

Acing that Job Interview

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Ah, the dreaded job interview! Or need it be dreaded? Believe it or not, there are some folks who actually enjoy the job interview process. They see it as a game, as a conversation, as a process of discovery rather than an inquisition or as an opportunity for someone to make them look dumb, feel small or otherwise pass judgment on them.

So, for me, the first and most critical step in having a job interview be successful is to be frank and honest with yourself about the beliefs you have about the process itself. If you believe that this is an opportunity for you to be judged, to have to justify your existence or for you to fail, then it is highly unlikely that you'll be able to have a truly positive interview experience. You may squeak through and actually get the job, but it'll likely be in spite of yourself rather than because of yourself!

Beliefs can be darned difficult things to shift because they are often interwoven with other related beliefs about the way the world works. However, while you may not be able to totally let go of existing beliefs about how interviews really work, you can perhaps find a place inside where you can consider this next particular interview from a different perspective. Visualizing yourself as being offered the job, as smiling and being relaxed can be useful tools to help you create the shift in your inner awareness. Breathing deeply and rhythmically before and during the interview can also make a huge difference.

This shift in beliefs is often where I spend most of my coaching time with clients. If you find that you have a miserable interview track record and that none of the tips that follow make any difference for you, you may find that it is time to invest in finding a career coach who can work with you on those beliefs.

But first ...

Consider for a moment that the person interviewing you probably is as nervous about the interview process as you are. Unless that person is an HR specialist whose job it is to screen piles of applicants, you are dealing with someone who is paid to do something else and they interview candidates only occasionally. They have probably been advised by their HR folks or their bosses about all the do's and don'ts of the process: no sexist remarks, don't ask about age, religion or whether a person is planning a family. They are likely terrified of making a pig's foot of it. So keep that in mind as you consider the person or persons on the other side of the table from you in an interview. If that person came into your office or home, how would you help them to be more at ease? You'd likely smile, relax and begin to build rapport with them, right? So why not do that in an interview. A few generalized chit chat comments as everyone gets settled in goes a long

way to breaking the ice and setting the tone for what follows. Just make sure that it doesn't go on for too long and that you don't digress into a long story about your weekend or the bad traffic on your way to the interview.

In today's world it is interviewers will expect that you'll have done your homework. You'll have checked to see how long the interview is likely going to last so that you don't suddenly have to leave to check your parking meter or shut the interview down because it has gone on longer than you'd planned and you have to pick your child up from day-care. You'll have come dressed appropriately for the company you're being interviewed for. Despite what many dress-for-success gurus claim, a shirt and tie or a suit and heels are not always appropriate attire. I remember how a friend was razzed once he started work at a new company for showing up at the interview in a business suit, white shirt and tie. He'd been used to working as a manager in a major corporation and was shifting his career. The company which eventually hired him was a casual high-tech company where only the senior executives dressed up. His colleagues who did the interviewing found it quite funny that he didn't show up in jeans and a sports shirt, which was (and continues to be) standard dress in that organization.

Beyond those basics, you'll be expected to know something about the company you're being interviewed for: its lines of business, its strengths, its issues and you'll score extra interview points if you can position yourself within any of those. For example, if you are applying for a position in a firm that has recently been bought out by another company you can talk about any previous experience you've had with buy-outs that leaves you well positioned for the challenges of those transitions. If you know the company is expanding its line of services or products you can talk to how what you have to offer could be useful. Being able to not only show that you've taken the time to know the company but that you can already envision yourself having a place within the company is something potential employers like to hear.

Don't be surprised or offended if you perceive that you've been asked the same question more than once. Potential employers often seek to confirm your understanding of an issue that's important to them by asking the same question a couple of ways.

If you aren't clear about what's being asked of you, ask the interviewer to rephrase the question for you. If you notice that an interviewer doesn't appear to have followed your reply to a question, don't be shy about saying that you're not certain if your response was clear to them. It is always more powerful if you can own any possible misunderstanding: "I'm not certain if I made myself clear just now" is more powerful than "I'm not sure if you understood me just now".

Always, always, always have some substantive questions about the company, what interests you or what you're curious about to ask the interviewer(s). These are questions beyond the usual "what kind of benefits plan do you offer" or "what are the promotional opportunities in your company". They sound more like "I notice that your company is committed to work life balance. Can you tell me about what that looks like as an employee practice?" "I understand that the company is getting ready to go public in the

next year. What is your understanding of what this will mean to the average employee when it finally occurs.” “This job sounds great for me, and I am someone who is very serious about building a career. What is a typical career path for someone entering your company in this type of position.” Notice that they are all open ended questions that require the interviewer to think and then respond. This is your opportunity to interview the interviewer and to show that you have expectations of an employer, just like they have expectations of you.

And finally, when the interview is over, position yourself to maintain control of further contact. As well intentioned as people are when they are in interview situations, they all have busy jobs to get back to. They may tell you that they’ll be making their decision by next week and they’ll contact you. But that frequently doesn’t happen. Don’t be shy about saying something like “Great, you expect to make your choice within a week. I’ll expect to hear from you by next Wednesday and if anything happens that we don’t connect then, I’ll give you a quick call to check the status.” Wrapping up an interview in this manner means that you’ve left the door open to reconnect. You won’t spend all those hours worrying about whether you should or shouldn’t call. And you’ll have shown a prospective employer in a very real, tangible way that you are the sort of person to take charge of a situation. I once worked with a guy who got the job because he stayed in touch. Our mutual boss was not inspired by any of the many applicants and took weeks making a decision. Then one day he realized that he was looking for someone with tenacity and there was one guy who called every week to see if there was any change of status. He was the one who eventually got the position even though he hadn’t done that well in the interview!

And absolutely finally, ...the interview is not the end! Make certain that you send a thank you. An e-mail is acceptable in many environments but a hand-written note is always a nice touch. Whether you get the job or not you know that you have shown that you operate with grace and elegance. This is probably the single thing you can do that will shift a good interview experience to acing an interview! It isn’t just about the quality of the overall interview experience but it is about your capacity to sustain a relationship beyond the immediate face-to-face interaction.

Maintaining that relationship is very important because it isn’t at all unusual for candidates who aren’t selected for a particular job to be recommended to others within an organization. Many times in my corporate career I’d come across someone who didn’t quite fit my needs but I was happy to recommend them to other colleagues who were looking for people. And those who maintained the relationship started in the interview were always top of my list for passing on.

So remember that in acing an interview it helps tremendously if you can see it as an exploration rather than an inquisition. Good luck in your next interview. Remember to be curious, stay relaxed and remain in touch after the interview!

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