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Creating Behavioral Interview Questions

Now that you know the behaviors that are most important, it's time to develop behavioral interview questions that will allow you to assess candidates against them.

The most effective interview technique in the world today is to use behavioral interview questions. There are reams of data on the technique, comparing it to others. Until there's a new way (AI, perhaps), you can't call yourself a good or professional interviewer unless you're asking behavioral questions.

The best example of behavioral interviewing today surprises many managers. It's software developers being asked to write code or debug some code during a technical interview. While most of us don't think of this as a behavioral interview, it is. It proceeds from the same premise: Past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. If the primary behavior in the role is writing code, and you can actually assess that behavior, why wouldn't you?

The same would apply to a role where using spreadsheets was a key factor. There are wide disparities in how people assess their own skills. Some people consider themselves experts in MS Excel,

for instance, but can't create a pivot table. Why not assess their behavior? We have heard surely a hundred anecdotes of managers doing so and finding "experts" who stare at some relatively simple Excel problem and can't even begin to solve it.

This is not to say that every role lends itself to such a test. It is to make the point that such a test *is in fact a form of a behavioral interview*. Past behavior/performance is the best predictor of future behavior, and in these cases, objective skills can be behaviorally "tested."

Of course, typical behavioral interviews do "test" such job skills. Of course, it's not possible* to "test" someone's ability, for instance, to get a team aligned and communicate fully over a several-month project. So we *ask questions about past examples* of the behaviors we are looking for rather than *directly testing them*.

You've probably heard or experienced some of the other formats and types of questions that are asked in interviews. Almost all of them are worthless *because they are terrible predictors of true positives and true negatives*.

- Asking, for instance, hypothetical questions: "What would you do if…". This only gives the candidate a chance to hazard what is likely a very good guess at what the right answer is.
- Asking intellectually challenging questions: "How many ping pong balls can fit in a modern passenger airplane?" This has been popular of late (but mainly because it makes interesting news and some of the companies who use it are of interest to many).

* Some companies attempt to re-create such skills by using exercises, often as part of an "Assessment Center." These can work, but are almost always a company-wide program, involving HR and perhaps an entire department to run the simulations with volunteers and various exercises lasting usually a whole day. An individual manager can't replicate this.

But they're not useful questions unless the role requires such estimation and problem solving on short notice. And while there are such roles (management consulting, for instance), it's unlikely yours is one of them.

Even the classic question, "Tell me about a weakness/Tell me your greatest weakness," isn't all that useful, according to interview results and performance comparisons. While it does get to self-awareness, that's usually something easily determined by asking a number of behavioral questions. What's more, high performance comes from leveraging strengths, not from improving someone's weaknesses. Also, sadly, most interviewees aren't terribly truthful with their answers.

"Unstructured" interviews have become more popular. They are also equally terrible at predicting performance. This is where the candidate asks all of the questions. They're certainly easier for the interviewer to prepare for, and maybe even more "fun" for the interviewer. But that's irrelevant. What matters in interviewing is efficient prediction of future performance.

There's another "type" of interview that can be called "unstructured." This is the interview conducted by the unprepared interviewer. This is just an unprofessional way to go about doing the most important strategic job of managers: assessing talent. It's funny that those who conduct these interviews reject other ways because the *other* ways don't have "data" to support them. Maybe funny is too kind a characterization.

If you're a manager who tends to be analytical and you're looking for data to support whatever managerial/professional approaches you take: *In my more than 30 years of interviewing candidates all over the world, there has never been any system that has any significant predictive effectiveness other than behavioral interviewing.*

How a Simple Behavioral Interview Question SOUNDS

A good behavioral question has three parts: the helpful lead-in, an open-ended beginning, and the behavior you're looking for. Put it all together, and it sounds like this:

- "Sometimes we have to provide service to a difficult person. Tell me about a time when you served someone whom others might have described as difficult?"
- "We manage a great deal of data and systems relied upon by other departments. Describe a situation when it's been necessary for you to create and maintain data accurately. What did you do to ensure the data began and remained accurate?"
- "This role deals with a lot of details that together make a big difference. Describe a situation when you noticed a particularly important detail and had to alert others to its importance."
- "You have to think broadly to achieve in this role. Describe a situation when you had to work to consider all relevant information, even some that others might have not valued, to make a better decision."

