Strategy 3: Probe to Gather More Complete Behavioral Data

Candidates, even sophisticated ones, may respond to well-constructed behavioral questions with their opinions of what they did rather than accurate descriptions of the actions they took. For example, they say,

- I led the team.
- I controlled the budget.
- I applied my technical skills to solve the problem.

In each case, the italicized word reflects an ambiguous label. How did the person “lead” the team? There are many possibilities. One objective of behavioral probing is to uncover the true meaning of the actions behind the labels. When you hear words that could have multiple meanings, probe with questions such as these:

- What did you do?
- How did you do it?
- Why did you do it?

Often in response to probing questions, candidates still respond with labels. Part of the reason for this is that, like all of us, they often use labels in everyday language as shortcuts to communication. As the interviewer, be assertive without being aggressive. Sometimes you will need to probe the same response more than once. Remember that the primary objective of probing is to understand how the candidate has behaved, not to obtain the right answer. Suspend your judgment during the interview.

You will know that sufficient probing has occurred when you can describe how the candidate has behaved. See whether you feel you could replicate the candidate’s behavior, based on the response. For example, if someone said, “I resolved team
confront, "would you be able to describe how that individual did so? Or if the candidate said, "I identified their common objectives and proposed sharing resources and restructuring the schedule," would you know how to replicate the behavior? Again, do not judge whether what the candidate did was the right thing to do, just make sure that you know exactly what actions the candidate took.

A second purpose of probing is to understand the outcomes of the candidate’s actions. Even when candidates describe their actions, they often do not describe what resulted from the actions. Organizations are typically looking for individuals whose actions produced positive results. To understand what the candidate accomplished, you can ask one or more of these questions:

- What resulted from your actions?
- How did the organization benefit from your actions?
- Would you do anything differently and why?

This last probe is especially important and useful. The purpose of interviewing is to predict performance. This probe provides an indicator of how the candidate will behave, which is what we are trying to predict. Here are some more tactics for probing responses:

- Ask how a candidate’s behavior changed as a result of the experience.

People often feel they learned something, when they really have not. For example, you could ask a candidate, “Did you learn anything from that action?” As the question is worded, this question measures opinion, rather than behavior. The key word should be how. A more effective probe would be, “How have you acted differently as a result of what you learned in this situation?” The idea is that if people learn something, they demonstrate it through their behavior.
- **Ask candidates about results.**
  Some interviewers ask, “Did it work?” or “How did it work out?” These probes are not likely to lead to a truthful answer. Few candidates will admit, “It was a total failure.” A better probe might be, “What resulted from what you did and how do you know this occurred?” or “How did you measure your success?”

- **Vary your style of probing to reduce a feeling of interrogation.**
  If you continually use the same question format for your probes, your approach will eventually wear on candidates and make them feel that it is more an interrogation than an interview. One way to avoid this is to simply express an interest in more information, while at the same time demonstrating an appreciation of the challenges in the situation. (For example, you could say, “That must have been hard to do. How did you go about getting their approval?”)

While we have suggested earlier the need to probe more than once to get a good understanding of how the candidate has behaved, sometimes “there is no there, there” and the candidate simply does not have a behavior to support a statement. Be alert to the need to back off when the candidate is unable to provide specifics.

- **Probe “red flags” but do not assume they are necessarily a bad sign.**
  Red flags are comments that a candidate makes that leave the interviewer with the impression the candidate may have behaved inappropriately in a past situation. Often what the candidate reveals may initially seem to be a behavioral problem, but can actually be an indicator of a competency requirement. When probed, red flags reveal specific and important aspects of the candidate’s behavior. In one interview, a candidate for executive director of a large not-for-profit agency revealed that she had left her last position because of a conflict with the board of directors. Naturally, this was a red flag for the board members who were
conducting the interview, so they probed by asking her about the conflict and what she had done. In answering the question, the candidate explained that her former board had directed her to withhold certain financial information from a funding agency. While the directive might not have been illegal, she felt it was clearly unethical and resigned when she could not persuade the board to accept her recommendation. Only by probing for details could the interviewers get a clear understanding of the incident that led to the conflict and the candidate’s behaviors in it.

- Avoid the normal tendency to rush to judgment—take descriptive rather than evaluative notes and suspend judgment during the interview process.

As an interviewer, you are like a reporter or journalist gathering the facts and putting them together to make the story. A good journalist would not write the story until all the facts were gathered. Unfortunately, some interviewers attempt to “write the story” by rushing to an opinion of a candidate before the facts are in. One way to control for this tendency is to take descriptive notes during the interview process. Focus your notes on describing the specific actions taken by the candidate, and avoid evaluative language and generic labels such as “did a good job” or “led the team.”

