

Part 3:

DISTINGUISHING YOURSELF AS A TRUE LEADER DURING BEHAVIORAL COMPETENCY INTERVIEWS

Few situations in life can be more anxiety provoking than going on a job interview. However, the interview is a necessary instrument in the job selection process and requires skills that may not come naturally but that can be honed over time. The personal qualities that combine with your expertise to produce a successful interview are the same ones that make you more influential inside an organization, namely social skills, energy, intelligence, the ability to think on your feet and so on.

While people have become very good at interviewing, organizations also have become savvier. Interviewers can quickly see through canned responses or unsubstantiated claims and will look for signs of an inflated ego, or, conversely, desperation. As Nancy Lataille, a client partner in Korn/Ferry's Toronto office, recounts, "One executive I recently met with initially showed clear enthusiasm for the hiring corporation but then went into sales mode by name dropping and mentioning other big organizations that were chasing him – so much so that in the end I questioned his motives and whether he would indeed serve my client well."





Kevin Ford
Korn/Ferry Chicago

“The harder I have to work to learn about who an executive is, the more likely it is that they are forgettable. During an interview, a person should be working to project

their style, their energy – everything that makes them successful in their career.”

Sometimes it is the most experienced professionals who underperform since they have long been on the other side of the hiring table without having to be interviewed themselves. The more senior the position, the more crucial “soft” skills become for success. Thus, you should expect a high degree of probing in order to gauge your emotional intelligence and social styles during the evaluation process, characteristics that help distinguish a good manager from a true leader.

At this level, behavioral competency interviewing is the most commonly used technique to evaluate how you operate. This type of interview focuses on recalling a variety of situations, especially those where you have managed through adversity, and how you have applied what you learned to overcome future obstacles. According to Hubertus Douglas, a senior client partner in Korn/Ferry’s Frankfurt office, “An interview is only truly meaningful if you are prepared to drill deep.” This article offers suggestions about how to do so in a way that is comfortable for you and compelling to the interviewer.

Preparing to “Drill Deep”

Staying at a very surface level of conversation is a red flag for experienced interviewers who might doubt whether you have the depth necessary for a leadership position or worse, even question your integrity. Telling a good story and painting pictures by taking them through a variety of personal and professional situations, rather than simply “giving the right answers,” will make a stronger impact.

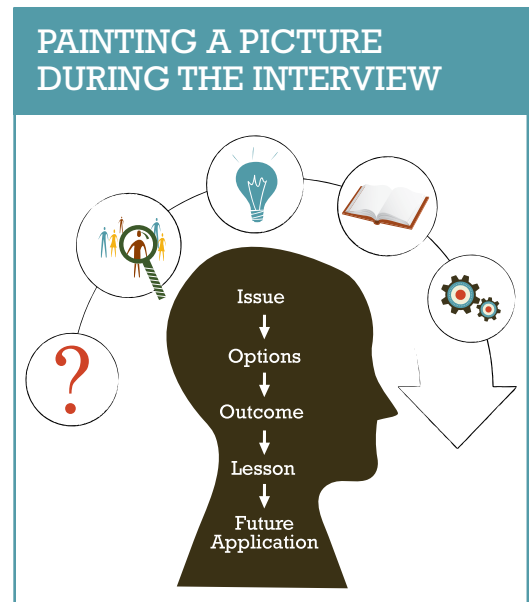
Your goal in any interview always should be to reassure the interviewer that you can successfully do the job. Recruiters’ top tip to candidates is to be willing and prepared to provide real examples of your career achievements, as well as to share learnings from your past experiences – even the disappointing ones. When recounting negative scenarios, give insights into

what you would have done differently and how you have applied these lessons to other situations. As Korn/Ferry Senior Client Partner Cheryl Buxton points out, “Most clients want to hire people who have the potential to take on or develop into a bigger role at some point. As part of this, they will look for what is known as learning agility, which is the ability to overcome difficulties, learn from the experience and apply those learnings to another situation.”

Recruiters also need to be able to imagine you working with their client or organization and will look for clues – based on intangible qualities and what you show them about your true nature – that there is a good cultural fit. According to the global panel of Korn/Ferry consultants interviewed for this series, few executives are adequately prepared to talk about themselves or their experience in these ways. Consider the following questions and ask yourself if you could respond to them without advanced preparation:

- What constructive criticism have you received in the past that surprised you the most?
- How would you describe the cultures of your last few employers? How did they compare and where did you find the better fit?
- Tell me about an initiative that you conceived and were responsible for executing. What challenges did you expect and what challenges did you actually encounter? How did you overcome them?
- Take me to a time when you had to get people with different viewpoints to the same level of understanding.
- Give me a couple of stories about you “in action.”

Practicing your response to questions like these with a friend or mentor is a good way of soliciting feedback if you have never



“People tend to stumble when they really have to tell you something about themselves. If they don’t know, they don’t score high on the emotional scorecard.”



Hubertus Douglas
Korn/Ferry Frankfurt



Nancie Lataille
Korn/Ferry Toronto

“The interview with a search consultant should be taken very seriously. We help provide a reality check about the hiring organization

and smart executives can learn a lot about the philosophy and culture from us.”

received it or done much professional introspection before. Be sure that you do this until you are comfortable describing various scenarios in three minutes or less.

Even before this, recruiters suggest going beyond Google and conducting more extensive research to get a better sense of the hiring organization’s corporate DNA, image and key issues. Think about what the company is looking for outside the job specification and align your presentation to anticipate any obvious potential questions you might be asked. You might consider preparing for the interview much as the interviewer will by spending time reviewing your reasons for interviewing, what you want to convey and what you want to learn during the session.

