

Tricky Questions Reign in Behavioral Interviews

by ARLENE HIRSCH

reprinted from the
NATIONAL BUSINESS EMPLOYMENT WEEKLY
from the publishers of the Wall Street Journal: Dow Jones & Company Inc

Behavior-based interviewing first gained favor when the labor market was an employer's paradise. When there were always more than enough candidates to choose from, employers could afford to be choosy.

Now that the job market has improved for candidates, it's less common for interviewers to rely solely on behavior-based questions. However, most interviewers routinely include several behavioral questions along with more standard general questions. Their goal is to make sure they don't hire a candidate who can talk a good game but can't deliver a great performance.

Built on the belief that past performance is the best predictor of future success, this interviewing style relies less on general questions and more on specifics. Questions usually begin with such phrases as "Tell me about a time when..." or "Give me an example of..."

Interviewers who favor this format usually develop their line of questioning around the traits and skills deemed important for success in the position or organization. For example, if a job involves a lot of customer service, an interviewer might ask you, "Tell me about a time when you had to handle an irate customer." For a position that requires extensive teamwork, you might be asked to "Give an example of a situation where you demonstrated your skill as a team player."

Similar Preparation

Knowing how interviewers structure their questions makes it easier for you to prepare good responses. If an interviewer prepares by reviewing the job description to determine a job's required skills and traits and asks for specific examples that demonstrate those characteristics, you need to go through a similar preparation process.

Katy Piotrowski, a career counselor with JobWorks in Fort Collins, Co., uses job descriptions for a specific position or function to prepare clients for behavioral interviews. With the descriptions, clients can determine the skills and traits interviewers are most likely to ask about.

If an employer wants someone who's a "team player," you can expect to be asked some of the following: :

"Tell me about a time when you had to rely on a team to get things done."

"Provide an example of a time when you had to persuade people to do something that they didn't want to do."

"Give me an example of your leadership style."

Candidates who understand the technique and are prepared to handle these types of interview questions have an edge over those who are unaware of this trend and must be coached by interviewers to respond appropriately.

Start With Your Resume

An easy way to start preparing for behavioral questions involves resume review. By going through your resume line-by-line (in search of relevant examples), you'll become comfortable with how you plan to answer likely questions.

The less confident you feel about a specific circumstance or qualification, the more you need to prepare and rehearse your response. For example, a Colorado educator interviewed for a position as a director of distance learning technology. Although she had an extensive background in continuing education, she didn't feel qualified to handle the technical aspects of the position.

By brainstorming, she realized that she had coordinated teleconferencing sessions for an audio tape series and worked on a planning program for developing Internet-based programming. When she had finished reviewing her resume and accomplishments, she realized she could do the work.

"The idea behind behavioral interviewing is that you can tell much more about a person's attitudes, work habits and skills by hearing them describe real actions taken in real circumstances than by letting them speak in the abstract about themselves," says Allen Salikof, president and CEO of MRI Inc., a Cleveland-based search firm.

Expect interviewers to ask negatively phrased questions that reveal your weaknesses and flaws as well as your strengths. Don't fall into the trap of demeaning yourself just because you're anxious to comply. If the stories you tell don't reflect positively on you, there's no reason to tell them.

A Three-Step Approach

Some candidates find the format of behavioral questions is unsettling. In the pressure of the moment, they can't think of a single example. To overcome that obstacle, develop a list of experiences that cover the skills and characteristics required for the position you seek.

Try the following three-step approach:

1. Determine your chief skills or strengths and actual experiences which exemplify each one. Remember dates, names, quantities or measurements of success and other details that will convey the situation to the interviewer.
2. Understand the job's description and be prepared to recall specific actions and behaviors that address the required skills.
3. Don't make vague proclamations of your skills. Small but telling actions and behaviors are more important than grandiose but unsubstantiated claims of job success.

Structuring Your Stories

It helps to use a P-A-R (Problem-Action-Result) formula to structure your stories. Review your resume and decide which stories to tell. Next, you should write, edit and rehearse your stories. This is time consuming but worth the effort. Since most people aren't natural storytellers, it's good to know what you plan to say and how you plan to say it. That way you minimize the risk of drawing a blank, telling the wrong story or rambling.

Here's an example:

Problem: Sally was a sales representative for a publisher. She was hired to replace a disreputable former rep who had tarnished the company's image with existing and potential customers. Sally's challenge was to rebuild the company's reputation and restore customers' faith.

