



CONDUCTING EXECUTIVE INTERVIEWS

Conducting an executive interview is a highly complex task. The interviewer must have a carefully planned strategy to extract information critical to making a proper selection decision. This strategy must be flexibly applied to the candidate depending upon the information gained early in the interview. The meanings of words and phrases must constantly be analyzed. Questions must be phrased on the spot to elicit additional key data. Pieces of information must be mentally compared for consistency and underlying meaning. Patterns of behavior and the candidate's motivations must be ascertained and compared with the demands and requirements of the position. And, this must all be accomplished in an atmosphere that will motivate the right candidate to want the position.

This guide provides a concise review of the strategies and techniques necessary to plan and execute an interview at the executive level. Reading this booklet before each significant interview should help you gather more information and analyze the data more effectively.

OBJECTIVE

The goal of each interview is to amass facts and impressions from which you will discover patterns of thought and action, which leads to a final judgment of the candidate's ability. Behavior tendencies, management philosophies, and character traits will emerge from the interview process. Drawing *valid* conclusions will require that you conduct an intensive, well-planned, well-executed interview.

Simply stated; an executive interview is a planned conversation with a two-fold purpose -- to gather data for later analysis and to inform and motivate the candidate. The sequence is important since you can recruit a candidate most effectively when you have learned about his or her motivations, interest patterns and priorities during the interview process. The interviewer concentrates on listening carefully to the candidate's answers to well phrased questions so that maximum information can be gathered, analyzed and used later in the interview's selling phase.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Inadequate preparation is the leading cause of poor interviews. To enhance interview quality, you should review the facts about the position, read the candidate's resume carefully, prepare yourself mentally to achieve objectivity during the interview and put yourself in an active listening mode (try to clear your mind of all other matters and concentrate exclusively on the interview).



Prior to the interview:

- Review and update the job description, or
- Prepare a list of job responsibilities
- List your performance expectations for the person to be hired
- Study the candidate's resume, and
- Prepare a comprehensive list of questions to which you want answers

During this review, make certain that required credentials and experience are appropriate to the position; pay special attention to the responsibility and authority of the position to assure they are commensurate with expected performance.

Compare information on the resume with the job requirements. Where the resume is unclear or where areas of experience are not addressed, target these as key questions during the interview. To avoid omissions, make a list of these topics and use this as a discussion guide. Note whether the resume outlines the candidate's complete background from completion of required education to the present time. If not, plan to accumulate the missing information and question the candidate's motivation for preparing an incomplete resume.

In addition to logistical planning, mental preparation is required. It is all too easy, to enter an interview with preexisting biases that can become self-fulfilling prophecies about the candidate. Examples include a prejudice against a little-known educational institution or a company whose reputation you do not hold in high regard. Bear in mind that many candidates have achieved superior results even though they were not in high profile surroundings. Similarly, graduation from a prestigious school is not a guarantee of business success.

In each interview you should solicit input about the candidate, while holding your own biases in check. The goal is to accumulate data without focusing on whether something was "good" or "bad". Concentrate on listening carefully and amassing information. Be particularly careful not to form a dramatic first impression of the candidate or you may spend the next two hours subtly reinforcing your (possibly erroneous) initial reaction. Make critical value judgments at the *conclusion* of the interview when a balanced overview is possible.

CHOOSING THE SETTING

An interview should be conducted in comfortable, non-threatening surroundings, which help the candidate relax. There are clear advantages to holding the interview in a neutral setting such as a private club, restaurant or conference facility located outside your office complex. This lessens the status differential that may exist between you and the candidate and reduces any potential breach of confidentiality, should members of your organization know the candidate.



Regardless of location, no interview can be optimized if there are frequent disruptions. If you use your office for the interview, be sure you isolate yourself from physical and telephone interruptions. Finally, be sure you have adequate arrangements for note taking. Believe it or not, by the end of a two-hour interview, most interviewers will forget some fifty percent of the factual content they did not write down!

SETTING THE TONE

To get the most from an interview, it is important to empathize with the candidate's perspective and reduce his or her anxiety level. Without question, a relaxed candidate will talk more freely.

Reducing tensions is important regardless of job level. All executives experience anxiety occasionally, particularly when they are not in control--for example, when they are being interviewed!

The interview is not intended to simulate the job environment, where stress may be substantial. Rather, its purpose is to elicit natural behavior on the part of the candidate and relevant information about the candidate's abilities, feelings and opinions. With this information you can better evaluate his or her ability to function effectively in your organization. You can learn about performance under pressure through the reference process.

