

Interview Impulse Control

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A career coach suggests putting your brain in gear before engaging your mouth.

Stop! Don't answer that question! During practice interviews, actual interviews and networking meetings, many job seekers are tensed and primed, ready to jump all over the questions they get. They eye the pitcher, praying for a high fastball across the center of the plate. Here it comes! Inwardly, the interviewee exults: "I've seen this question! I've rehearsed a smooth, punchy response ... even outlined my talking points. I'm going to nail this question, dazzle 'em with my footwork, win a 10.0 from the Russian judge."

Too many job seekers view the interview process as an athletic competition. They assume the challenge is to score the maximum number of points for style on each question, racking up an aggregate score that exceeds the competitions. Their performance will "win the interview," secure a job offer and, presumably, allow them to live happily ever after.

This is a superficial understanding of how interviews work and interviewers think. Of course, you're being evaluated and you have a justifiable reason for wanting to appear articulate, credible and attractive. However, your goal shouldn't be to give a good performance. You actually have four goals: 1) to build rapport, 2) create a relationship that lasts beyond the interview, 3) understand and address the potential employer's concerns and priorities and 4) treat the interviewer like a human being, not an adversary. Your emphasis should be on overall fit, not fancy footwork.

So before you unleash a canned one-size-fits-all answer to the question flying in over the plate, stop. Rein your impulse to provide an automatic response. Instead, view the interview strategically. Your meeting isn't about you answering a string of unrelated questions. It's your chance to paint a coherent picture that develops and reinforces fundamental themes. As trial lawyers often coach critical witnesses before testimony, there are many ways to answer a question. A few are better - more succinct, informative, and responsive - than the rest. And of those, one will be the most effective under the circumstances. Knowing which response to use means knowing the intent behind the question.

Before you answer, take a moment to figure out where the interviewer is coming from. What does he really want to know? What does the question mean? How does it relate to previously asked questions? What's appropriate in this context? What pitfalls lurk beneath the surface of this question? Where will your answer lead?

It's always wise to anticipate topics that will arise in an interview. Job seekers who wing it often blow it. The key to confidence is thorough preparation. But there's a distinction between thinking about how to approach certain issues and prefabricating canned responses that you regurgitate on cue. Your preparation should focus on two concerns: 1) the employer's needs, priorities and values and 2) what you should say about your skills, abilities, aptitudes, values, style and motivation to give the interviewer an accurate picture of you.

What Do They Want, Anyway?

The good news is that there are only two interview questions. That is, regardless of what you're asked, the employer really only wants to know:

- 1) What value can you add to my enterprise as an employee (and can you prove it)?
- 2) Why do you want this job?

Every interview question probes some dimension of your capability or motivation. The problem is that interviewers sometimes ask questions without knowing why they're asking them. Therefore, they can't always distinguish a constructive answer from an evasive but adroit dodge. Moreover, some questions shouldn't be taken at face value. The challenge for job seekers, then, is to build and buttress a coherent picture of their strengths and figure out what's going on in the interviewer's head.

Assume you've just arrived for an interview and you immediately spy a copy of your resume filled with notes, underlines and exclamation points in front of the interviewer. Next, he hits you with that mushiest of all questions: Tell me a little

about yourself. This information is obvious from your resume, so, you think, what does this clown want to know? What's the point of the question and why is he asking?

Your mind reviews the punchy openers you've rehearsed: I was born at an early age and from that point forth I had a dream ... or I'm a highly motivated, bottom-line oriented shirt-sleeves go-getter, a people-person and problem-solver with a proven track record in blah, blah, blah. . . All along, you hope the interviewer's demeanor will signal whether you're on the right track.

But instead of offering a pat answer that tanks, consider the question in a different context. Employers have two concerns - needs and priorities. You're selling three solutions: expertise (knowledge or technical skills), experience (transferable abilities) and motivation (the roles and activities that ignite a fire in your belly). Why not frame your answer in terms of the intersection between the employer's needs and your attributes? You might say:

Sue, perhaps the most relevant way to address that question is in terms of how my skills and abilities match up with the most pressing needs and priorities you have right now. If I read your ad correctly, you need someone to streamline and re-motivate under performing field sales staff while orchestrating a shift from a product-driven to a market-driven sales strategy. When I saw that I was really enthusiastic (motivation) because a number of my most satisfying accomplishments (capability plus motivation) required the ability to diagnose and turn around sales-force problems. For example, last year with U.S. Widget...

