

Dr. Nicholas J. Mathys
Professor of Management
DePaul University

NM: What are some of the qualities that applicants or employees should look for in an organization?

KD: For me, it's how a company values its people. Are people treated as drones, or are they an integral part of bringing the product to life? Are employees respected as individuals with something to contribute, or regarded as "order takers"? It can be hard to discern whether what's written in a corporate brochure is "image propaganda" or an accurate representation of the company's culture, values, and behaviors. Remember, you'll be spending a third of your day or more on the job, day after day, month after month, potentially for many years to come. You'll need to make some value judgments about the company, and you should do it before you accept the position.

Many people don't take advantage of the interview. They're so humbled at being considered for the job that they don't really take advantage of the process. Don't forget that you're interviewing the company as much as the company is interviewing you. Know what you're getting into; if there is a gap between your values and the company's, let that be your informed decision and not a surprise after the fact. Do research online, ask your friends and networking contacts. Prepare questions in advance and interview the interviewer. Ask to speak to current employees whose jobs are similar to the one you're applying for. Don't ask "eyes/no" question; ask situational questions that really give you a better sense of the real culture, the real environment and behaviors.

NM: What advice would you give to young people studying management, or those in the early stages of their career?

KD: The indispensable first step to getting what you want out of life is this: decide what you want. You have to decide what type of work really matters to you. What do you love to do? What kind of work inspires you to make a difference? You must know who you are and what gives meaning to your life.

If you're not starting your own company, seek to join an organization with a vision and mission that excites you, one that operates by a value system similar to your own. Once you have such a link, it will be a great ride, a tremendous career for you regardless of the product line. You'll have a great job and be great at your job. To love what you do and feel that it matters – how could anything be better?

NM: You've said that your personal values and those of McDonald's were aligned. What did you mean by that?

KD: I found McDonald's to be very open to and very aware of the need to have a family life while building a career, and it has always been involved in the community. The company genuinely embraced family and encouraged people to be very involved in their children's lives and in their communities. In my last couple of positions, I took every opportunity to include spouses and families as a part of their wife's or husband's, dad's, mom's, brother's, or sister's work life, so the families could better understand and support what my people were trying to accomplish.

NM: Business schools tend to emphasize the technical skills and knowledge needed to run a business. What else can a good business program provide to help students be more aware of these sorts of issues?

KD: No question that the technical aspects of an MBA Program provide a solid foundation and develop skills that are desirable and necessary. I also believe that much real learning comes from life experiences that people share – what things worked and what things didn't work, what's really important and what's just clutter.

I urge students to develop relationships with professors, business people, other students at the school. Find a good coach or mentor, and let them help you take what you've learned from theory to practice. A good coach and a good network of contacts can help you enter the work force in a more significant way than you could on your own.