Action: Sally reviewed the files of existing customers to determine where problems had occurred in the past. Then, she met with each current and former customer in her territory to introduce herself and assure them that past problems had been remedied. She guaranteed that she would oversee personally their accounts to make sure problems didn't recur. With her manager's permission, she offered price incentives that would encourage them to try again. When orders arrived, she maintained a hands-on approach to ensure that customers received the best possible service.

Result: Of lapsed clients, 75% became active again. More than half of existing customers increased sales. Net result: over \$500,000 in new business the first year.

Disconcerting as behavior-based interview questions can be, they're really nothing more than requests for examples to accompany standard responses. To prepare, make sure your answers to typical questions include such illustrations.

To put a unique spin to the P-A-R format, try a R-A-P format. Start with the result, because accomplishments capture an interviewer's attention. Then describe the actions you took and finally the problem that was solved. In that way, your accomplishments stand out boldly.

If you're really savvy, you can vary your approach by using both strategies within the same interview. For example, if you're describing a tough problem, you might want to use the P-A-R approach to emphasize the very real challenge you faced. If you achieved a particularly spectacular end result, you might want to use the R-A-P format, which emphasizes your results.

Here's an example:

Result: Sally could choose to start her story by saying "I increased sales by more than a half-million dollars in my first year with XYZ company."

Action: "When I first took over the new territory, I knew it was important to develop strong relationships with customers. I wanted them to know that they could trust me to deliver what they needed. I made it clear that this was a new beginning, that whatever problems they had in the past were in the past, and that I would personally supervise their accounts and guarantee the results.

"Because I was dealing people who had some difficulties with our company in the past, I was able to offer financial incentives to bring back lapsed customers and encourage existing customers to expand their orders."

Problem: "What I needed to address openly was the fact that many customers had problems with our company in the past but that those days were over. Fortunately, I was able to win their trust and, equally important, I was able to deliver what I promised -- which is why I achieved such good financial results."

When You Don't Know the Answer

Behavior-based interviewers can be like bulldogs. They won't give up until they get the information they want. But you don't have to answer a question just because it was asked. At times, you really won't have the answer. Much as it may hurt to say, "I'm sorry but nothing comes to mind," that may be the most honest answer. Rather than lie, you're better off being honest about what you have and haven't done.

You also can ask for clarification. If you don't understand what the employer is looking for, ask him or her to be more specific. Most employers will appreciate your interest and thoroughness.

That said, don't ever provide information that will hurt your prospects. When faced with negative questions, look for the positive spin. This could mean taking the initiative to rephrase the questions.

For example, if asked to describe a time when you failed, you might reply, "I need you to help me out here. Since I tend to view most events as opportunities to learn, I'm not sure I know what you mean by the term 'failure.' If you learn something from an experience, it can never be a failure. And I try to learn from everything I do. Would you like me to share a learning experience with you?"

If you're asked to describe a time when you lost your temper, you might say, "I get angry at times but I almost never lose my temper."

If the tone or content of a question throws you off-balance, don't be afraid to buy time to regain your composure and collect your thoughts. In those cases, you might say to the interviewer, "Do you mind if I take a minute to collect my thoughts?"

Although silences can be uncomfortable, they also can be productive. Rather than rush into an ill-advised statement, make sure that you're in control of your response. If this takes more time, the interviewer will need to wait. Most interviewers will appreciate your thoughtfulness.

Strategizing Behavioral Questions

Behavioral questions pose a real challenge to interviewees who are striving to make the interview a conversation between equals rather than an interrogation. This isn't impossible, however. Many of the same techniques you use with standard questions can be employed successfully in this situation. For example, you can finish up a story or response by asking for feedback: "Is that the kind of example you were looking for?"

Nor should you be afraid to ask for clarification: "I'm not sure what kind of information you'd like me to provide here. Can you be more specific?"

Fortunately, the tight labor market has forced interviewers to soften their styles a bit. In some cases, you may be given a list of behavioral questions you'll be asked before the interview. This is because employers recognize that it's difficult to think of examples on the spot.

This raises an interesting point. Employers primarily use behavioral questions to gauge your skills and accomplishments. But they also may want to see firsthand how you function, think and communicate under pressure. You can give yourself a competitive edge by anticipating questions and formulating your responses in advance. This will reduce the pressure and make you seem clear thinking, level-headed and well-prepared. Given today's frenetic business climate, those are traits any employer would value.

-- Ms. Hirsch is a psychotherapist in Chicago and author of the "NBEW Guide to Interviewing" (Third Edition, 1999, John Wiley & Sons Inc.), from which this article is adapted.