is to help them make me look good quickly.

Joanna B., Red Deer, Alberta

Dear Joanna,

You've got a clock ticking against you so you need to act fast. There are two primary tasks at hand: one is to choose the right colleague and subordinate who can speak on your behalf (since your previous boss is a given); and two is to prep all three of them so that they say pretty much what you'd like them to say.

For task one, a colleague can be anyone you've worked with directly over the years who didn't report to you, though it's in your favour to choose someone at least at your level, if not higher. In terms of someone you've supervised, they can either have reported in to you – in that you were their boss – or more informally, such as when you headed up a committee and had team members you oversaw. Narrow this down to the ones who remember you and might be willing to serve as a reference for you. Then add in one more selection criterion: their ability to present information effectively. It's one thing to have your biggest fans wanting to rave about you. But if they can't come across as professional or credible, then cross them off your list. So too anyone who might be holding a festering grudge against you.

In task two, you can assist all three of your references by coaching them subtly and reminding them of why you're the ideal candidate for this new role you're pursuing. Get in touch with each one and politely ask if they would agree to serve as a reference for you. Let them know that you are truly interested in this potential assignment and that their assistance would be most appreciated. Then mention something toward the effect of how you'd like to make it as easy as possible for them to fulfill their duty, so would they mind if you gave them a few pointers on what they might say about you.

At that point you can do the following:

- Send each of them a page with some reminders of the key projects and accomplishments you were involved with together
- Highlight some of your personal characteristics you'd prefer them to focus on (e.g. being industrious, reliable, easy to get along with, not afraid to make hard decisions, etc.)
- Inquire about any questions they might have in terms of representing you

One more thing: don't be afraid to ask if there are any negatives they might be inclined to reveal if the potential employer probes. Better to deal with these issues here and now than to get sandbagged when it counts.

In general, of course, you would choose and prep your references well before you start heading into interviews. Still, even when time is short, by taking these few simple steps you can maximize the chances of coming out smelling like roses.



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