Upon meeting a candidate, you can begin to reduce tensions and establish rapport by communicating in a relaxed, open, honest style. Be friendly. Be enthusiastic. Smile. If you're enjoying this, the candidate will, too. It matters little which opening topic you select; just begin *naturally* where you think the person will be able to respond freely. This is why subjects such as family, the airplane trip, sports or even the weather tend to be reasonable departure points. If you feel uncomfortable making small talk, simply ask a broad question about the person's recent job history.

Finally, share something about yourself early in the interview that shows you are human. Perhaps a story about how you missed a flight through your own negligence, an anecdote illustrating the richness of your family life or a heartfelt comment about your company. This will help to establish a rapport that has a human touch that goes beyond the roles being played as interviewer and interviewee. It will stimulate conversation by signaling to the candidate your interest in the full and open expression of his or her opinions.



ESTABLISHING CONTROL

Control of the interview rests with you. Because you have employment and its attendant compensation and status rewards to offer, you have the privilege to ask your questions first. You also need to elicit responses from the candidate that are not biased by his or her prior understanding of your business problems. If you tell too much about your situation at the outset, the candidate may slant his or her responses to the scenario you have communicated.

If control is not obvious from the outset, reinforcement will establish it quickly. Normally, a statement such as, "I am eager to learn about your background to see how you might contribute to our company's growth", will remind the candidate that you are in control. If a candidate begins by asking, "What are you looking for in a candidate?" you should respond by saying, "Understanding your capabilities is the most important thing we can accomplish today. So, let's start with your role at XYZ Corp." This normally will get the interview off on the proper footing.

PHRASING QUESTIONS

The effective interviewer listens during 80 to 90 percent of an interview. Remember, when you are talking, you are learning relatively little about the candidate! To be able to listen ninety percent of the time, your questions must be phrased so that they trigger a rich, detailed response.

The first questions in any topic area should be open and broad. Questions that begin with "How," "Why," "Please explain," or "Tell me about..." are the most useful in getting the candidate to speak at length about a selected topic. For example, opening an interview with the instruction, "*Explain* to me how you entered the marketing field," will generate a much more interesting, lengthy and informative response than the question, "When did you have your first marketing job?"

Certain words and phrases frequently lead to the problem of short and uninformative responses. Beginning a question with the word "Did" or "When," for example, can lead to staccato interviews. Any question that can be answered with a "Yes" or "No" should be avoided.

Probing

Once the candidate is talking freely about a general topic, the interviewer can control the direction by using probes (follow-up questions) to focus the candidate's response on a specific subject. When the candidate begins to speak about something you think is important, you might probe by saying, "Tell me more about that," or, "Give me an example of what you mean," or "I'm not sure I understand."



Another good technique for interviewing is to proclaim occasional ignorance. Since everyone likes to think that he or she has expertise, your saying "I'm not sure I understand," is exceptionally motivational to the candidate. Don't hesitate to say this even when you *are* knowledgeable in a particular area, but want to gain full insight into the candidate's knowledge or feelings about that topic.

Body language can also be used to attain focus. Such actions as smiling, leaning forward or raising your eyebrows will encourage the candidate to elaborate. These and other probes indicate your interest and desire for more information.

After responding to the probe, the candidate generally will shift back to the original topic. If not, redirect by saying, "I understand that now. Please go on."

To change the general direction, pick an appropriate moment and introduce a new broad topic. Here is an example: "You have given me an excellent overview of your current work situation. Now I would like you to do the same for your prior three positions, with particular emphasis on staff development issues." This transition is rewarding to the candidate because you stated your satisfaction with the prior response. It also allows you to pose another broad, general question and, at the same time, focus on an issue (staff development) you think is particularly relevant.

Problem Questions

An additional technique involves use of the problem question. There are times when a candidate's experience does not correspond directly to a key job issue. Posing a real or hypothetical problem situation will help you to learn how the candidate analyzes a unique set of circumstances. An example would be: "How would you price our new product if Acme Corporation enters the market with a competitive product?" Or, "How would you weigh the variables in determining whether to build a new plant for our XYZ product line?"

In addition to gaining insights into the candidate's thought processes and ability to apply past experiences to novel situations, you also can evaluate risk-taking behavior and determine whether qualifying questions are posed before the respondent plunges ahead. Having a few problem questions prepared, covering those topics where you know the candidate lacks specific exposure, should keep the conversation flowing.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

It is crucial that the content areas of your interview be carefully outlined and listed by priority. In addition, you must know what response patterns you are anticipating. The sequence suggested below begins with factually oriented material and moves on to more sensitive material later in the interview. Reversing the order and starting with highly personal topics may generate less information because the individual is not yet fully at ease



and is hesitant to respond completely. Ask the easy, factual questions early; the more sensitive, emotionally laden ones later.

