



P R O F E S S I O N A L S

Answering Behavioral Interview Questions

When presented with interview questions beginning with phrases like "tell me about a time when" or "give me an example of" the interviewer wants to hear your real-life examples. When interviewers ask such behavioral interview questions, they are listening for examples of how you handled situations similar to the ones you may handle for this company. This is your chance to talk about your accomplishments. If you can demonstrate through examples (preferably recent ones) that you've succeeded in certain areas of interest, you'll likely be considered a strong candidate for the position. After all, if you did it somewhere else yesterday, you can do it for this company tomorrow.

Behavioral interview questions probe into what you've done in the past, not what you say you'd do in the future. More traditional interviews tend to rely heavily on hypothetical questions: How would you handle it if a customer did X? How do you think we should approach Y? What would you do if you were in danger of missing a deadline? It's not too hard to come up with good answers to these sorts of questions, even for people who don't perform well when they're actually on the job—which means that they're not of much real benefit to employers.

In contrast, behavioral interview questions don't ask you to speculate on how you might approach something. Instead, they ask you to describe how you really did approach something. They tend to start out with "tell me about a time when..." or "give me an example of how you..."

Example questions:

- What was the last project you headed up, and what was its outcome?
- Give me an example of a time that you felt you went above and beyond the call of duty at work.
- Can you describe a time when your work was criticized?
- Have you ever been on a team where someone was not pulling their own weight? How did you handle it?
- Tell me about a time when you had to give someone difficult feedback. How did you handle it?
- What is your greatest failure, and what did you learn from it?
- What irritates you about other people, and how do you deal with it?
- If I were your supervisor and asked you to do something that you disagreed with, what would you do?
- What was the most difficult period in your life, and how did you deal with it?
- Give me an example of a time you did something wrong. How did you handle it?
- What irritates you about other people, and how do you deal with it?
- Tell me about a time where you had to deal with conflict on the job.
- If you were at a business lunch and you ordered a rare steak and they brought it to you well done, what would you do?
- If you found out your company was doing something against the law, like fraud, what would you do?
- What assignment was too difficult for you, and how did you resolve the issue?
- What's the most difficult decision you've made in the last two years and how did you come to that decision?
- Describe how you would handle a situation if you were required to finish multiple tasks by the end of the day, and there was no conceivable way that you could finish them.
- Tell me about a time when you felt it was you against everyone else. You thought you were right and that everyone else was wrong. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time when you were working with someone who wasn't pulling their weight, and they had a different value system than yours. How did you deal with this person?
- Tell me about a time when you suffered a **setback**. What happened, and how did you recover?
- Tell me about a time when you succeeded. Give a specific example.
- Tell me about a time when you had to take initiative.
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult customer.
- Give me an example of a challenge you faced in your current job and how you solved it.
- Tell me about a time you faced an unreasonable deadline and how you handled it.
- Give me an example of a new approach you developed for tackling a problem.

More examples here:

<https://www.pharmacy.umn.edu/pharmd/prod/groups/cop/@pub/@cop/@pharmd/documents/asset/completelistofbehavioral.pdf>

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These types of questions are often followed by probing follow-ups to dig more deeply. Your interview might ask: What did you do then? What happened after that? What was the result? How did you handle X?

In other words, the interviewer doesn't want to hear about what you claim you'll do in the future, or your thoughts on how you'd approach an abstract situation. They want to hear about what you've done already. This makes sense, since how you operated in the past can give a lot of insight into how you're likely to operate in the future. After all, if you can't come up with one example of how you solved a problem or juggled a high workload, what reason do they have to think you'll excel at those things when working for them?

Of course, it's a lot harder to bluff your way through an interview like this—and that's the idea.

But no matter how much your past experiences line up with the job, it can be tough to come up with some of those examples on the spot, so it's key to prepare in advance. Here are four key steps to before your next interview:

1. First, go through the job description line by line, and picture yourself doing the job. What will the person in the role be responsible for? What are the likely challenges?
2. For each responsibility or challenge, think about what examples from your past you can point to as "supporting evidence" that you'd excel at the job, and write them down.

Keep in mind that you don't need to be direct one-for-one matches. For instance, if you're applying for a sales job without any actual sales experience, you might talk about how you made fundraising calls to alumni when you were in college. Or if you're applying for a manager job and haven't formally managed anyone, you might talk about how you were the go-to person for training new employees in your last job, managed numerous group projects, and were known as a diplomatic problem-solver. And if you don't have a lot of work experience to draw on, you can use examples from school, volunteering, and hobbies. [See Why Is It Taking So Long to Hear Back After Your Job Interview?]

3. Once you've written out your examples, turn them into answers that have this structure: problem/response/outcome. In other words, start by talking about why the situation was challenging. Then express what you did in response, and finally, explain what the outcome was.

4. Now, make yourself practice your answers out loud. You might feel foolish talking to yourself, but doing this will make these answers more easily retrievable to you when you're sitting in that interview chair.

And lastly, don't look at these questions as something to dread. Look at them as a chance to really show why you're a strong candidate who would be great at the job. That's what they're designed to ferret out, in the end.

You can also prepare by writing your story!

Preparing your stories is one of the most beneficial exercises you can do to become focused before your interview. If you say you're good at something, prove it with a story. You should be able to back up anything you say on your resume or in an interview with a story or an example of how you soared in a sticky situation.

Your success stories should include the situation, the action you took and the result. Here is an example if you were interviewing for a sales position:

- The Situation: I had a customer who did not want to hear about the features of my merchandise because of a prior interaction with my company.
- The Action: I listened to her story and made sure I heard her complaint. I then explained how I would have handled the situation differently and how I can offer her better service. I showed her some facts that changed her mind about dealing with the company again.
- The Result: She not only bought the merchandise, but also complimented how I handled her account. She is now one of my best customers.

One way to prepare for behavioral interview questions is by writing out your stories before the interview. Determine what stories you have that would be appropriate for the position based on its job description. If the job requires dependability, write your story about a time when your dependability was recognized or made a difference with a customer.

You can use the stories you prepare even when the interviewer does not ask behavioral questions. If you are asked a traditional question, use your prepared story and preface it with, "I can give you an example of a time when I used

that skill on a previous job."

By preparing for the interview ahead of time and recalling your past successes, you will be able to have examples in mind and will not be caught off guard. There is no way you can predict what the interviewer is going to ask you, but you can prepare what you want him to know about your past as a predictor of your future performance.

Sources:

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<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewquestionsanswers/a/interviewquest.htm>

<http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2011/08/17/interviewing-101-tell-your-story/>