



Getting to Know All About You: Elucidating Interviews by Laura Gassner Otting

Although interviews are considered one of the most useful tools available, they are artificial by nature and often lead to skewed impressions of candidates. Cutting through the artifice takes skill and practice, and the following guidelines:

“And you would be.....?”

Start the interview with quick introductions of everyone in the room and their association or history with the organization. Make sure the candidate is comfortable, with a glass of water and a chance to use the bathroom before you get started.

The candidate should be the last to introduce him or herself. Ask the candidate to provide a brief (five minutes or so) summary of their career and explain what interests them about the position in question. Some candidates will become immediately comfortable when asked to talk about the subject they know best, themselves; others get uptight. Be mindful of the clock and feel free to cut off or move along a nervous candidate who is babbling away too much of your already limited time.

Talk is Cheap

Ask open-ended questions. Let the candidate do most of the talking but don't be afraid to follow up if you feel the candidate is speaking in overly broad terms. Narrowing a candidate's answers will allow you to make a more informed decision.

The most common interviewer's trap is asking the candidate what s/he might do in a fantasized situation. Don't fall into it. Hearing your candidate pontificate about hopes and dreams of their performance on an imagined project may be interesting, but it is not really that informative. Ask the candidate how s/he has performed in situations actually faced, what was done, by whom and at whose instruction. After all, you are hiring a track record, not an interviewee.

The Remaining Questions

Prior to the interview, set an agenda and stick to it: roughly half of the allotted time should be dedicated to the candidate describing his or her career's track record; a quarter of the time should focus on specific questions relating to the primary challenges of the job in question; and the remaining quarter should be given to the candidate as his or her opportunity to ask questions.

Pay close attention to the types of questions the candidate asks and the boldness with which s/he asks them. You will learn a great deal about their preparation, intellect and personality, just as they will learn this about you and your organization by the way you



describe it and, if applicable, interact with the other people administering the interview with you.

Keep track of your own lingering concerns and unanswered questions. Some of these questions might be answered as the interview takes on its own life, but most can be explored in further interviews and ought to be discussed in depth with the candidate's references.

Nothing is Ever as it Seems to Be

An important caveat: the interview is but a staged performance with actors playing predetermined parts. A good interview is akin to an Oscar-caliber performance. A bad one gets you, "Don't call us, we'll call you." So, keep in mind that you are not the Academy and you are not judging a person based on a single performance. The interviewee that shows up at 2pm on a Wednesday, having taken off the morning to sleep in and prepare, is not the employee that comes to work at 8:30 on a crisis- infused Monday morning.

For that information, you must ask former employees, peers and bosses. You must reference not only the people that the candidate gives you but also the people s/he doesn't. So, remember to ask for names of team members as the candidate describes projects. You'll want to reference check these people later.

Illegal Questions

You cannot ask questions, explicitly or implicitly, about race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, age, sexual orientation or disabilities. Increasingly, laws are being passed that prohibit asking for a candidate's salary history.

Here are some questions that we recommend:

1. To begin, what is it that brings you here today to discuss this position with us? How do you connect personally and professionally to our mission?
2. Describe your experience with strategic planning. What worked, what didn't, and what have you learned about the process?
3. What state will your organization/division/department be in when you leave?
4. How would your team describe your management/leadership style?
5. Describe a decision you have made where an employee has successfully changed your mind.
6. How would you rate your hiring skills? Have you ever had to fire an employee?
7. What challenges do you foresee in the job?
8. What would your superiors/subordinates/peers/board say about you?
9. Why this job, at this particular moment? What motivates you?
10. Describe a particularly challenging situation that you handled well, and one that you handled not so well (and what you learned from it).