Hiring managers on Indeed.com use the keyword “passion” twice as frequently as they use “detail-oriented” in a job description, but I believe detail-oriented trumps passion in practice. Here is an example: a friend’s daughter told her dad she had her snow tires. Then she got stuck in her own driveway. The tires were in the car, not on them.

There ought to be a special award for the heroes who teach us to communicate with specificity. My award goes to Peggy.

She first appeared when I pushed a button on my answering machine, “The second page of your resumé did not come through. Fax it again.” I did. Peggy hired me to work on her team of three undergraduate career advisors for 6,000 students. While a cohort of undergraduates progressed from first-year students to seniors, Peggy served as my boss and gave me an education in parallel.

Writing teachers often say, “Show don’t tell.” Family, friends, and colleagues often encourage people to “Think before you speak.” I can’t recall Peggy telling me to do either, though my work for her required both. Peggy is a maestro of spoken and written communication—her specialty is the deliberate pause. She could have been a museum curator or a critic for The New York Times. Instead, I was lucky to be one of her protégés.

In the process of developing workshops, how-to guides, and answering hundreds of emails, Peggy gave me a master class in the art of compassionate but direct communication. She taught me the difference between suggested and recommended (the latter is stronger). She left me the lasting recommendation that you should only say variety when speaking of a box of chocolates. She imparted the magic of writing with non-repro pens that
produce copies devoid of editing marks. She taught me to stand away from
the curb in the rain—cabs and cars splash up, dear one.

Peggy encouraged me to show up for my students no matter what. On
Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I delivered a workshop to thirty students
less than two hours after the collapse of the twin towers. On Thursday,
September 13, I gave a workshop for over one hundred students—many
of whom were applying for positions with employers who no longer had
offices. Show up, give the presentation you planned—and tell students you are
available if they'd like additional support.

“Peggy, a student said he was on a low floor of the Towers when the
second plane hit. He left his resume on a banker’s desk and asked me the
best way to follow-up. I told him it was too early—to send good wishes for
the health and safety of his family and co-workers, instead. Did I do it right?”

“Yes, Chan. Tell him to follow up on the resumé in a month.”

I remember breathing a sigh of relief.

Shortly before COVID-19 emerged, I faced a dilemma during a visit
to Peggy’s home in Philadelphia.

“What kind of tea would you like?” Peggy said, opening a floor-to-
ceiling cabinet. “You must pick the right one for our meal; I recommend a
tea that pairs with fish.”

“How about ginger? I always enjoy ginger tea, P.” I backed away from
the cabinet as Peggy pulled out options.

She pulled out one box from a top shelf and then three others from
one below. She worked her way down to a lower shelf and pulled out more. I
realized this wouldn’t be an easy decision, and my ability to discriminate was
under a magnifying glass. There were at least nine boxes of ginger tea.

“These three all have lemon. Here is the plain green tea version or
the one with coconut or the peach. Ah, here is my new favorite—Golden
Turmeric,” she said as she pivoted away from the counter.

She held it out for me to inspect. The Golden Turmeric Organic
Herbal Tea Tisane commanded attention among the sea of tea boxes, the
bulk of which were of a standard rectangular size, height, and width. The box
was taller and presented in the form of a hexagonal package, complete with
a white branding label that ran on the flat front and back of the box
highlighting tasting notes: Warming, Candied Lemon, Ginger. There were
eight tea sachets in the package—enough for sixteen steeps. This tea was so
rare and valuable that it was to be savored—and savored again. Especially since it cost more than twice as much for half as much tea!

“This is the most expensive one of all. The tin was $15. Someone got it for me at La Colombe. I’d never spend that for myself and I’m starting to run low. Let’s drink it.”

I backed up from the kitchen counter and moved towards the outer edge of the kitchen as Peggy put the water in her glass kettle on the countertop—auto set to 200 degrees. When the water was ready, Peggy filled a mug with hot water and pulled the tea—a diaphanous sachet in the shape of a pyramid—from the box. The pyramid went into the mug to steep for five minutes. Then Peggy took it out and put the sachet in her own cup to steep for six minutes.

I let mine cool off for a good half hour. Then I drank half of the hot tea as we finished up dessert—cherries to complement our dinner of salmon with hoisin sauce. The tea was spicy and slightly sweet, pleasant tasting but better in sips. I could taste the ginger when it was hot. Or maybe not. I didn’t share my secret with Peggy: in a blindfolded taste test, I chose an $8 bottle of Gallo Family wine over an award-winning cabernet from Vaso Cellars.

In the morning, Peggy offered me the same cup of tea, leftover from last night. She offered to warm it up. I said, “I’ll drink it as is.” She nodded, and we added a small amount of water to it.

“It has a completely different taste at room temperature,” I said. “Equally good, just different. Did I mention I still don’t let my students use the word variety?” I found the tea to taste a bit sweeter at room temperature. Perhaps I was picking up on the lemon?

She smiled.

Later, I accompanied Peggy on errands. We went to a wine shop for Prosecco. We went to La Colombe on 19th Street in Rittenhouse Square. She bought a fresh tin of the Golden Turmeric tea. I did not ask questions. At dinner that night, I opted for Peppermint tea after the Prosecco. My tastebuds were exhausted. Peppermint is always a safe and reliable choice with no unexpected twists.

The next morning, Peggy packed up the Prima Donna cheese I’d brought at Di Bruno Brothers. I’d selected it as a gift for her, but the cheese selections for the weekend had already been made. “Take it with you. Enjoy. You can’t get that in New Hampshire.”
While I was stripping the bed in the guest room, she slipped the Golden Turmeric tea into my bag. I read the label on the train. She had made the tea exactly to specifications—even the double steeping. But it was twelve degrees colder than recommended. Within two weeks, World Health Organization experts recommended drinking tea colder to lessen the chance of throat cancer. I wasn’t surprised that Peggy was ahead of the curve on the proper temperature.

Shortly after my visit with Peggy, my friend Donna posted a Facebook photo and status update on her fractured glenoid fossa. “The cat jumped on me, I lost my balance and fell down the stairs. I’m in such pain—really bad break. It hurts to do anything.”

I Googled glenoid fossa—Donna had hurt her shoulder. I was worried. Donna is a small business owner. She is a single mom of two kids who aren’t old enough to drive. She lives in Connecticut—two hours away from her ex-husband, three hours away from me, and 3,500 miles from her parents in the United Kingdom. Donna doesn’t have the liberty of sick days or weekends without clients. How would she manage on her own?

I called her.

“Donna, are you okay?”

“Yes, darling, I just got back from a hike on the Ridge Run Trail in the Mianus River Park—the one we went to the last time you were here. I’m making brunch—your favorite Shakshuka! I just finished chopping the plum tomatoes and now I am sautéing the peppers. Can you hold while I crack some eggs?”

“Donna, I’m so glad your shoulder doesn’t seem to be disrupting your day! Based on your Facebook post, I pictured you sitting in a corner with an ice pack unable to change channels with a remote! May I recommend that you post another update and let your concerned friends know you’re not immobile?”

Donna was talking to me, but the recommendation was all Peggy.