

The Power of Interview Preparation

By Bill Radin

Fundamentals of a Successful Interview

To a large degree, the success of your interview will depend on your ability to discover needs and empathize with the interviewer. You can do this by asking questions that verify your understanding of what the interviewer has just told you, without editorializing, or expressing an opinion. By establishing empathy in this manner, you'll be in a better position to freely exchange ideas, and demonstrate your suitability for the job.

In addition to establishing empathy, there are four intangible fundamentals to a successful interview. These intangibles will influence the way your personality is perceived, and will affect the degree of rapport, or personal chemistry you'll share with the employer.

[1] Enthusiasm --- Leave no doubt as to your level of interest in the job. You may think it's unnecessary to do this, but employers often choose the more enthusiastic candidate in the case of a two-way tie. Besides, it's best to keep your options open -- wouldn't you rather be in a position to turn down an offer, than have a prospective job evaporate from your grasp by giving a lethargic interview?

[2] Technical interest --- Employers look for people who love what they do; people who get excited by the prospect of tearing into the nitty-gritty of the job.

[3] Confidence --- No one likes a braggart, but the candidate who's sure of his or her abilities will almost certainly be more favorably received.

[4] Intensity --- The last thing you want to do is come across as "flat" in your interview. There's nothing inherently wrong with being a laid-back person; but sleepwalkers rarely get hired.

Since interviewing also involves the exchange of tangible information, make sure to:

- Present your background in a thorough and accurate manner;
- Gather data concerning the company, the industry, the position, and future growth opportunities;
- Link your abilities with the company needs in the mind of the employer; and
- Build a strong case for why the company should hire you, based on the discoveries you make from building rapport and asking the right questions.

Both for your sake and the employer's, try not to leave an interview without exchanging fundamental information. The more you know about each other, the more potential you'll have for establishing rapport, and making an informed decision.

The Short and Long of It

There are two ways to answer interview questions: the short version and the long version. When a question is open-ended, I always suggest to candidates that they say, "Let me give you the short version. If we need to explore some aspect of my answer more fully, I'd be happy to go into greater depth, and give you the long version."

The reason you should respond this way is because it's often difficult to know what type of answer each question will need. A question like, "What was your most difficult assignment?" might take anywhere from thirty seconds to thirty minutes to answer, depending on the detail you choose to give.

Therefore, you must always remember that the interviewer is the one who asked the question. So you should tailor your answer to what he or she needs to know, without a lot of extraneous rambling or superfluous explanation. Why waste time and create a negative impression by giving a sermon when a short prayer would do just fine?

Let's suppose you were interviewing for a sales management position, and the interviewer asked you, "What sort of sales experience have you had in the past?"

Well, that's exactly the sort of question that can get you into trouble if you don't use the short version/long version method. Most people would just start rattling off everything in their memory that relates to their sales experience. Though the information might be useful to the interviewer, your answer could get pretty complicated and long-winded unless it's neatly packaged.

One way to answer the question might be, "I've held sales positions with three different consumer product companies over a nine-year period. Where would you like me to start?"

Or, you might simply say, "Let me give you the short version first, and you can tell me where you want to go into more depth. I've had nine years experience in consumer product sales with three different companies, and held the titles of district, regional, and national sales manager. What aspect of my background would you like to concentrate on?"

By using this method, you telegraph to the interviewer that your thoughts are well organized, and that you want to understand the intent of the question before you travel too far in a direction neither of you wants to go. After you get the green light, you can spend your interviewing time discussing in detail the things that are important, not whatever happens to pop into your mind.