



## A Quick Guide for Effective Behavioral Interviewing

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***Have you ever had to fire someone?*** Occasionally it is because they can't or don't want to do the job, but usually it is because of poor conduct. Maybe they lied, stole, or were simply disrespectful of others. Maybe they could not control their temper. Maybe they wouldn't show up on time. Somehow they lacked character and brought you problems, instead of value.

You thought of an incident, didn't you? You're not alone.

There is a good chance you have regrets that you didn't handle things sooner, or differently. You learn from your mistakes. That is what people with good character do - they recognize mistakes and make adjustments.

You can expose a persons' character with a well-constructed and managed behavioral interview.

You have probably heard of the 'behavioral interview' before. Education organizations everywhere offer 1 day (or more) courses to train folks to use this technique. Let me simplify it for you.

In the behavioral interview, the candidate tells real-life stories and the interviewer interrupts, prods and challenges the candidate to expose as much as possible about what really happened. A good interviewer learns about the character of the candidate, mistakes they've made, how honest they are about their past, and how the candidate has learned and adapted to get to where they are (or are not) today. The Behavioral Interview is based on the idea that past performance is the best predictor of future performance – and how the person handled situations in the past (and the lessons learned from the resulting success or failure) is the best predictor of how the person will handle situations when working for you.

Simple, huh?

Until you try it. It is a skill that takes some practice (as all skills do). Let us simplify it for you with a process and then by exposing the pitfalls so you know how to get past them. You can get good at this with just a little on-the-job practice.

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Only 5 steps are required:

- 1) Prepare the Demands (Questions)
- 2) Set the Stage
- 3) Prepare the Candidate
- 4) Control the Interview
- 5) Close the Interview

**Prepare the Demands.** All of the ‘questions’ start with the words “Tell me about a time . . .” or “Tell me a real story about . . .” or “Tell me about the steps you have taken to . . .”. It is not really a question, it is a demand. You want to make sure you cannot be answered with just a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Reserve the questions for step 4.

Using the End-in-Mind Hiring model, set up your demands on a tablet (paper or electronic) that allows you to take notes during the interview. Since each candidate is unique, but the model is always the same, your questions will be a little different for each candidate depending on how each one differs from the model. Stick to 2 or 3 things you want to know in each circle of the model. It may seem like it will take too long, but you’ll find candidates responding to one demand will offer responses that fit other demands, so you won’t have to use them all. Some sample demands follow.

To address natural fit gaps. If you assess a person’s traits and know the traits that are most shared by high-performers (like with do the PXT Select™), you can build demand statements that will let you know if the candidate has learned to adjust, or not.

- When the candidate is less social than the model performer; *“Tell me about a time when you felt the team was bigger than it needed to be or had too much small talk going on.”*
- When the candidate has a lower vocabulary than that of the model performer; *“Tell a real story about a time you had to work through some written directions or instructions that were not clear.”*

To address skill or knowledge gaps. Very few people meet all the skills and qualifications you set out to find. The resume does not always provide the details you need.

- When a certification is preferred or missing; *“What steps have you taken to be a CPA or keep up with the changes in the accounting world?”*
- When supervisory experience needs exploration; *“Tell me a story about the best (worst) team you had to lead.”*

To address value and principle alignment. These questions are about character. Make sure the characteristic you seek to know about is highly important for job success.

- When you want to know more about reliability; *“Tell me about a time when circumstances would not allow you to meet an initial promise or deadline.”*

- When you want to know more about how they manage conflict; *“Tell me about a time you had to manage a serious conflict.”*

Create a final, interview-ending demand just in case you need it. Make it easy to answer in a positive way and put it at the bottom of your tablet. You will only need it if you choose to end the interview abruptly. Make it simple, like *“Tell me about a time you felt really appreciated.”*

**Set the Stage.** The interview environment should mimic, if not match, the environment that you would use with any employee when dealing with confidential matters. Confidential matters must be protected from interruptions and so must the interview. It only works if you are prepared to listen carefully, and that means you won't be talking much. If you spend more than 10% of the time talking, you cannot learn what you need to know. Selling the candidate on the job or company comes only after you finish interviewing everybody.

This is your turf. Candidates often struggle with demands and need a few minutes to think. Make sure you have access to email or some minor distraction so you can turn away from the candidate when they need time to think of a real life example. If you have more than one interviewer in the room, all should plan on having a similar distraction. Doing this sends a message to the candidate that it's okay to think; you want the candidate to give a real answer, and that can be difficult when they're trying to play *“Beat the Clock.”*

Make sure your tablet of demands are ready and that your pen works. It is best if you put the date and time at the top of the first page, and the candidates name on each page. You do not want to mix these up later. With multiple interviewers, it is a good idea to split up the demands even though everyone should be taking notes for the whole interview.

**Prepare the Candidate.** Many folks have not been through a true behavioral interview, and it can be nerve-racking. It goes better when the candidate knows the rules, and what to expect. Use their name frequently. We'll refer to *“Pat”* in our examples here.