Work Experience

It makes sense to begin the interview by asking the candidate to talk about his or her current job. Generally, the present employment situation will be the most relevant to you in terms of screening the candidate against the position requirements. Further, the candidate typically has substantially more knowledge about the current position and should respond to your questions in great detail.

Before getting into the candidate's job performance, however, your first order of business is to understand the scope, products, and markets of the individual's present organization.

Next you should learn the structure of the organization, how the candidate fits into that structure, and the nature of assigned responsibilities. Finally, ask what the priorities are and how they are established -- in other words, what overall plan the individual has been working to fulfill.

Armed with this knowledge, you can shift the conversation to an analysis of results: how they have been obtained, and how they relate to the expectations. In this way, you ascertain how the candidate has planned, set priorities, and executed them, to obtain specific results -- within the previously identified organizational constraints. Only at this point can you evaluate whether a stated achievement (e.g. a 10 percent reduction in manufacturing costs) was significant or insignificant. Don't be hesitant to ask for details. Use the management-by-objectives matrix to ascertain what was achieved in terms of quantities, quality, costs and timeliness.

A similar line of questioning should be used for each major job and/or employer until the process works back to a point where early jobs bear no direct relationship to the open position. Some questions should be asked, however, concerning job titles and responsibilities of early positions so that career progression can be evaluated.

For each major responsibility block, other questions should be posed to determine the person's motivation and involvement in the work effort. Ask a question such as, "During those two years, what did you find most and least rewarding about what you were doing? To evaluate relationships with others on the job, ask the candidate to tell you about his or her superior (peers/subordinates). To determine the relative emphasis placed on various functions or projects, ask, "By percentage, how do you divide your time among these tasks?"

Finally, inquire about compensation received during recent years. This will give you some idea of how that person's contributions were valued by the employer. The candidate's feelings about compensation may also come into focus.



Military Experience

In many cases, military experience is not directly relevant to business executives. However, it is a part of some individual's formative periods. A candidate's perspective of the military and determination of whether they achieved a leadership role will provide clues to early motivational levels.

Education

Learn where the person's education was obtained -- on the secondary as well as college and graduate school level. Areas of inquiry here should relate to academic performance, attitude about education, motivation to seek out educational opportunities, and participation in nonacademic pursuits available within the educational environment. How college was financed may also be an indicator of maturity and motivation. Here, as with your questions concerning military experience, it is important to determine whether leadership and striving for excellence are long-standing traits.

Family Background

When you and the interviewee are at a comfortable stage in your conversation, ease into the topic of his or her early life. Discussion of the size, structure and interactions of the candidate's family may yield insights into attitudes about peer and authority relationships. Check whether these parallel more recent work relationships. If they do, don't expect any changes if you bring them into your environment.

Gaining insights into the candidate's assimilation of parental views is also important. These values, particularly as they relate to achievement expectations, often become a relatively immutable personal characteristic. The individual who has been taught as a child to set and achieve high standards normally continues striving through adult life. And, while there are exceptions, the child who is taught to wait or compromise is generally more docile as an adult.

Activities, Interests and Family

Determine how the executive evaluates the balance of work and personal life, as it may be important that you and the candidate have compatible views in this area. A discussion of family activities, hobbies, and civic affairs normally will help you measure the emphasis he or she places on career and other pursuits.

Ask about the kinds of outside activities the individual is pursuing. The after-hours gardener and the town council member may be very different people. One who seeks all solitary activities may be uncomfortable in a high interaction job, while someone who is influencing people and playing a leadership role off the job obviously thrives in directing



others. Ascertain, too, whether there is a supporting spouse and family backing the candidate's career ambitions.

Health

One needs to be sure that the candidate has a health profile that will not hinder or imperil job performance. Ask yourself if the candidate appears well, is in good physical condition and is generally vital. Typically, brief questions on this topic can give such assurances. However, a broad question such as, "How is your health?" normally will net an inconclusive response such as, "Excellent," or, "Very good." Most people simply will not volunteer potentially negative information about themselves. You may learn more if you ask these questions: "When did you have your last physical and what did the physician tell you?" "Have you recently had any surgery?" "Any planned?" "Are you under treatment of a physician and/or taking medication?" If there is a problem area, you should uncover it with these probes. *Use caution:* Health can be a delicate area. National, provincial or local legislation needs to be followed. In the United States, for example, laws relating to discrimination against the handicapped may preclude asking some of these questions. Check with your human resource director or legal counsel.

