



## An Interview for Contagion

by Martin E. Dodge

I arrived for the job interview ten minutes early and parked behind the brick house as directed. It is the first job interview I have had in years and my first time applying for a sales position. The sales position is for a home improvement and commercial contracting company. I have some primary know-how and the required math skills listed in the job ad, and I want to know more about the opportunity. I am here to practice my interview skills, gain a learning experience, and get a job, and hopefully, I will get all three items.

I know little about the company, so I went online to learn what I could from its website. Exploring the header options of the website, I discover many broken links that need fixing. Some links imply additional information and reload the page they are on with no further information. The website is trash – astounding for a company boasting a big reputation. I ensure my ad-blockers and pop-up blockers are disabled for the website and retest everything. The results are the same. Finally, I type out a guide for corrections and print it to bring to the job interview. If this company is not aware of the website problems, it might be the victim of a lousy web developer.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, wearing a face mask is required by state law for everyone in an indoor business or public space. I plan to put my face mask on before I enter the building. Four mask-less workmen are milling about a large white pickup truck outside the entrance to the basement level of the house.

I approach the workmen and say, “Hey, guys. How you all doing? Is this where I go to find The Place?”

“Yeh,” says one of the four workmen.

Another workman asks me, “Are you the Sales Guy?”

“Well, I am here for an interview,” I reply.

Before I realize what is happening, I instinctively shake hands with all the workmen and receive introductions from them. Another man suddenly joins the group and introduces himself as The Boss I talked to on the phone. He says this is his team and that we should go inside to begin the interview. I am alarmed by the lack of face masks and social distancing, but my flight instinct does not kick in, so inside, we all go.

I am led through a room to enter a boardroom complete with a long table, plenty of chairs, a dry-erase board, a chalkboard, and stacks of boxes. The table is littered with empty energy drinks and other clutter. The Boss orders everyone to clear the trash from the table. The “professional” in me cringes. I overdressed for this occasion – like wearing a tuxedo to a college frat house party.

The Boss tells me, “Sales Guy, I want you to be a part of our sales meeting and see how we organize the priorities of the day.”

The Boss addresses the room, “Everyone sit down, and let’s get this started. This is Sales Guy, and he will participate in the meeting as directed.”

The Boss continues, “Sales Guy, this is my team. They are all killers. Individual One is my right-hand man and is the leader in sales here. This team has the best sales numbers for The Place in the state.”

Introductions went around the table from left to right: Individual One, Individual Two, Individual Three, Individual Four, The Boss, and a Phone Guy listening in on the meeting.

I say, “I will piggyback as needed for interaction during the meeting then.”

The Boss mentions the job contracts that the Individuals are managing. The Individuals report the dollar amount of the job contracts they have in sales for the company. The Boss and the Individuals ramble on for a short time about the progress of each job contract. I listen and observe the exchange. I am sitting in on a sales meeting after all.

In the following interview phase, the four Individuals, The Boss and the Phone Guy, asked me questions. I pass a copy of my resume to The Boss, stating it is more modern than my profile on the job recruiter website. He asks me if I have more copies of my resume. I told him that I only anticipated needing one copy. The Boss reviews the resume and passes it around the table.

Individual One states he was not yet born when I worked in some places. Individual One then mentions that he has worked with some of the same people I have. He is a bitter young man that has a grudge with his restaurant past. He says he would base his opinion on how I answered his questions about the restaurant contacts we have in common.

Individual One then asks me, “The restaurant you last worked at closed. Are you making more from unemployment than you were while working?”

I answer, “If you are implying I am gaming the system, the answer is no. And if I was, I would not be sitting in this chair right now.”

Individual One starts to ask me another money-related question, and the other Individuals and The Boss shut him down. I give Individual One a withering stare.

I address the room, “I have worked with some incredible people in restaurants. There is a lot of talent and skill required to perform in that environment. I will never speak badly about the people I worked with.”

Individual Two asks me, “So, you are a writer?”

I answer, “Yes.”

Individual Two follows up with, “How is that going to help with sales?”

After a brief exchange with Individual Two, I finish with, “I can tell a story.”

Individual Two asks, “Why did you go back to school?”

I reply, “It was one of my failed attempts to get out of the restaurant business. I was working full-time and going to school part-time. I decided to start by taking light classes, like all math. The last class I took was in 2012, and I am a little rusty. But I can dust off whatever math skills are needed for the job.”

Individual Two asks, “Can you read a tape measure?”

I say, “Yes, I can.”

The Boss asks me, “So, your math blade is dull?”

I say, “Yeah, I am a dull blade, but that can be fixed pretty fast.”

The Boss then launches into a grand design for my future with The Place. He says to me, “Working in restaurants is in your past. You can mention you worked in them to clients, but you now work for The Place, and that is the future you have chosen.”

The Boss continues, “You must emphasize your rejection of the restaurant lifestyle and glorify The Place as your savior.” – OK, reader, I made up that line. Still, the tone of what The Boss had to say about his plans for Sales Guy is on point with my fictional summation.