Here is a suggested script to start the questioning:

*Hi Pat. We are [or I am] going to ask you to tell some real life stories today about the things you've done and the people you've worked with. You don't have to stick to just your most recent job, or any job, to give examples. You can include experiences with volunteer projects or even school situations.*

*Sometimes you may need a few minutes to think of a situation, and that's fine because we all have a few emails to address, so we can give you that time. However, Pat, we do want you to tell us about the first situation that comes to mind, even if you think it's a bad example. We are as interested in how you deal with mistakes as we are in how you deal with great successes. If you insist on being mistake-free, we insist on being skeptical.*

*Pat, we will interrupt you a lot. We will ask you for specifics when you describe each situation, like people's names, how you responded, and even how you felt about the situation. Please try not to*

*generalize, just tell us the story so we can learn as much as possible about you. Sometimes we may cut you off just to keep the process moving. To make sure we get it right, we will take some notes while you are talking.*

*We won't make a decision right away. We'll compare our notes about the things you tell us with our job needs and call you about the next step after all the interviews on finished on Friday [or whenever interviews end].*

*We'll let you ask us a few questions toward the end of the interview. Do you have questions about the process, Pat?*

**Control the interview.** Now give your first demand and get quiet except for quick, short questions to guide the story telling. Continue to use the candidate's name, and other names as the candidate introduces them to the story. When the candidate is having a hard time thinking of an incident, don't turn into the war interrogator. Give them the time and turn away from them to the email or other planned distraction. Say something like *"Do you need a minute, Pat? Go ahead, and signal me when it comes to you."*

Once they have the incident at the top of their mind, use the most basic of questions, the journalism six;

- 1) Who
- 2) What
- 3) Where
- 4) When
- 5) Why, &
- 6) How?

Reinforce the "What" and "How" questions with an occasional follow-on of the words "think" or "feel."

Your questions are in direct response to the incident being described. They should sound something like these:

- *How many were on that team, Pat?*
- *Who was trying to get it done earlier?*
- *Why were you involved?*
- *What was Sally's role?*
- *How did you feel about the result?*
- *Where was the boss?*
- *When was the deadline?*
- *What did you think of the plan, Pat?*
- *How long were you on that project?*

When you have enough from one situation, interrupt with a *"Thanks, Pat. Let's move on to another situation."* Then introduce another demand statement and start again. It does not have to be in a

specific order, as some responses will naturally segue to another demand. Your main job is to listen and keep notes.

**Close the Interview.** When the interview goes well, it ends pretty naturally. When it is going poorly, you can end an interview on a positive note by jumping to the last demand on the tablet. Don't waste your time if the candidate leads you to the problems listed in the pitfalls section.

Closing is simple. Thank the candidate, and ask them for any questions they have about the process, job or company. Keep taking notes as needed. It is OK to look at the clock at this point if you need to keep it short.

It is too soon to make a decision. When the candidate has left, take a quick look at the tablet and add notes before you forget.

### **Avoiding the Pitfalls.**

When candidates can't, or won't, tell you real stories you need to save your time and effort. After all, will you hire someone who can't or won't do the job? Learn to recognize and deal with the pitfalls when they happen. The pitfalls to avoid are underlined.

Break the Silence. Don't do it. 'Type A' personalities, social extroverts and fast decision makers abhor silence. You are one of them if someone gave you a dirty look the last time you were talking in the theater. Use the technique provided in the first paragraph of the 'Control the Interview' section and let the candidate continue the show. You can decide later if you ever want to see the show again.

Set a Time to End the Interview. It is still your turf. You can end the interview anytime you see fit. Avoid promises and setting expectations about the length of the interview. It's over when you decide it's over.

Allow Generalizations. When the candidate starts using words like "When that happens to me I . . .", or "If that happens . . ." they are no longer talking about a real-life. Interrupt them, and remind them that you need know about a time that it really did happen. If a candidate slips into generalizations too often, end the interview with the last demand on the tablet. The candidate is either inexperienced or not being honest with you.

End on a Bad Example. When the candidate gives a story that is not flattering, demand that they tell you about the next time something similar happened. You need to see if they learn from mistakes.

Sell the Job or company. It is their job to sell. You are the buyer, purchasing talent.

Argue. This is a tough technique and you will catch candidates in inconsistencies and lies when they change what they remember, or can't give specifics about their accomplishments. If a candidate gets cornered and assertive, end the interview with the last demand on the tablet.

Take Inappropriate Notes. Never write down race or other protected class information as a way to remember a candidate. Candidates will sometimes expose information relating to marital status, sexual

preference, past alcoholism or other health issues and a host of things that can run afoul of discrimination laws. Don't take the bait and write it in the notes. Notes are discoverable in the legal process. If you built the End-in-Mind Hiring model, the questions are all based on job-related and legal things you can use to make a decision.

Decide Based on How You Feel. Studies show that interviewers are often more excited about the first interview and the final interview and attribute that to the candidate. Make sure you finalize and complete your notes at the end of each interview, but delay decisions until after you compare all candidates.

Destroy the Candidate. Sometimes a candidate just can't think of a real-life situation. They could be too nervous. You can help by moving on and trying another demand, giving them a short water break, or reminding them that they can talk about a project or team that was not at work.

With a little practice, this technique is powerful and even fun. You will be amazed about how much you can learn about a person if you keep them talking. Many odd and funny things will occur. One thing you are sure to hear from a future great employee is *"I figured you would never call me back after everything I told you in the interview."*

## About the Author



**Kirk Young** is the President of Job Match Assessment, Inc. founded in 2002. Prior to JobMatch, he progressed through 9 management and HR roles with 3 large firms; Safelite AutoGlass®, Unilever and Ernst & Young Consulting. Today, JobMatch serves over 300 clients with candidate and employee assessment for job fit, on-boarding, promotion, development, team and conflict management.

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