

The Importance of Telling a Good Story in an Interview

By Kristin Peterson, Career Consultant

Most of you have experienced a behavioral interview at some point in your job-hunting. Behavioral interviewing has become a popular method with many companies for selecting candidates over the past 15 years. The idea behind behavioral interviewing is that the candidate's past performance is the most accurate predictor of future performance. To learn more about the candidate's job performance, the interviewer will query the candidate on how they have handled a certain situation in their past. Many of these questions start with "Can you give me an example of a time..." or "Tell me about a time when." Knowing how to respond to these questions effectively is crucial to succeeding in an interview.

Learn to showcase your talents

As an interviewer, a common mistake I have seen is that candidates respond to these questions in the future tense. Rather than saying what they have already accomplished, they tell me what they would do if faced with a particular situation. All of us could narrate incredible stories about what we would do if faced with a certain circumstance, but answering this way does not give the interviewer enough information and does not showcase your best qualities. Additionally, you may appear unprepared, evasive, or not qualified for the position due to the lack of information received by the interviewer. Being able to "tell your story," i.e. your qualifications, skills, and accomplishments, is critical.

Decide what qualities you want to convey

Developing a bag of tricks, i.e. your stories, is the most important aspect of interview preparation. However, it is impossible to have a story for every possible question you may be asked! To select which stories to tell, create a list of what you think your best qualities are. Perhaps you are detail-oriented, calm during a crisis, or a good planner. Pare down the list based on your most important traits, and the qualities that you think the employer is seeking. You can learn more about what the employer is looking for by studying the company's website, reviewing the job description, and talking to people you know at the company. Remember that most companies have competencies assigned to the positions they are hiring for, and your thorough research will enable you to prove that you are the best fit for the job.

Craft the stories

Reflect on accomplishments of your past that demonstrate the qualities you have selected. The examples should draw from several of your past jobs, and may also include other areas of your life such as volunteer experiences. Think of projects where your role was integral to the positive result, as increased probing by a good interviewer may prove that perhaps you were just on a committee and were not directly responsible for the success that you are taking full ownership for. Do not limit yourself to only positive experiences, however. Interviewers love to ask negative questions that invite you to tell them your worst qualities. Include in your bag of tricks a couple of examples about times when things might have ended negatively, but be sure to include a positive spin about how you overcame the negative experience.

Prepare Yourself

Using the SAR method (Situation, Action, Response), create vignettes from your experiences that demonstrate these attributes that you have selected. The SAR method is an effective and succinct way to tell an interviewer about yourself. A good story starts with the presentation of the background information, moves on to the actions that you took, then ends with the positive conclusion and the impact that your actions had. Each story should be no longer than 2 minutes; this is where practice is key.

If you are properly prepared for your interview, you will know who your interviewers are, and the positions they hold. Expect that the quality a VP is looking for to be different from someone who will be your peer. You, therefore, should be able to select stories that will be appropriate for each person. If you want to convey to the VP that you are a strategic thinker, then be sure to tell a story that leveraged your strategic abilities during the interview with the VP. If you are a good team player, then this is a story you may want to tell the person who could be your peer.

Practice, practice, practice

Practice telling the stories to a friend or outloud to yourself. If you find that you tend to ramble in interviews, the utilization of the SAR method and a timer will help you to speak with more purpose and more succinctly. You will also find that practicing how to tell a good story is a great confidence-builder, as you are repeating to yourself what your best qualities are! You may also find it helpful to write down one sentence per story on the notepad that you bring into the interview to cue your memory.

Remember, coming to the interview with your bag of tricks helps you to control the direction of the interview. This control will enable you to best express the traits you are seeking to convey, and therefore, convince the interviewer that you are the best fit for the job! Good luck!

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