Individual Three asks me, “Are you a coder?”

I answer, “No.”

Individual Three follows: “But, on your resume, it says you develop and maintain a website.”

I clarify, “My resume states the website is a Shopify site. Shopify provides a website template you customize, and I do tweak it with some basic HTML, but I am not a coder.”

The Boss asks Individual Three, “You have a Shopify site, don’t you?”

Individual Three then asks me a question that prompts me to retort: “Well, I guess my response is me showing my age.”

The Boss asks Individual Three to reveal his age. Individual Three reluctantly admits he is twenty-three years old.

Individual Three glares at me for the rest of the questioning phase of the interview.

No one asks me how old I am.

Individual Four asks me, “Have you done any home improvement work?”

I tell him about my experience: installing laminate wood flooring, interlocking tile flooring, baseboard, molding, and painting.

He follows with, “Did you talk to a contractor about the work?”

Individual Four is a contractor, and he wants to know if I can speak on familiar terms with a contractor.

I tell him, “I did the work myself and did not speak to a contractor about it, but I understand the question you are asking, and I do not have any experience talking with contractors.”

He is satisfied with my answer.

The Boss and the Phone Guy ask me more traditional questions, and the room is impressed with my responses. I hear “that’s good,” “right on,” and more than one “nice” from the peanut gallery.

Next, The Boss waves for me to follow him into an adjacent room. The room is a small unfinished kitchen with a counter, sink, and a full-size refrigerator. He tells me, “Sales Guy, you are killing it in there!” We fist bump.

The Boss then grabs a square foot size piece of material off the counter and launches into a sales pitch. I am given no warning or context, and he is speaking fast. I realize what is happening about halfway through his sales pitch. I struggle to remember what he said and make up my version as I am reintroduced to the boardroom with a “The room is yours!”

My sales pitch for the material is a wordy “as seen on tv” style, but overall, The Boss and the Individuals feel they can work with me to improve my delivery.

In my defense, I say, “I have never done that before, but with more notice, I will be polished.”

The Boss asks me, “Do you have questions about the interview process so far?”

I respond with, “The job ad lists the potential income of the sales representative position for The Place as ranging between \$75,000 to \$200,000. How does that work?”

To answer my question about how getting paid works, The Boss asks me, “So, what is the total sales number of the contracts we just discussed earlier?”

I am caught off guard and reply, “I don’t know. I wasn’t counting.”

After an awkward exchange, The Boss finishes with, “I expect everyone to be able to answer about the numbers.”

The Boss explains the payout system and the scheduled delay of payment and points out that Individual One is waiting for \$12,000 from last month. The scent of money sends the room into a buzz. Murmurs about home theater gaming rigs and other desired treasures bounce among the Individuals like a beach ball.

The Phone Guy has one more question for me, “How do you feel your experience in hospitality will benefit you as a salesperson?”

I reply, “I have developed a skill of reading people and anticipating needs. Listening to guests and responding appropriately, and fulfilling the guest’s needs also play a huge role. A guest will buy more if they trust they are getting the best service.” I look every Individual in the eye as I reply to the question.

The room seems impressed with my reply.

The Boss announces that the meeting is winding down. He says he will contact me in a few days with a decision. He asked me if I was available the following week to begin training. The training starts at 8:30 a.m., but it is out of town, and it is an hour and a half drive away. The training will be five days long.

The Boss asks me, “Are morning hours an issue?”

I admit, “I am still living on a dinner hour restaurant time clock, but I can adapt.”

The Boss excuses himself and takes the phone to an adjacent room.

Individual One asks me, “Can you make it to the morning meeting?”

I say, “That depends on the response I get from this,” and I hand out four copies of my critique of the company’s website.

When he re-enters the room, the Boss gets his copy of my website review.

After reading the short report, he says, “Wow! Did you make this for us? You edited our website?”

I reply, “Yes, I did,”

I ask The Boss, “You called me last night to come in here today, right?”

“Yeah,” says The Boss.

“Well, I know nothing about this company, so I decided to go to the website to learn as much as I could. There were so many errors on the website; I felt I needed to highlight them in case the company has a bad web developer. I wanted to provide some value to the company even if I was not going to be considered for hire,” I say.

The Boss turns around, crumpling the paper with his hands, and says to the room, “Throw this thing away, and don’t mention it to the higher-ups. It’s not our department.” There was no anger in his voice, just surprise.

I say, “I did not mean to offend, and I realize I put my head on the chopping block by taking the chance to point out this issue. I won’t mention it again.”

The room is stunned.

The Boss leaves the room again, presumably to talk to the Phone Guy.

Individual One directs the other Individuals in a short discussion about what everyone is doing today. There is a lot of driving involved. I envision everyone using many public restrooms.

The Boss returns and gets everyone’s attention and prompts me to tell the room about myself, how I am in town, and what music I listen to.

I reply, “I am a misfit, a punk, and an ex-skate boarder. I came to this town as a young man and grew up with the town.”

The Boss says, “Individual One and Individual Four also grew up in town.”

