

One of My Favorite Interview Questions

By Jim Symcox

Let me describe what I have found to be the single best interview question of all time: "Can you please describe your most significant accomplishment?" It's a great way to start an interview. I spend about 10 minutes on this question, gaining insight in the results achieved, the environment, and the process used to achieve the results. I then repeat the question to gain broader insight into the trend of team and individual accomplishments and see how they relate to specific job needs.

But my favorite question is something completely different. It takes this understanding of performance to another level. It reveals problem solving, insight, intelligence, potential, vision, and leadership. *The question is, "If you were to get this job, how would you go about solving this (major/typical) problem?"*

For example, if we're hiring a sales manager, the form of the question might be, "How would you go about ensuring that the team met quota every month?" For an engineer, it might be, "How would you design and develop this product to ensure it's in production by next March?"

I have used something similar for Director level positions in the past: "If you were to get this job, how long would it take you to prepare an action plan to ensure the department was meeting all its critical objectives?" This is a question about thinking, planning, and strategizing. It gets at an important aspect of top performers.

The best candidates I've met in my 20 years in executive search all have the ability to anticipate the needs of the job before starting. They can figure out very quickly what's wrong or what's necessary to accomplish a task, what they need to do to implement a solution, and what resources they need to do it. And they have a track record of implementing these changes. Success is about planning to accomplish a major task, and then delivering on these plans.

The "how would you" question gets at the planning and visualization aspect of every successful accomplishment. A lack of planning and visualization skills is one of the key reasons projects come up short, budgets are overrun, implementation is slow or problems go unresolved.

I allow the candidates to ask me questions to gain more insight into the specific problem(s) or project(s) under discussion. "What's the budget, the time frame, the staff, the resources?" are all great questions. Their questions provide me with another dimension to assess the candidate's competency and fit.

As an interviewer, when you try this question out, imagine that you're turning off the spotlights, and that you're just going to have a give-and-take discussion about real job needs and problems. This is no longer an interview, it's just how you'd be talking with the person (candidate) if he or she were to get the job. So try it out beforehand to get a feel for the person's style. At the end of the interview, I categorize the candidate's responses along four dimensions. These won't make a lot of sense right away, but after a few interviews you'll see these patterns emerge. They'll be very helpful as you evaluate a candidate's current ability to do the work and their future potential.

1. Determine if the reasoning is complex, advanced or superficial. The best candidates demonstrate a good understanding of the cause and effect of their actions. Superficial reasoning is evidenced by a bunch of seemingly unrelated ideas. Reasoning is more advanced if the ideas logically link together.
2. Is the focus technical, tactical or strategic? Candidates with a pure technical focus get into process details. Those with a tactical bent address more the results of the process. A strategic focus is represented by a longer time horizon, typically six months or more.
3. Team or individual emphasis. Do the candidate's ideas involve others? This is very revealing when compared to actual accomplishments. It's especially important if you're hiring a manager.
4. Functional or multifunctional perspective. The best candidates understand the implications of their job on other people and other functions. Listen for this as the candidate plans out a task and asks questions.

Pure behavioral interviewers don't like this type of job problem solving question too much. They feel it overvalues the planning aspects of the job, instead of actual accomplishments. They have a point. If the question doesn't involve an actual problem a candidate would face on the job, then I believe the information obtained is irrelevant. "Why is a manhole cover round?" is a favorite question of some companies. The thinking is that it reveals reasoning and logic. It's a great question if a person is designing mechanical components used in industrial products, but misleading if you want to get at the creative side of a marketing person. Something like, "How would you launch the new line to increase market share by 10 points?" would be a more valuable line of questioning to pursue.

Behaviorists don't like this accommodation, either. This is where I disagree. The ability to think and plan out an assignment provides very valuable information about a candidate's potential and intellectual compatibility. This is why it's my favorite question. It quickly separates the strong from the average. A top person can quickly move to the head of the pack, as they advocate new ideas and different perspectives. As long as you combine these with a track record of achieving-related results, you won't go wrong. Try this form of problem-solving question a few times. It might soon become your favorite question, too.