When reflecting upon past setbacks, work the “what has happened” into a plausible explanation and get yourself into a mindset where you are not afraid to tell the truth. The interviewer’s aim is to understand why it happened and why it will not happen again, as well as to look for any gaps between your resume/CV, assessments that you have taken and the profiles of other best-in-class executives who would be considered for the position. By honestly evaluating your shortcomings and being sincere, you can turn this line of questioning into an opportunity to show that you can see your weaknesses and conscientiously work on developing yourself, which will ultimately be seen as a strength.

Staying Connected With the Interviewer and Yourself During an Interview

As Kevin Ford, a senior client partner in Korn/Ferry’s Chicago office, explains, “The most important thing about an executive interview is learning about a person’s core: when you lift them out of their current situation, what is left? My goal is to build a profile that will help separate the executive from the context of their recent positions and will allow us to project them into a

MANAGING VARIOUS INTERVIEW SCENARIOS WITH APLOMB

■ **Phone Calls:** Recruiters commonly rely on brief phone conversations early on in the search process to gauge your interest in a role while verifying that your technical and functional skills align with a particular job specification. One of the most important things you can do to maximize the value of these conversations is to sharpen your *listening* skills, paying close attention to what is being inferred and asking for clarification when necessary.

■ **Videoconferences:** As companies try to limit travel expenditures, video conferencing is an increasingly common solution for candidates and hiring managers who are located a significant distance apart. These can be some of the more challenging meetings in which to participate, but your chances of success can be greatly improved if you pay some attention to how others will be seeing and hearing you and if possible, conduct a brief “test run” ahead of time to clear up any technical issues.

■ **Panel Interviews:** Still the norm for academic and nonprofit positions, the same principles apply whether you are interviewing with several people at a time or in a one-on-one situation. You will be expected to demonstrate achievement as well as learning agility. Ask up front how much time you will have and ensure that you have interacted with each person on the panel at least once before bringing the interview to a close.

■ **Off-Site Venues:** If you are in a final round of interviews involving the top executives of an organization, you may occasionally find yourself meeting with them in places that are much less traditional and private than their offices (e.g., airports, hotel lounges) so as to accommodate everyone’s busy schedules. If this more public exposure puts you on edge, work with the recruiter either at the search firm or the company’s HR department to choose a place where a reasonable level of confidentiality can be maintained and remember to stay focused on the matter at hand. (As one recruiter says, even if you are expected to eat it is still an interview – order something you can manage in small bites with a fork and pay more attention to the conversation than you do to the food.)



Cheryl Buxton
Korn/Ferry Princeton

in the depth of what they have achieved during their career.”

“Those who interview better than others do so because they have strong listening skills as well as with a high level of confidence

new culture, a new management structure and a new reward system.” Other recruiters echo the notion that in the end, hiring is a personal and subjective matter. The interview is about you, and it is to your benefit to open up and assume that the interviewer can help you from the start.

As outlined in the first article in this series (“Conducting a Successful Job Hunt”), the first 15 minutes of an interview will be spent establishing rapport and trust with the interviewer, after which you should focus on selling yourself, then reviewing what has been discussed and wrapping up. Maintaining this emotional connection can be achieved by smiling, listening, endorsing and contributing throughout the conversation. This will be easier if you are centered, focused and calm, so do whatever works for you to stay in a clear frame of mind and in touch with your instincts so that you will pick up on cues about the organization and its people. Korn/Ferry’s Buxton remarks that often when executives are asked to reflect on the first time a job did not feel right to them, they will say it was during the initial interview. She notes that people stop being intuitive during an interview and tend to rationalize away important signals that the position might not be a good fit.

Pay close attention to your word choice: in some cultures, executives will frame their answers in the “We,” an approach that should be used only when talking about team initiatives. Be mindful of where you are in the overall process as well. Breaking rapport can happen all too quickly if you are sarcastic, critical about a past employer, or place too much emphasis on issues like compensation and advancement too soon. Stay focused to show a genuine interest in the organization and opportunity and drive the interview to a successful conclusion.

Every interview should be a two-way conversation. Korn/Ferry consultants encourage candidates to take charge in order to make the most of the small window they have in which to

make an impression and learn about the opportunity rather than merely answering the questions they are asked. They also acknowledge that, while it should not happen, sometimes the interviewer might not do their job perfectly, or might casually veer into areas that are irrelevant or inappropriate.

Knowing yourself and being authentic are critical if you want to be as powerful during an interview as you can be. This self-awareness comes with a healthy self-confidence that will help you to manage the interview and a leadership role with grace.

About The Korn/Ferry Institute

The Korn/Ferry Institute was founded to serve as a premier global voice on a range of talent management and leadership issues. The Institute commissions, originates and publishes groundbreaking research utilizing Korn/Ferry's unparalleled expertise in executive recruitment and talent development combined with its preeminent behavioral research library. The Institute is dedicated to improving the state of global human capital for businesses of all sizes around the world. For more information on the Institute, visit www.kornferryinstitute.com.

About Korn/Ferry International

Korn/Ferry International, with more than 90 offices in 40 countries, is a premier global provider of talent management solutions. Based in Los Angeles, the firm delivers an array of solutions that help clients to attract, develop, retain and sustain their talent. For more information on the Korn/Ferry International family of companies, visit www.kornferry.com.

