How to Handle the Interview Weakness Question

Mark recently blogged about the crazy advice being given - by the Wall Street Journal! - about how to handle the perennial interviewing question, "Tell me about a weakness." He was stunned by how lame some of the suggestions were, as well as the implication that a clever interviewee could trick the interviewing manager into accepting a non-responsive answer. We think it's funny how many folks think that "they" can fool "their" interviewer, but of course, if "they" were the one "interviewing", why, "that would be different."

Yeah right.

In this cast, we share one of the best interviewing answer templates you'll ever hear. It's simple, elegant, easy to deliver, and surprise, surprise: it directly answers the question.

One of our core issues in interviewing is to answer the question. No matter what you want to tell the interviewer, answer THEIR question first. If you feel compelled to add something, that's okay... but by gosh, whack us on the forehead with your answer right up front. BLUF [Bottom Line Up Front].

In the Wall Street Journal "advice," one of the ideas was to give a weakness that could be a strength - come on, we're just not STUPID. Cite a corrected weakness... uhh, that wouldn't be a weakness anymore, right? Another theory was, "deflect" which we couldn't even bring ourselves to read... And then also, "address the unspoken question." Uhhh. NO. Address the spoken one.

But ENOUGH. How DO we answer this question effectively?

First, let's agree on a couple of preparatory concepts. Then our answer has three simple parts:

1. **Preparatory Thoughts**
2. **Three Part Answer**
   a. **Briefly Qualify Your Answer**
   b. **State Your Weakness**

c. **Talk About What You're Doing To Improve In This Area**

1. **Preparatory Thoughts.**

We have four thoughts here before we move into our answer to the weakness question.

a. **Weaknesses are not fatal flaws**.

The reason so many people mess up this question is FEAR. They're afraid of being thought human, and so don't want to admit that they have weaknesses at all. Part of that comes from a misunderstanding of how to think about weaknesses. Here's how WE see it. We're not suggesting that what you're going to tell us is a dark and dirty secret, or is a character flaw, or a fatal flaw. When we ask about YOUR weaknesses, we're asking you to compare your skills to EACH OTHER, and be clear about which of those skills is NOT AS STRONG as some of your other skills. **This is no way implies that one of your weaker areas is down in the depths across all society.** By definition, half of your skills are strengths, half are weaknesses. BY DEFINITION.

If you're an above average performer - and if you're a manager or even a manager in training you ARE - a skill you consider a weakness might very well, when performed at that level, would be a strength for someone else. A weakness is a skill that you are not as good at as some of the things you think of as strengths. It we can get

over the fear that we're divulging a criminally negligent area, we'll do a lot better.

b. **You DO have weaknesses.**

And we know it. This is the part that shoots down the "deflect" theory of answering this question. You know you have weaknesses, we know WE have weaknesses... we think we're fine, we'll think you're fine if you share them with us. **If you do not answer this question, you get TWO STRIKES, where even a bad but direct answer can only get you one. The TWO strikes are: you don't have the confidence to talk about them, and you must have a lot, or at least big ones.** *This is the kiss of death.*

c. **Don't choose a weakness that is core to success in the job.**

You have more than one weakness because our definition compares your skills to one another. By definition, half are strengths, half are weaknesses. So you get to choose. Just don't choose persuasive ability if you're interviewing for sales, or analytical ability if you're going to be a financial analyst. Even if those areas ARE weaknesses, please just choose something else.

d. **You should know your answer in advance.**

You know you, you know your weaknesses, you know the job you're interviewing for. Pick your weakness before you ever walk in.

2. Three Part Answer.

Before we detail each part, here is an example to consider when we go through the rationale. "Every once in a while, I procrastinate on longer projects. I know what I'm supposed to do, but I focus on shorter term objectives on other projects. What I'm doing to address it is briefing others about my deadlines, and posting them so that others can keep me on track. I'm also very upfront about encouraging feedback from others when they worry I might be late. I also try to build some buffer into my own deadlines."

a. **Briefly Qualify Your Answer.**

This is just a way to clearly signify that this is a weakness and not a fatal flaw. If you start the answer with, "I procrastinate." you get a much stronger reaction from the recruiter. You're saying, this is a weakness for me, but not a deal breaker. Now, for those who might say, "But you said answer the question directly and immediately..." We say there's nothing wrong with a BRIEF introductory clause or phrase. This isn't talking about something else, or introducing other data or ideas. Just starting a sentence with an introductory phrase.

b. **State Your Weakness.**

We've already covered this one, really, in the prep comments above. We're not going to say what anyone should or shouldn't use. That is person and interview dependent. And to be clear, you wouldn't want to choose ethics, or racism, or violent tendencies.

c. **Talk About What You're Doing To Improve.**

Mention 2-3-4 things you're actively doing to address the weakness. The idea is that it may still be a weakness relative to your strengths a year from now, but your overall performance will have improved, and this skill won't cause you to drop balls.

Wrap Up
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2. **Three Part Answer**
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   b. **State Your Weakness**
   c. **Talk About What You're Doing To Improve In This Area**

That's it. Three parts: briefly qualify, state the weakness, and discuss improvement efforts. Sure beats the heck out of "deflect".