Self-Assessment

By this point in the interview, you will have some idea of the relative strength of the candidate's skill, knowledge, and ability to perform in the position. It is important to learn whether the person's own assessment is congruent with yours. In the final phase of the information gathering process, ask the individual to tell you about his or her strengths and weaknesses. You can pose the question directly. One example might be, "You have told me much about yourself, but I would be interested to know what you think your greatest capabilities are."

Follow this discussion with a statement such as, "Since none of us excels at everything, tell me what you might improve upon." Obviously, a candidate is going to be somewhat careful in answering this question. If he or she offers an exhaustive list of improvement needs, that may end the candidacy! On the other hand, a candidate's inability to respond openly could signal a lack of candor, introspection or objectivity. This would be an excellent time to ask for examples and use the other probing skills outlined earlier.

An indirect approach (which may be less threatening) is to ask the candidate how his immediate superior would respond if asked, "Tell me about (candidate's name)'s strengths and weaknesses." After the person responds, follow with the question "In what areas do you agree and disagree with the analysis your superior would give me?" Now you can evaluate the candidate's relationship with his superior in addition to gathering the self-assessment material. Asking this question about several of the person's prior superiors and associates can be very revealing.



INFORMING AND MOTIVATING THE CANDIDATE

When you have covered all the topics on your interview outline, move on to the candidate's information needs. It is best to begin by providing a good general, but brief overview of the company and the challenges associated with the open position. Then tell the candidate you will be happy to respond to questions.

This process of providing basic information and then inviting questions accomplishes a variety of objectives.

First, you reduce the likelihood of having answered all the relevant questions the candidate had in mind (a potentially embarrassing situation). Second, you can evaluate the quality of incisiveness of the questions, as well as their logical structure. Third, you can appraise how thoroughly the candidate has prepared for the interview. Finally, you can assess from his or her questions the level of risk-taking the candidate demonstrates. Be alert to the tact displayed when questions about sensitive topics are posed.

Overall, the informing portion of the interview -- when conducted in this fashion -- achieves a continuation of the information-gathering phase. Specifically, you can verify ideas you formed during the early stages of the interview, particularly those relating to the candidate's priorities, needs and status orientation. The order of topics about which the candidate asks will correspond to the individual's basic focus. If, for example, the first question is about the country club membership, you've learned something!

When the interview is in its later stages, you will be able to decide whether the candidate is worthy of further consideration. When this is so, communicate your affirmative reaction. It doesn't take much to accomplish this. A simple statement such as "I'm very happy that we have had this chance to talk. I think there are ways in which you can contribute to this organization," will let the candidate know that everything is going well. Where appropriate, you can go beyond such a general statement and indicate specific areas of potential contribution. For example, "The market research which you did with XYZ Corporation is exactly what our company needs prior to launching our next major product."

Throughout the interview you should make mental (or actual) notes about what is going to motivate the candidate to accept an offer of employment. The important items may relate to decision-making latitude, working in a semi-structured atmosphere, responsibility for a new functional area, escaping from an incompetent superior, or movement into a new industry. Note where the job opportunity meets the identified needs. Make special mention of the similarities between the candidate's goals and the challenges of the job. This will help the individual focus on the ways your available position can meet his or her professional development needs.



CLOSING

There is no specific point at which the motivation portion of the interview becomes the closing portion; one flows into the other. During the closing phase, however, you should provide initial evaluation feedback and information on follow-up procedures.

It is important to be honest with the candidate, not only by providing positive motivational feedback, but also by offering critical comments. The candidate will focus on the issues and concerns you raise. In the event that rejection is the ultimate outcome, speaking to these areas will form a logical basis. Your concerns may range from the lack of specific knowledge or skills to severe differences in work style between the candidate's current organization and your own. They also could relate to the possible inability of your organization to respond to the candidate's personal growth plans.

Whatever your tentative conclusions, inform the candidate of the follow-up procedure, noting what other interviews will be necessary. Also, be clear about the timing of the feedback cycle. Candidates can move from an emotional high to relative indifference very quickly if they sense that the process is slowing down. While occasional delays may be unavoidable, the candidate always perceives a delay as an indirect communication of diminishing interest on your part. Schedules should be met in virtually all instances. But, when a delay occurs, the communication process between you and the candidate must be frequent and meaningful (don't use an intermediary!) to maintain the candidate's enthusiasm.

MAKING AN ASSESSMENT

Following the interview, allocate time to review, analyze and reflect upon the information that has been presented. Of course, it will have been necessary for you to draw some preliminary conclusions prior to this point so that you could begin the motivational effort discussed earlier. However, an analysis considering all the data following the interview often causes a modification of your initial reaction.