In conjunction with the emphasis on description, focus the interview process on attaining the best understanding possible of what the candidate has done in situations similar to those that will determine success on the job. During the interview, the goal is not to judge whether the actions taken were the right ones. Interviewers who are making judgments when they should be gathering data are likely to miss important pieces of information and may fall into one of many judgment errors that we discuss in Chapter Six. Suspending judgment is a skill that requires discipline—most of us tend to rush to judgment when we first meet people and to form opinions based on our first impressions.
Strategy 4: Reinforce the Impressions You Want to Create

You can reinforce the impressions you want to create as an interviewer through verbal and nonverbal strategies. First, you need to decide what impressions you want to create. Most participants in interviewing seminars say they want to be perceived as friendly, knowledgeable professionals. To achieve this impression, you need to use your interpersonal skills to establish rapport with the candidate.

Because many of the candidates you interview will not receive job offers but may have other relationships with your company (as customers, for example), you need to create a positive, professional impression. Because both verbal and nonverbal cues create impressions, you need to monitor both what you say and how you say it. Nonverbal cues include dress, gestures, facial expressions, vocal qualities, and eye contact. Guidelines for creating positive, professional impressions are listed in Exhibit 5.2.

Strategy 5: Manage the Interviewing Environment

The first step in managing the environment is to remove all distractions, both auditory and visual, so that each party can easily communicate with the other. Make sure you put yourself in the

Exhibit 5.2. Guidelines for Managing Impressions in the Interview

- Dress professionally.
- Show a genuine interest in the interviewees through facial expressions and appropriate verbal responses.
- Smile and call the candidate by name when you say hello.
- Maintain a professional demeanor throughout the interview as you ask questions and probe for behaviors.
- Maintain frequent eye contact with the interviewee even though you're taking notes.
- Avoid behaviors such as excessive head nodding, frowning, or blank stares that can be confusing to interviewees.
candidate’s shoes as you review the effectiveness of the environment for interviews within your company. Exhibit 5.3 lists some guidelines for managing the environment in which you conduct your interviews. Each of the guidelines facilitates rather than blocks communication.

**Strategy 6: Streamline the Interview Process with Team Interviews**

One strategy for dealing with the duplication of multiple interviews and making them less exhausting for the candidate is to conduct a team interview. A team interview (sometimes called a panel interview) involves having several people interview the candidate as a group. Typically, team interviews should be limited to four to five interviewers since more than that number can be intimidating and hard to coordinate.

Team interviews are typically done as the second interview in a selection process. There is no need to involve multiple interviewers unless the candidate passes an initial screening by

---

**Exhibit 5.3. Guidelines for Managing the Interview Environment**

- Choose a quiet environment free of distractions.
- Choose an environment with a comfortable temperature and soft lighting.
- Provide comfortable seating for both parties.
- Establish a distance between you and the candidate that facilitates communication.
- Establish an angle for the seating that allows eye contact but does not place the candidate directly across a table or desk from the interviewer.
- Reduce distractions (interruptions, ringing phones, intriguing documents, computer screens, outside noise). Many experienced interview subjects can read text upside down quite easily, so put away anything that might divert attention from the interview.
- Reduce barriers (cluttered desks, intimidating seating arrangements) that inhibit communication during an interview. Consider using a round table, if feasible, to minimize power differences between the parties.
demonstrating some potential for the job. Team interviews are also more effective for higher position levels, higher levels of technical competence, and jobs that involve interacting with multiple constituencies. However, some organizations that are very team oriented demonstrate their commitment to teams by using team interviews to select even entry-level workers.

In addition to reducing the duplication and exhaustion of back-to-back interviews, team interviews can make interviewing more accurate. One reason for this is that the interviewers have the same set of questions and answers to use as the basis for their assessment of the candidate. Additionally, interviewers involved in the team interview are more likely to challenge each other regarding the basis for their assessment. The possibility of being challenged causes interviewers to carefully consider the reasons for their hiring decisions and to use a more objective standard. However, when team interviewers use a subjective decision process, research shows that team interviews do not predict performance better than individual interviews.10

There are several benefits to team interviews beyond their ability to predict performance expectations. Team interviews can also be an unobtrusive way to train interviewers to interview more effectively. A single interview typically takes place in the privacy of an individual office. People who can see how their colleagues conduct interviews have a chance to learn from that experience. Team interviews can make it easier for better interviewers to pass on tips to weaker ones. Team interviews can also be a mechanism for identifying those individuals who need additional interviewer training.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the team interview is what it says to candidates. Many organizations say they are committed to the team process, but run candidates through separate interviews one at a time. The team interview says, “We walk the talk.” As one candidate said when asked about team interviews: “As they are interviewing me, I’m trying to evaluate them. I’m
impressed by companies that use the team interview process, since it tells me they live their philosophy.” In a team interview the applicant gets the opportunity to see how the people who will be important on the job interact. As another applicant noted, “I was involved in a team interview where it was quite clear that the interviewers did not get along. I’m not sure that I would have picked that up in a one-on-one interview. I knew I would not be happy there.”

