

INTERVIEWS – TURNING AN ASSESSMENT INTO A DIALOGUE

CONVERSATIONAL MINDSET

No matter how well qualified you are for the role for which you are being interviewed, or how confident you are, interviews are high stakes, anxiety producing situations. Being in a heightened state of anxiety reduces your ability to be truly present, to listen well, to pick up nuance and to be cognitively at your best.

We tend to assume the role of ‘the one being interrogated’ – they ask the questions, I answer. This isn’t helpful for your own state of mind, and you won’t be at your best and likely won’t interview as well.

The key to a successful interview is your own mindset going in: Try shifting from “I am going to be assessed” to “this will be a *conversation* during which I will share some information, but I will also learn some things about the organisation, the people etc.” This applies even for interviews where you are an internal candidate. You want a mindset of curiosity and enquiry to help you get out feeling interrogated, allow you to relax into the conversation more, and show a bit of how you operate.

Your role in this process is to connect the dots for the interviewers – you need to make it easy for them to match you to the spec/position description and even the best interviewers sometimes need to be guided to see how your experience connects. So, making explicit connections to the spec/position description (over and over again) is central to your preparation and to the conversation.

CAREER HISTORY (a trap for the unprepared)

Typical interviews will start with the interviewers asking about your career history, or worse, starting with a question like ‘tell us a bit about yourself’. The aim is to settle the interviewee into the conversation, but it can be a real trap for both the interviewer and the interviewee and can lead to an unintentionally long conversation that takes time away from the more relevant parts of the interview.

So, be well prepared and rehearsed on telling your career story – think in headlines only. Regularly stop and ask the interviewers if this is the right sort of depth for their needs. This does two things; firstly, stopping breaks the ‘download’ and allows you to take a breath (maybe even an opportunity to course correct if you feel you are going into too much detail), and secondly it contributes to a more of a conversation than a one-way presentation. Try to keep the overall story to no more than 10 minutes. For most of us this means rehearsing it out loud multiple times so that it comes naturally.

CONNECTING TO THE SPEC/POSITION DESCRIPTION

The core of the interview should be related to the position description and the interviewer(s) will ask for examples of achievements that match the spec.

Part of the success here is for you to have three or four main stories that you have chosen beforehand that between them cover all the competencies in the spec. So, the stories have to be large enough and complex enough to cover the competencies. Choosing a small number of rich stories is easier for

you to remember. Then as you tell these stories of achievement, you connect them (again explicitly) to the competency that it is demonstrating.

Obviously, we don't always have a perfect match, maybe the task that you tackled is similar, but the context is different – you want to make these things clear. For example, you might be asked about a time when you had to persuade key external stakeholders, who may not have been positively disposed towards your idea. If your interactions have been primarily internal, you might say, "I have had limited experience of that exact situation, but I do have an example where I had to persuade a difficult stakeholder inside the organisation". Consistent with the suggestion above about covering multiple competencies, you might add "... and this example also speaks to [pick another competency]."

When preparing your examples, try using the STAR model.

- S = Situation (the context – the closer the context to that at the organisation you are interviewing with the better, but don't assume that the interviewers understand the similarities, so you need to make the link for them).
- T = Task (what you did).
- A = Actions (this is all about how you behaved to deliver the task, a key indicator of cultural fit).
- R = Result (the outcome).

As with the career history, try to turn this into a conversation. Here are some examples of how to do that:

- *Invite them to select from a list* – you might have more than one example that could address their question. Say so, e.g., "I could speak to the time I had to influence someone more senior or another time where the influencing was with a peer, which would be more relevant for you?"
- *Offer chapter headings* – one you have your example lined up, think of it like a book. The example heading is the title of the book. You now give the interviewers the chapter headings, and then you stop and ask where they would like more detail. Don't unfold the whole chapter in one go.
- *Check In* – ask; "Is this the right amount of detail?" "Does this example fit with what you would like to know, or should I choose another?"

The interviewers may not engage in this type of conversation, but if you don't try, you will never know. Every time you pause, it is a chance to gather yourself and learn something that can help you match to their needs.

THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES QUESTION

It is a terrible assessment question however it is still commonly asked.

Some people find it difficult to speak to their strengths. One way through this is to use language like "feedback I have received indicates that..." or "people say..." and then tell the story through their eyes.

On weaknesses, which are often positioned as development areas, be prepared, have only one or maximum two. This is not an invitation to share a long list, even if you feel like you have one! Sometimes it can be about context, "I have done x, but not in the context that you [interviewers'

organisation] operate.” Sometimes, you can use the “I have received feedback that...”. Whatever you offer up, offer with it what you have done/are doing to mitigate its impact. E.g., “While I love turning ideas into action, I need people around me who are blue sky thinkers.”

While it might be true, unless it is the only ‘weakness’ you have, try to avoid generalities like “I’m a workaholic” or “I struggle with work life boundaries” or “I struggle with imposter syndrome”. Unless they are having a major impact on your productivity and ability to do the job, they are not necessary to disclose. If you do feel like this is central to your candidacy, again speak to what measures you have put in place to mitigate the issue.

TAKE NOTES

Have a notepad with you. It does not detract from your candidacy to make a few notes from time to time. Most interviewers, even professional ones, don’t ask very concise or clear questions. Typically, they might load up a question with multiple parts or it is just a long complex question.

What you are writing down is both the different parts of the question, if there is more than one, and a couple of key words that will help you cover all you want to in your example. Before you respond, indicate that you have made a couple of notes to ensure that you address all aspects of the question. Or you might say, there are a couple of parts to that question, let me take [insert part] first. And then refer to your notes to make sure you don’t miss something you wrote down that you wanted to share.

If the question isn’t clear, play it back and ask whether you have interpreted it correctly.

Ironically, this behaviour signals that you are listening and are really engaged. You can have your own questions (see later) on the same page.

What you might note down might not be related to the question – it might be a private key word for yourself. E.g., “slow down”, “less information”, “breathe”.

ASKING YOUR QUESTIONS

Interviewers typically ask the candidate what questions they have. This too can be a bit of a trap. The quality of your questions can be part of the assessment process.

That said, think of your questions, not as a test, but as an opportunity to learn something. Below are some examples, some of which are less relevant for internal candidates. Your questions are predicated on the fact that you have done your homework and read up everything you can about the organisation.

- “I understand that you have embarked on a major refresh of the strategy? Where are you at in that process?” [Or if they are into strategy execution – “how is it going”?]
- “I see from your website that you are committed to [insert a stated philosophy], how does that translate on a day to day basis?”
- “You list ‘courage’ as one of your values, how is that demonstrated/or encouraged?”

- Do not ask “what’s the culture like here”; rarely do you get a quality answer that reflects reality. Instead ask about actions/symbols from which you can infer culture, e.g., “what happens when people disagree?” or “how much time do people spend in meetings” or “what are the things that new joiners to the organisation comment about?”

DEMONSTRATE WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO WORK WITH YOU

At the end of the day if all else is equal, as humans we tend to pick people we feel that we would like to work with. In your responses you want to show what you are like to work with, not just the ‘shiny version of you that you put on for interviews’. If you are someone who has an opinion and tends to share it, share an opinion. You can caveat it with, “clearly I don’t have the benefit of a lot of knowledge of the organisation, but my observation is that...”. If you don’t agree with something they say, be willing to challenge it. If you like working with others, ask about others that would be involved in your work. Whatever is relevant for you. It is much better for both sides to understand what it would be like to work together at this stage, than six months down the track!