The following list of questions reviews the patterns to which you should be attentive. When you can answer these questions, you should have enough information to determine whether a candidate is acceptable for most positions.

Given the specific nature of each position and candidate, the importance of each factor will shift from situation to situation. Even so, these questions should help you focus on the relevant material gathered in the interview process.

Performance

- Has the candidate developed a command of the required industry(s), functions and technical databases?

Integr 

- Given your understanding of the organizations and constraints under which the person has worked, are his or her accomplishments significant?
- If you project the candidate's achievements into your organization, would they compare favorably to your personal performance expectations?

Management Ability

- Does the individual contribute to planning processes and believe in the virtues of planned activity?
- Does the person have a capability for administrative tasks and dedicate appropriate attention to them?
- Does the candidate place a premium on teamwork and properly motivating and developing subordinates?
- Does the individual understand the process of delegation, demonstrate a willingness to delegate and implement proper controls on the delegation process?
- Is there evidence that previous risk-taking behavior is appropriate to the style of the organization?
- Does the candidate demonstrate objectivity in his or her capabilities and the capabilities of others, and hire staff accordingly?

Emotional Maturity

- Does the candidate demonstrate resiliency under stressful conditions?
- Will behavior be predictable? Will the candidate provide a consistent point of reference for subordinates?
- Is there evidence of self-knowledge, which allows maximization of strengths and buttressing of weakness?
- Have good judgment, self-discipline and tough-mindedness been amply demonstrated?

Motivation

- Is there a long-term behavioral pattern of goal setting and achievement throughout the individual's development?

Integr 

- Does the candidate have an ongoing plan for personal and career development that is aggressive, relevant and achievable?
- Does the person display aggressiveness, drive and follow-through in the pursuit of business tasks?
- Is the candidate an initiator in both individual and group settings?

Intelligence

- Did the candidate demonstrate academic excellence?
- Were challenging courses chosen?
- Did he or she exhibit analytical acuteness and creativity in problem-solving behavior in past jobs? In the interview?
- Does the candidate have the ability to deal with simultaneous, complex problem-solving tasks?
- Were professional degrees, designations and other recognitions achieved with distinction?
- Does the individual have a wide span of interests and activities?

Communications

- Was the candidate articulate during the course of the interview? Were questions answered candidly and concisely with good organization?
- Does the individual communicate at an appropriate detail level for the circumstances?
- Does the candidate demonstrate an acceptable style of communication in terms of energy level, flow, eye-contact and sense of humor?

Bearing

- Does the person present a healthful and well-groomed personal appearance? Is the clothing selection appropriate to the status level and industry?
- Are the levels of interpersonal skill and sophistication suitable to the role to be played in the organization?
- Does the candidate project self-confidence and leadership capacity?



Career Development and Growth Potential

- Does the overall career achievement to date -- as well as knowledge, personal maturity and growth potential -- make him or her a realistic candidate?
- Does the individual's personal circumstances appear to provide solid support for career success?
- Are the candidate's current and future expectations for responsibility, title, earnings and geography achievable within your organization?
- What capabilities and potential exist for future growth into other staff, line or general management responsibilities?

VERIFYING YOUR CONCLUSIONS

A review such as the one suggested above should help crystallize your opinion of the candidate's ability, both to perform and fit within your organization. It is unlikely that all questions will be answered satisfactorily by the end of the first interview. This highlights the importance of having multiple meetings before hiring a candidate for a key role.

Where possible, have others interview the candidate to augment your interview perceptions and analysis. Remember, no two interviews proceed in identical fashion -- and no two generate the same data. Compare and contrast the information and reactions noted by your associates; then resolve any inconsistencies through additional meetings with the candidate or via references.

Reference checks are critical and should be conducted at a mutually agreeable time. Their basic virtue is that those who serve as primary references may have spent hundreds of hours working with the candidate. Those individuals have had the opportunity to gather far more -- and more reliable -- data on a candidate than could any interviewer, no matter how talented. Again, legal constraints exist in some areas and need to be accommodated.

One last, important word: Trust your own emotional reaction to a candidate. If, in spite of a perfect match of experience and credentials, you still feel uneasy for any reason do not extend an offer. That initial doubt or apprehension frequently grows into full-blown lack of confidence in the candidate, and may result in an eventual termination. Hire someone who elicits in you fully positive expectations -- it's worth waiting to find the executive who is "right." Your collective performance will be greater when each has total confidence in the other's ability.