In short, see people for what they need, nothing else. If you aren't clear about how a potential employer perceives his needs and priorities, try asking:

"Joe, probably the most relevant way to respond to that question is in terms of how my skills and abilities match up with your needs. The problem is that I don't know enough about your priorities to give you a focused answer. So if it's okay with you, could I ask you to expand on what you need in this position so I can touch on my strengths that would be most important?"

While you won't always receive a target to shoot at, this approach is interactive, collaborative and helpful. It promotes an exchange of information, not an adversarial contest.

What's the Point?

Good interviewers will ask questions to gain specific information ("Do you know how to do research on the Internet?") or examples of capability ("How have you approached new product development in the Pacific Rim?"). They'll also explore your insight, self-awareness and ability to put yourself and your prior career in perspective. But when they ask such questions as "What do I need to know about you to get an accurate picture of what makes you tick?" or "What forces - positive and negative - do you think were most instrumental in shaping your style and your values?", they're probably less concerned with the content of your answer than with your willingness to take a big-picture view of your past, present and future.

At face value, questions such as "Where do you see yourself in five years?" or "What are your life goals?" seem pretty silly if they're merely requests for information. But you can view them as opportunities to demonstrate the serious thought you've given to your values, priorities and driving motivational forces. Your responses should reflect optimism and the ability to reality-test forces that shape your career development. "I'd like to have you job" probably isn't the most insightful answer.

One seasoned interviewer asks job seekers to define what four terms - success, achievement, challenge and growth - mean to them, then describe examples of when they've expressed those definitions at work. "People are always saying, 'I want more challenges' or 'I want a job that will allow me to grow,'" he says. "So I ask, in effect, what do you mean, grow? What do you mean, be successful?"

This interviewer doesn't expect - or enjoy - glib responses to this question. "It's meant to be thought-provoking, and I want to see their thought processes in action," he says. "If they're afraid to pause and reflect, even to stumble and bumble as they wrestle with the question, then how can I assume they'll be open and reflective on the job? Confident candidates should be willing to reveal themselves a bit in an interview."

When an interviewer asks "What are your greatest strengths?" she may, in fact, be asking several distinct questions:

- ◆ In what ways could you add most value to us?
- ◆ Can you organize your capabilities into distinct functional categories?
- ◆ What evidence or proof can you provide to substantiate your claims?
- ◆ Can you prioritize: If a lot of things are true of you, what things are most true of you?

Simply laundry-listing a mixed bag of self-laudatory adjectives - I'm kind, trustworthy, brave, clean, reverent, wholesome, goal oriented, innovative, collaborative and strategic" - hardly addresses or suggests you're aware of the interviewer's concerns. "What are your weaknesses?" is a classic example of a question that shouldn't be taken at face value. The interviewer isn't asking you to disqualify yourself; she's really asking, "Should I worry about your ability to deliver the goods?" This is the first issue to address in your answer:

"Sue, I'm sure we all have some developmental areas we should be aware of, but I must say, that as I understand them, your needs and priorities play to my strengths, not my soft spots. I don't think there are any fundamental issues that would affect my ability to perform well in this position."

If you can't say this with a straight face, then you probably should take yourself out of the running for this position. For there to be a real fit, the answer should be true. By comparison, the common approach of turning a strength into a weakness ("When the stakes are high and the deadlines are tight, my folks might say I can be pretty demanding") rings false. It's an attempted con and few astute interviewers will be fooled.

The Last Resort

If you can't determine what a question means, try asking the interviewer for help:

"Leo, I'm not sure I understand the thrust of your question, and I certainly don't want to appear evasive or unresponsive. Could I ask you to tell me a bit more about what issues or concerns you'd like me to address?"

Rarely will a polite request for clarification result in contempt or hostility, particularly if the interviewer is interested in helping you to put your best foot forward. While you may meet nasty or sarcastic interviewers, always assume a non-defensive posture. It's the interviewer's job to evaluate whether a candidate will be a good fit for a position and organization, not to give potential employees a tough time. Since it's in his interest to elicit useful, reliable information, he has little incentive to trick you.

Help the interviewer give you a good interview. Think of each question as an opportunity to collaborate and elaborate and for give-and take. If you're asked an inarticulate, imprecise or inappropriate question, use your answer to ennoble the query, provide useful information and validate the underlying concerns. Reality-test your responses: "Have I addressed your question fully? Am I being clear?"

Avoid patronizing, pontificating or professing. You gain little by trying to outthink or outmaneuver the interviewer; you gain much by communicating a desire to be responsive and sensitive to the interviewer's needs, personalize the interaction and build a relationship. Leave stock answers at home. Arrive prepared to open your ears and mind before you open your mouth.

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