We have heard people object that team interviews are more stressful than individual interviews, but we believe that comparing the anxiety of a team interview to one individual interview is the wrong comparison. Team interviews do not eliminate all the individual interviews, but they do reduce the number. As a result, instead of six or seven hour-long, back-to-back interviews, a candidate may go through just an individual interview followed by a team interview and then perhaps another individual interview at the end of the process. Which of these alternatives would you find more stressful? Most of the candidates we have talked to say they prefer the team interview process, combined with fewer individual interviews. As one candidate said, “I just like to get it done.”

CHAPTER SUMMARY
In this chapter, we have discussed strategies for conducting effective interviews. We reviewed the typical problems—unstructured or poorly structured interviews, environmental distractions, and multiple back-to-back interviews—that lead to poorly conducted interviews. Strategies for conducting effective interviews that we presented include developing and using an interviewer guide, previewing the interview process, probing to gather more complete behavioral data, reinforcing the impressions you want to create, managing the interviewing environment, and streamlining the interview process with team interviews. Guidelines for implementing the various strategies were described. In the next chapter, we will explore the process that takes place after all interviewing is completed—making the hiring decision.
In the following “Perspectives,” three managers describe the benefits of using an interviewer guide to conduct interviews in their organizations. A vice president of human resources also describes how interviewers use behavioral probing and the challenges and benefits of team interviewing.

**Perspectives on Conducting Effective Interviews**

Mike Johnson, Human Resources Manager, Plante & Moran

*What are the benefits of developing and using an Interviewer Guide?*

Because of our style of interviewing, we interview all candidates against a standard for our company. We do not ask our interviewers to ask the same questions for every candidate, but we ask them to ask questions from the same categories so we make sure that we are assessing people across the range of their talents. Each interviewer has some freedom to choose some questions within the categories.

We have not always used an Interviewer Guide. We implemented one about five years ago. We believe it has enhanced our consistency. However, having a guide is not enough. You have to be sure that the guide has the right questions or you can be consistently bad. You have to make sure that your interviewers have the conceptual understanding of why they are asking the questions. The guide should have both the questions and sample answers so that people understand what you are getting at in asking the questions. I think the guide has had a positive impact, but I do not think it would have had as much of an impact if our interviewers were not made aware why these questions are important and what they are trying to measure.

Susan J. Adams, Chief of Recruitment, International Monetary Fund

*What are the benefits of developing and using an Interviewer Guide?*

In the past, we would have asked questions in a fairly random manner. Now each of the team panelists is assigned a segment of the questioning, with all panelists allowed to probe with follow-ups. This has made the interview much more orderly (less randomized) and has allowed us to compare answers much more easily across candidates. The “flow” of
the interview is always a little rougher with the first candidate in the chair, but by the second or third candidate, the panel works seamlessly.

We have always offered a laminated, customized "IMF Pocket Guide for Interviewers" to our line managers, but it only had general information about the types of questions to avoid. The new Interviewer Guide includes the general script of the interview, and this has helped direct the flow better.

Susan Mason, Vice President of Human Resources, Old Kent Financial Services

What are the benefits of developing and using an Interviewer Guide?

The Interviewer Guide has several benefits for Old Kent Financial Services. First, developing the guide helped us focus on matching the job-specific behavior with the appropriate question that targets that behavior. Second, the guide assists us in keeping the interview on track by having prepared questions as well as the desired or effective answer. Finally, the guide provides a standard set of questions for all candidates, which helps protect the organization against any perception of discrimination.

How do interviewers use behavioral probing in interviews at Old Kent Financial Services?

It takes a while for interviewers to get used to behavioral probing because it can be uncomfortable at first. Some candidates seem almost physically uncomfortable with the probing technique because their examples may be too weak or they lack the necessary experience. You feel like you just keep asking, "Then what do you do?" If the candidate provides a quality answer and you probe, they generally respond positively because you are "guiding" them toward the information that you need. The value has been the quality of information we collect. With stronger information, the hiring decision becomes easier.

What are the challenges and benefits of using team interviews?

Team interviewing requires far more coordination among the interviewers than scheduling multiple back-to-back interviews. Team interviewing also requires preparation to define roles, types of questions each participant will ask, interviewing styles, and the general logistics of the interview. Creating core teams of interviewers (groups who often interview as a unit) has streamlined our process and created a more seamless interview for the candidate.
Applications

1. What strategies do you use to structure your interviews?
2. How do you manage the interviewing environment so that you communicate effectively with the interviewee?
3. What strategies can you use to improve your ability to probe the interviewee's responses for behaviors that demonstrate the desired performance expectations?
4. What are the impressions you are trying to create as you conduct your interviews? What strategies do you use to create those impressions?
5. What are the benefits of using team interviews in your organization? What strategies lead to effective team interviews?
mizes effective (Chapter Five) he candidate’s

...you complete nd on the spe-
rance expecta-
our interview t’s résumé, but ons. Your new ct, retain, and

es to technical l levels. At the mizations, Old :
International Interviewing

approach will conduct inter-
ave not con-
occasionally,

signs of suc-
he best use of