Each of these questions has three parts. It's the use of the three-step building process that makes creating a behavioral interview question simple.

The Three Parts of a Simple Behavioral Interview Question—And Why

We've already shown the three parts: the lead, the question, and the behavior. Before we describe how to build the overall question, it helps to explain *why* the parts are important to the question.

Part 1 is the lead. It's often skipped, but it's there for a *big* reason. The lead tells the candidate exactly what we're going to expect in the job. We're *telegraphing* what we're looking for. We're making

it easy, ***but only for those who have what we're looking for. We can telegraph what we're expecting a candidate to do in the job because if he hasn't done it, it will be obvious when we probe any answer that isn't based on direct and related experience.***

Frankly, we ***want*** to make it easy for those who have the experiences we want. We've said it before—when decisions are tough, the decision support method ought to "spread the field"—make the worst performer as far from the best as we can get them.

Part 2, the question itself, asks for an expansive answer. Note that in our example question we're making a request rather than asking a question: "Tell me about a time when…". You don't want to start with a who or a what or a why, generally. Those are certainly good question words for many interview questions, but generally ***not*** for behavioral questions. Behavioral interview questions suggest the need for a narrative, a description, a longer answer than most candidates tend to deliver to who/what/why questions.

Part 3, the behavior part of the question, is closely related to the lead. In the lead, we give the candidates an idea of what our job will require them to do. In the behavior part, at the end, we state specifically what we're looking for from their answers. It's couched in the form of a situation. What's interesting about this is that many candidates don't hear the behavior. They've heard the lead, they think they can just talk about a recent experience that matches what we've shared, and they either don't choose well or don't have what we're looking for.

But that's okay, because if they don't have it, we want to know that, and if they *do* have it but don't highlight it, we'll be probing their answers to see whether it's there.

How to Create Part 1: The Lead

There are really two parts to creating the Lead. The first is thinking about the key activities that you expect in this role. The second is actually crafting the wording, which is pretty easy.

For the first part, the activities we expect from the role, you can do this in one of two ways. You can put your feet up and think about your best performers in the role. [Please don't bother thinking about the lower performers. Please set the bar high.] Ask yourself any and/or all of the questions below. Then write down your answers, while thinking of perhaps two or three members of your team, one at a time.

- If I followed each of them around for a day, what would I see them do?
- What reports do they provide me about their work, and what do those reports suggest they are doing?
- What work product do they produce that I report on to the organization?
- What does my top performer do that makes her so good?
- What are the one or two metrics that this team lives and dies with, and what activities do they require?

What this gives you is a whole lot of "stuff"—they might not exactly be behaviors, but that's okay. It might be "stuff" like "runs project meetings," "produces C++ code for our core application," "inspects bridges and compares them to published standards," or "creates new product ideas."

The other way to do this is even easier—ask your directs to answer the questions. You have to change the questions to their point of view, but that's easy enough. And by the way, give them no more than 48 hours to do it. We've found that all the good work happens right in the beginning.

Now for crafting the wording. Simply put the "stuff"—the behaviors, if you've been that precise—into a lead-in statement, a stand-alone sentence, with an introductory phrase that approximates, "Periodically we engage in behaviors in this area here." Some examples:

- "We often are required to come up with new product ideas."
- "Sometimes we have to recommend quality initiatives with a lengthy presentation."
- "Frequently we're asked to deliver product to customers within narrow delivery timelines."
- "We routinely have to persuade customers to think differently about pricing."

How to Create Part 2: The Question

This is the easiest part of all three. You can choose from a prepared list.

- Tell me about a time when you …
- Describe a situation where you …
- When have you had to …
- Walk me through an experience where you …
- Share with me an example of you demonstrating …
- Give me an example of a time when you …
- Give me an example of a situation where you …
- Think of some time when you …

There are more that you could use if you prefer. But don't spend too much time here: Spend less here and more time on knowing what behaviors matter in the job.

How to Create Part 3: The Behavior

Simply take those behaviors—that "stuff" from your work in prepping part one—and add it to the question that you started in part two.

Part one and part three are closely related. If you use the exact same words, it might seem funny to you, so change them a bit.