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Short listed? Here's how to win that job

By [KATIE ZEMTSEFF](#)
Journal Staff Reporter



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Johnston Training Group coached The Miller|Hull Partnership before the firm was picked by The Bullitt Foundation to design its super-green headquarters.

After a team is short listed for a big project, a principal will often spend the interview telling how great his company is, with a flashy PowerPoint presentation. But Karen Johnston says that won't wow a selection panel.

The interview process is all about connecting with the project panel, Johnston said. Too many teams just talk about themselves when they should be showing they understand the project.

“Panels are looking for the ability to listen... and hear what the client's concerns are,” she said. “The whole deal is to start a relationship.”

Johnston Training Group provides coaching for short-listed teams, business development and presentation skills. Karen Johnston formed the business 30 years ago, and has focused on the AEC community for the past 10 years. Mark Johnston, no relation, is another coach for the company.



K. Johnston



M. Johnston

Their advice is based on interviews with experts: people who have served on at least 25 selection panels, including people from state departments, counties, cities, the University of Washington, Woodland Park Zoo and a local tribe.

Mark Johnston said most teams going into a project interview have a 20 percent chance of winning a project. He said Johnston Training Group's win rate is 45 percent.

Johnston coached The Miller|Hull Partnership before the firm was picked by The Bullitt Foundation to design its proposed super-green headquarters. It also coached Miller|Hull on the San Ysidro Land Port of Entry it designed for the General Services Administration and Customs & Border Patrol. Other clients include Mithun for the Brightwater Education/ Community Center, as well as Microsoft, NBBJ, W. G. Clark Construction Co. and AHBL.

By the time there is a short list, Mark Johnson said, every team on the list is qualified. The team that wins is the one that makes the strongest impression and connects best with the panel.

“If a firm demonstrates they understand all the elements, they're going to stand out,” he said. “If it's not working as a presentation, it's not going to work in the project.”

Interview basics

Mark Johnston said the biggest mistake teams make is arrogance: Relying on a well known name, not being prepared or letting a principal “pontificate” and dominate an interview. Panels want to hear from the people they will be working with, rather than a company's star.

The principal should attend the interview and should speak, but everyone else also needs to speak. The panel should represent a diverse age group. “Too much gray hair is bad if it's across the board,” Mark Johnston said.

Another huge mistake is not acting like a team. Everyone needs to be introduced immediately, otherwise the panel will spend the entire interview wondering why those who did not speak were invited. The team needs to look like a group, and this extends to tone of voice, gestures and clothing.

Overusing visuals is a problem. Karen Johnston said designers often think visuals will wow a panel but they have the opposite effect. Visuals ought to be used to create interaction and discussion. Karen Johnston said she uses video to show speakers what they could do better.

The underlying idea behind these tips is to create a relationship between the

Presentation tips:

- Learn as much as you can about the project before the interview.
 - Know the size and kind of room where you'll be presenting.
 - Try to present last.
 - Quickly introduce everyone on the team and what job they will do.
 - Act like a team. Dress and present yourselves similarly, and let everyone speak.
 - Don't overwhelm the panel with PowerPoint.
 - Be clear and articulate what your team will do.
 - Interact with the panel. Don't just talk about your company.
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interview panel and the team. Karen Johnston said think of it like a marriage. “(The panel says) we're getting married to these people for five years, I want to know what its like to be with them.”

Teams should begin before the interview to find out about the panel's real concerns and needs. Second, the team needs to let the panelists know they understand the project's unique issues. For example, if a project has funding concerns, a team should address that in the interview. “You want to let the panel know you understand the complexities of these decisions and you're accustomed to dealing with it.”

Karen Johnston said the interview is a microcosm of how the project will turn out, with panelists reading into everything. If a team cannot stay on time, it is interpreted that they will be late with a project. If it has a fancy visual, panels often assume the team will spend money in an ineffective way.

The recession

It can be difficult to teach companies new patterns. Teams, Mark Johnston said, already have a system and coaching disrupts it, but by the end of the training program, there's little resistance.

Karen Johnston said it isn't so much about teaching a team new things, it's about refining what they already do.

“They're so thrilled to be out of a pattern that never really felt right. They just did it because they didn't know what else to do,” she said. “Our job is to help them make what they already know (more refined) in a way that is more effective.”

Karen Johnston isn't concerned about being put out of business after coaching a team once. There is so much to learn, she said, that no business can learn it all on the first try.

She has seen changes in recent years. The number of groups on short lists has grown from about four to six teams. One short list, Johnston said, had 12 teams. Mark Johnston said they hope the pendulum swings back.

Sustainability is another shift. Today, Karen Johnston said panels aren't interested in hearing that you're a sustainable firm because it's expected. They're interested in how that knowledge and experience will help their project.

Recession has changed the amount of work Johnston has seen. On one hand, more people are calling because they want an edge. But on the other, they aren't spending as much money and there are fewer projects to go after.

Mark Johnston said some companies that never had to market before are doing so now to win jobs. Other companies have cut their marketing budgets. Cutting marketing entirely, Karen Johnston said, is “absurd” because it is critical to finding new work. However, she said marketing can involve teaching architects and engineers to market themselves, rather than dedicating it to a marketing department.

In general, Karen Johnston said the firms she work with are hiring, not laying off.

Mark Johnston said the economy has impacted everything. “But we like to think that what we do gives them a much better opportunity to win the work.”

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