

A Bad Reference

from Vault.com blog

You just found out the reason you haven't been getting a few jobs is because one of your previous employers has been giving you a bad reference. Count your blessings that you found out what was going on, because lots of people never do. What do you do about it?

You could sue them. But that takes time and money and only engenders the bad feelings and issues. And it certainly doesn't help the current problem, which is getting a job and dealing with the reference. As for prospective employers, that story only cements their perception of you as a problem. Calling up and confronting the person isn't going to remedy the situation either, because now the reference will be worse.

"Confronting" is the operative word there, because you do have to call them. Watch your tone of voice. It needs to be reasonable, polite, and one of seeking information and understanding - not angry, not defensive, and not whiny. Your goal is to learn what their issue is/was and to arrive at some sort of understanding about how it will be handled for future references.

Before I give you the wording, I'll tell you something surprising. Bad references don't always prevent someone from getting a job. For instance, a person can do their job very well, but for some reason never seem to make it to work on time and finally be fired for it. The key is how the issue is handled in the reference, and how you handle it prior to the reference being checked. So your goal isn't necessarily to erase or debate what their issue is, only to reach agreement on its presentation.

When you phone the reference, you say, "I'm calling to ask your help with something. (This disarms them and doesn't put them immediately on the defensive). I understand that you have an issue with my performance when I worked for you and I'm wondering if we might be able to reach an agreement on how it's presented so that it doesn't compromise my chances of employment. Would you mind sharing with me, please, what you weren't happy with when we worked together?"

You've got to do it softly. If you're too harsh or they perceive they're being attacked, you're not going to get what you want or need, which is information and cooperation. So create an environment where they feel comfortable talking. And hopefully, after you've said the above, they will.

Do not argue with them or interrupt. Though you might feel defensive, angry, threatened and fearful, don't react to those emotions. Just listen. And when they're done talking, the next thing you absolutely must do is tell them you appreciate their sharing that with you. All of this creates the increased likelihood of arriving at some win/win agreement rather than the conversation degenerating into more hostility (which exacerbates the entire problem you're trying to solve).

After they've said the negative, ask them what (not "if") good things they noticed about your performance and results. And ask them, if along with the negative, they'd be willing to share those with any prospective employer. Again, this is negotiation for a win/win, not argument for win/lose. Tell them you're not asking them to remove the negative, but that you'd like to find a way of presenting it that isn't so harmful, and is balanced by the positive. If you're coming at it to learn, to resolve the situation, and to heal the relationship as best it can be healed, you'll be okay and get what you want.

From there, you need to address this with a prospective before the reference is checked. That happens just about when you perceive an offer will be extended. If there's validity to what the reference has been saying, you acknowledge that you've had some problems with this issue in the past, specifically at X company, but that you've been working on this issue and it really isn't one anymore (then follow through on that!). Now you've just defused the situation and removed the element of surprise. You don't need to mention they'll get word of it in a reference.

If there's no validity, then you'll need to address that too, but by presenting the supervisor as perhaps someone who was threatened or new or wanted their own person in your position, or whatever the case truly was, but you need to be brief, objective, and balance it with a positive about the person as well. Don't trash them. That doesn't align the hiring authority with you. Instead, it reflects poorly on you and will backfire.

In the future, and a wise word to every job seeker, contact your references before you start looking. Send them your resume. Tell them what you'll be interviewing for. Ask them what they might contemplate saying and how they'd speak to your abilities to do that particular job. ***Ask their permission to provide a reference.*** References are sacred. Their privacy and willingness to speak on your behalf is to be respected and appreciated. Then you prevent this kind of thing from the start.