



Behavioral Interviews

A behavioral interview is one in which you will be asked questions about how you acted in specific situations. Rather than being asked to provide hypothetical responses to questions, you will be asked to describe in concrete terms what you actually did when faced with certain challenges. Behavioral interviewers believe that your past performance in highly specified situations is the best indicator of how you will respond to future situations. They are far more concerned with your past actions than your beliefs about yourself.

Answers to behavioral questions are typically brief stories about a situation where you took action, accomplished a task, met an objective or had to formulate an interpersonal response. Your responses should typically take no more than about one to three minutes to recount, depending upon the complexity of the situation and the amount of positive information you can provide the interviewer. Although describing a personal situation may be appropriate on occasion, responses that focus on your professional and academic life are usually the best way to go. A good guideline for answering behavioral questions is the SAR (Situation-Action-Result) model. Here is an example of the SAR model in action:

Question: Can you tell me about a time when you overcame an adverse situation?

Answer: **(Situation)** I was asked to lead a project team that was supposed to deliver a new product to market within a short time frame. Several team members believed that the company was making a mistake by developing this new product line and were reticent to commit the time necessary to make the product launch a success.

(Action) So at our first meeting I invited the brand manager of the new line to our project team meeting. He was well respected within the company as an innovator and creative thinker. He had an opportunity to describe the strategy that led to the development of the new product line and to introduce the research data that suggested it would be successful. He also took questions from the group and responded to a lot of the objections some group members had in a straightforward manner. I then arranged for the project team to receive regular updates from brand management on market research developments and the creation of the products advertising and promotional strategy.

(Result) Some team members maintained their skepticism, but as a result of understanding the strategy behind the product and being kept in the loop on the promotional strategy they maintained their commitments to the project. We launched on time and our initial sales exceeded our targets.

Preparing for a Behavioral Interview

Here are some tips to help you prepare for a behavioral interview:

- Be able to recall the accomplishments you describe on your resume in the SAR format. If you overcame adverse circumstances to achieve them, describe how you did it.
- Reflect upon the events and situations that helped define your professional and academic life, and situations where you handled challenging interpersonal situations with aplomb. Compose descriptions of these events in the SAR format.
- Vary your stories. In addition to class work and employment, examples of actions you took while in community service, participating on sports teams or while a member of a professional or student association can provide the interviewer with a better picture of the breadth of your abilities.
- Discuss special accomplishments like promotions, academic or athletic achievements.
- Quantify your results when possible.

Sample Behavioral Questions and Answers

Question: Give me an example of a time when you motivated others.

Answer: **(Situation)** I was captain of my intramural volleyball team that was playing for the all-campus championship. The team we were playing against had much taller players, and some were graduate students who had played on their college teams. Several of the players on our team thought we had no chance to win and even talked about forfeiting.

(Action) I acknowledged how challenging the game would be. But I also talked to the players about how many tough matches we had won to get where we were. And as sort of a joke I offered to wash my teammates' cars if we won.

(Result) We played really inspired volleyball and we barely lost to a much taller and more physically gifted team. We came together as a team during that match and everyone supported one another. On a number of occasions I was reminded about how many cars I'd be washing if we won. I learned how well people respond when you are willing to make a personal sacrifice to help the team succeed.

Question: Tell me about a difficult decision you made in the past year.

Answer: **(Situation)** I had several professors encourage me to extend my commitment to graduate school for two to three years to obtain a Ph.D. They explained the opportunities

and the prestige that go with holding such an advanced degree in my field, and they let me know that they were confident I would be successful in their program. But I had not previously planned on being in school that long and was anxious to assume some professional responsibilities.

(Action) I talked the situation over with the people who matter most to me in family, and also with my former boss who has always mentored me. I also made a list of the pros and cons of staying in school. While going through the process, I realized that I could always work on my degree while working or return to school in the future if I believed that would be to my advantage.

(Result) I decided to stick with my original plan and seek a professional position where I can have an immediate impact on the local community. But I'm glad I had the opportunity to evaluate the benefits of a Ph.D. because I now have a much better understanding of my professional options and potential strategies for growth in the future.

Question: Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem.

Answer: **(Situation)** I was participating in a class project that required gathering and interpreting a considerable amount of data relating to human behavior. Our objective was to develop a predictive response model for how people cope with stress. The data did not appear to corroborate our hypothesis, and we had a lot of confidence that it should.

(Action) We focused primarily on the validity of the data we gathered. We went back to source documentation to ensure everything had been input to the model correctly. We double checked the computations and found nothing wrong. It was only late in the process that a member of our team began questioning the statistical methodology we had used. It became very clear that a different type of analysis would have been more pertinent to the problem and would have yielded results that supported our hypothesis.

(Result) We did formulate the solution in time to act upon it. We changed the regression technique within the model and re-ran the data. It required an all-nighter or two, though. We did receive the highest possible grade on the project. From this experience, I learned never to assume or take for granted that the quantitative aspects of a project are correct, and I always work closely with statistical teams to understand their rationale for using the quantitative methods they prescribe before moving forward.