I look at the two Individuals and say, “Nice.”

A few more pleasantries are exchanged before The Boss excuses himself again. Individual One exits through a different door.

The Boss re-enters from the door that Individual One exited through, sits in the closest chair, and asks me, “Are you a sex offender?”

Taken aback, I reply, “Uh... No.”

“We had this other guy apply, and he was a problem,” says The Boss.

“I have a clean record,” I reply.

The Boss asks me again, “So, you are not a sex offender?”

“I have nothing to report,” I say.

The Boss stands up and walks closely behind my chair to the other side of the room. The Boss says, “A misfit and a punk! What a story, Sales Guy! You are full of surprises!”

I am as bewildered as the rest of the room.

The Boss excuses himself from the room again.

Individuals Two, Three, and Four are still in the room. Individuals Two and Three start talking about some guy they worked with who got arrested for peeing in public and was charged as a sex offender.

I chime in jokingly, “Someone who urinates in public on a regular basis is bound to attract problems.”

I get a chuckle from the Individuals.

The Boss had re-entered the room, caught most of my exchange with the Individuals, and seemed amused.

“You have the green light to attend the training, Sales Guy,” says The Boss.



The Boss continues, “Do you have a pen, Sales Guy?”

“Yes, I do,” I reply, and The Boss dictates the address where the training will take place.

The Boss tells the Individuals, “We won’t need to talk to the other guy that walks like this now.” The Boss then demonstrates a limp I know all too well.

“I know the surgery that guy needs,” I say.

The Boss asks me, “You know the surgery? What surgery?”

“Hip Replacement Surgery. I know because I have had it myself,” I say, looking around the room at blank stares and slack jaws.

“So, I am also an over-thinker,” I announce.

I ask the room, “What do I need to get, read, watch, or otherwise prepare for training?”

Individual Two exclaims, “That is the question I asked!”

Individual One returns to the room and takes a seat. He says, “Get a nice notebook binder for taking a lot of notes. I got mine at Walmart for twelve bucks. It even came with a notepad.”

The Boss says I should dress more casually, but not too casually, as the company owner will be at the training site. The company’s owner is the chief instructor by the tone of The Boss.

The Boss continues, “No jeans and a collared shirt but no tie. I realize we are all not setting a good example with the dress code today. Definitely do not dress like Individual Three.”

Individual Three looks dejected.

Individual One says, “Dress like a construction worker who’s made it.”

Individual Four takes offense at the comment and offers, “I am a contractor. I don’t know what these guys are saying. Khakis and a collared shirt.”

The Boss tells me, “What you are wearing now might be fine for some sales situations. The training will work your style into the role of a salesman for The Place. We will mold your look and style to what works best.”

The Boss addresses the room, “OK, I think we can break.”

The Individuals turn to Individual One and start planning the day.

I ask The Boss, “Can I get out this way?” I point to a door different from the one I entered in the boardroom.

The Boss says, “Yes. The rooms all loop around.” He escorts me on a short tour of what is to be his office, a storage closet, and where a receptionist will eventually greet clients at the door and answer the phone.

“Very nice,” I reply.

Before turning to leave, I say, “Well, thank you. Nice meeting you, The Boss. Have a great day.”

I exit the building, and Individual Four is standing by the large white pickup truck.

I bid him a good day.

Individual Four asks me, “What is your ride?”

I say, “I am the RAV4 down there.”

Individual Four says, “This is my truck. It needs a new engine.” He points out the other vehicles in the parking lot and provides knowledge of each one’s ownership. He thinks the trashy car must belong to someone in the business upstairs. In retrospect, I do not recall him mentioning what car The Boss drives.

“That sucks about needing a new engine,” I say, and we exchange a few words before I turn to go to my car.

The Boss suddenly appears from around the tailgate of the white truck and blocks the path to my vehicle.

The Boss asks me, “So, how was the interview?”

I reply, “It was the first interview I have had in years. I hope I performed well for you all.”

The Boss asks me, “How do you think it went?”

“Well, I am sufficiently intimidated, but I also look forward to working with your team and starting a new profession,” I say.

“A new profession,” The Boss repeats softly.

“Yes. A new profession,” I state.

The Boss asks me, “Do you drink?”

I say, “Yes.”

The Boss asks me in a tense tone, “How often?” He is standing awfully close to me, and we are face to face.

I look directly into The Boss’s eyes to see a reaction and say, “Frequently.” His eyes are lifeless.

“I can’t have people show up to work or be on the job drinking,” says The Boss.

With my eyes still locked on his, I reply, “It will never happen.”

“Have a good day,” I say as I walk past him to go to my car.

The Boss and the four Individuals are talking in front of the white pickup truck as I exit the parking lot—five young men who disregard every safety precaution recommended by state law during the COVID-19 pandemic. I chose to participate with the Individuals, The Boss, and the Phone Guy because, by reflex, I shook hands at the start of the encounter. I did not want to disengage and leave abruptly, so I became a part of the problem. When I get home, I reschedule my life to allow for two weeks in quarantine.