

How to Ace an Interview

You get an interview through connections or maybe your resume. You get a job through body language and a few compelling stories.

MOST PEOPLE MISCONSTRUE the task that lies before them in the job interview. Some think the interview is a kind of test, and to pass it they must answer all the questions correctly. Others imagine that it's all about finding out the interviewer's secret passion for fly-fishing and spending the hour talking about how to cast.

Neither approach will get you the job. Instead, think of a job interview as having two purposes:

- ❶ Establishing basic trust with the interviewer.
- ❷ Giving the interviewer a few clear ideas about what you can do for the company.

Achieving both of these goals when you're under pressure takes some planning and advance work. At the most fundamental level, you need to figure out how to align yourself with both the interviewer and the company. So begin by finding out as much as you can about both. Look for things you have in common with the person interviewing you and values you share with the company. Once you've done your homework, you're ready to focus on the interview itself.

A question of trust

Your primary goal is to establish basic trust with the interviewer. You have only a short time to do so, and it is essential.

There isn't much science to interviewing; most interviewers have little idea of what they're doing beyond asking some pet questions and coming away

with a "gut feeling" about the person. So give your interviewer a good gut feeling. Project trustworthiness.

How do you accomplish that difficult feat when you're nervous and on the spot? If you're a natural actor, the task is simple. Act comfortable, poised, and friendly. Mirror the body language of the interviewer, especially when she is being open with you. If her body language is reserved or hostile—say, her arms are crossed and she's half turned away from you—don't mirror that. Wait for a moment of openness.

This kind of acting is difficult to do, however, and most of us don't do it very well. But if you prepare yourself mentally and emotionally, the body language will follow. Look for ways in which you and the interviewer are alike and talk about them; your body language will then naturally copy hers. Don't just settle for finding favorite sports teams in common, though; this is superficial stuff. Look for experiences or passions you both share. Have you both vacationed in Aruba? That's a little better. What was that holiday like? What were the emotions you both experienced?

Even better is to discover work-related interests in common and focus on the emotional currents that drive those. Do you both have a passion for creating order out of chaos? Are you list-driven, or are you creative types who like to take each day as it comes?

You can't simply ask these questions; the topics have to come up in anecdotes, examples, and stories that reveal how the interviewer thinks. In short,

you have to interview the interviewer. Which leads to the second point.

Lay out what you can do

Your resume lists all your accomplishments. But they're in the past. What you need to communicate is how you are going to help the company in the future. The way to start is by doing your homework on the company. Find out how you can help. Then match three ideas with your experience where you've done something like it in the past.

These experiences have to be chosen with care. There's nothing wrong with talking about your college sports triumphs—if you can compellingly relate them to the job you want to do for the company. And by the way, don't just talk about teamwork. That's a cliché. Sports stories, in particular, have to be chosen and shaped with attention to the point that they make for the interview.

Think of your experiences as potential parables—stories with a moral. Anecdotes quickly become maddening when they are not sufficiently pointed. How many times has your mind wandered seconds into this kind of story?

Last Wednesday—or was it Tuesday? No, it was Wednesday, because my wife always takes the boys to Scouts on Wednesday, and she was late getting back from Scouts, which is why I remembered—I was talking to my friend Bill—or was it Jim? Yes, it was Jim because he was running ragged that day....

You get the idea. We're a minute into the story and we don't even have the beginnings of a glimmer of a point on the horizon. It is good to personalize stories—make them about you or someone you know. But personal stories have to be especially well shaped, or the interviewer won't be able to bear to listen to them.

In an interview, the stakes are very high. Make your stories do double duty, at the least. They should illustrate the good job you'll be able to do for the company if you're hired. And they should have an emotional subtext that shows you to be loyal, trustworthy, a hard worker—some personal quality you need to get across.

You should prepare one story that highlights a significant failure you've had, a story that shows you learning from your mistakes. Why a failure? Some interviewers may ask about a failure you've experienced, and if you're not prepared, your answer may harm rather than help you. Other interviewers will appreciate the subtext: That you're big enough to admit to making mistakes and to learn from them. This will magnify you in the interviewer's mind, not diminish you. And such stories have the charm of the unexpected during an interview. Your goal in these situations is first not to give the interviewer a reason to eliminate you, and second to give him some reason to remember you, to make yourself stand out in some way from the herd.

Finally, prepare some specific questions for the interviewer. When the interviewer asks, "Now what ques-

tions do you have for us?" nothing is more lame than saying, "Uh, I don't really have any, I guess." So be prepared to ask specific questions that your research has unearthed. What was the thinking behind a marketing campaign? A new product launch? How well does the company's vision line up with its actual activities? And always have questions like the following up your sleeve:

- What would constitute success in this job?
- How would you know that it has been achieved?
- Can you give me an example of a previous success?
- How was the employee rewarded?
- Can you give me an example of a significant failure someone on the team has experienced?
- What happened? Was the employee punished?

Now go interview with confidence. Lean forward, show some excitement, and tell the interviewer how the experience you gained herding llamas in Peru can help her company thrive in the difficult economic environment we find ourselves in. Perhaps herding

llamas is ideal training for becoming an excellent project manager, one who brings costs down and speeds up com-

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pletion times. Be as specific as you can, especially if invited to by the interviewer.

Don't overpromise. But this is not a time to be shy. It's unlikely that others will recognize your hidden promise if you don't point it out. Especially if your experience doesn't precisely match the new job, you'll need to do some bridging and explaining to show why you can succeed in the new environment.

Get in the right frame of mind, and your body language will send the right trust messages. Go in armed with what you can do for the company, and you'll get the offer. What you do with the offer is up to you. □

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