Responding to Behavioral Interview Questions

Behavioral interviewing is based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future success. Therefore, how someone has behaved or performed in the past will probably be a good indicator of how they will behave or perform in the future. Behavioral interview questions usually begin with, “Tell me about…” or “Describe a situation…”

You will be asked to describe specific situations that demonstrate your abilities in a specific competency (e.g., analytical skills, leadership, or motivation). Below are some examples of typical behavioral questions and the competencies they demonstrate:

- Describe a difficult problem that you tried to solve. How did you identify the problem? How did you go about trying to solve it? (Demonstrates problem solving)
- Describe a time when you tried to persuade another person to do something that he/she was not very willing to do. (Demonstrates leadership)
- Describe a time when you decided on your own that something needed to be done, and you took on the task to get it done. (Demonstrates initiative)

Behavioral questions are very difficult to answer spontaneously. Preparation will help you to effectively answer these types of questions.

1. Using the job description and organizational research, determine the competencies that are required for success in the job. These may include: leadership, creativity, communication, teamwork, problem solving, analysis, etc. Remember that different organizations/companies and industries may require different competencies, even for the same position. For example, “self-managing” can mean very different things to a local health department than to a non-profit agency.

2. Know your resume/CV. This might seem obvious, but your resume/CV is often the basis for many questions. Identify the competencies that your resume/CV demonstrates and be ready to speak to anything on it.

3. Decide which of your experiences best exemplifies your abilities and the competencies the organization is seeking. Be deliberate and thoughtful about each scenario and stay away from sharing negative examples about your or someone else, keep the tone positive. Be able to draw from a variety of experiences that demonstrate your skills and abilities (e.g., work, school, volunteer work).

4. Use the STAR (Situation/Task, Action, Results) method to formulate your answers to the behavioral interview question. Describe the situation or context, what you did in response, what changes or differences your actions made, and whether they were effective or appropriate. You should prepare at least one STAR response for each bullet point on your resume/CV. Break down each question before answering it and try to address the competency the interviewer is trying to address.
a. Use actual situations
b. Use your individual behaviors, not team actions, where possible. Although you were part of a team, be sure to emphasize your role. Don’t be afraid to take credit where it is appropriate.
c. PRACTICE responding to these types of questions.
d. Although it is best to use job-related examples, this will not always be possible. If an example from your personal life illustrates the competency, use it.
e. Even if you didn’t achieve the desired result from your experience, if you learned something significant from it, you can turn this into a winning story.

Common Competencies and Behavioral Interview Questions

1) Problem Solving
When was the last time you solved a difficult problem that had significant impact? What was the situation? How did you analyze the problem? What additional information did you gather? What alternative solutions did you consider? How did you implement your solution? What was the outcome?

2) Decision Making
What was the most difficult decision you have made in the last six months? What was the situation? What made it difficult? What factors or variables did you consider? What did you decide? What was the result?

3) Initiative
Describe your best example of taking the initiative to do something that needed to be done, even though it wasn’t really your responsibility. What was the situation? What circumstances required you to act? What actions did you take? What impact did your initiative have on the situation?

4) Achievement/Drive
Describe a situation in which you believe you were effective in achieving an ambitious goal. What caused you to work hard to meet this objective? What methods or skills did you use to meet your goal? What were the results? What feedback did you receive?

5) Handling Details
Tell me about the most significant project you have worked on in which it was crucial to keep track of details while still managing the “big picture.” What was the project? What skills did you utilize in managing it? How did you make sure the work got done? How did you keep focused on the overall goal of the project while still managing all of the specific parts? How did the project turn out? What feedback did you receive on your management of the task?

6) Oral Communication
Describe a time when you had great difficulty communicating your thoughts clearly to another person or group. What was the situation? What message were you trying to convey? Where did the difficulty in communicating effectively lie? What did you do to get your point across more clearly? What was the outcome?
7) **Conflict Management**  
Tell me about a time when you voiced a concern or differing opinion to a co-worker, supervisor, or professor. What did you say to the other person? What was his/her reaction? What was the outcome of the conversation?

8) **Coordinating/Leading Others**  
Tell me about a situation in which you had to coordinate several people to achieve a goal. What prompted you to take the lead? How did you go about coordinating and leading the group? How did they respond? What tools did you use to measure the progress of the group? What was the outcome?

9) **Managing Stress**  
Describe your most disappointing experience. How did you cope with it? What did you do to move beyond it?

10) **Technical Expertise**  
Tell me about a time you were effective in putting your technical expertise to use to solve a problem. What was the problem? In what ways did you draw upon your technical knowledge to solve it? What was the outcome?

**More Behavioral-Based Interview Questions**

1) Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.

2) Summarize a situation where you took the initiative to get others going on an important issue, and played a leading role to achieve the results wanted.

3) What steps do you follow to study a problem before making a decision?

4) Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.

5) What was the most complex assignment you have had? What was your role?

6) Provide an example of how you acquired a technical skill and converted it into a practical application.

7) Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).

8) Describe a creative/innovative idea that you produced which led to a significant contribution to the success of an activity or project.


10) Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.

11) Describe a situation that required a number of things to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?

12) How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time? Give examples.

13) Give me an example of an important goal, which you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
14) Give an example of when you had to work with someone who was difficult to get along with. Why was this person difficult? How did you handle that person?

15) Describe a problem situation where you had to seek out relevant information, define key issues, and decide on which steps to take to get desired results.

16) We can sometimes identify a small problem and fix it before it becomes a major problem. Give an example of how you have done this.

17) Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.

18) Tell me about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get an important point across.

19) Describe the most significant or creative presentation you have completed.

20) Give me a specific occasion in which you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.

21) Describe a time on any job that you held in which you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.

22) By providing examples, convince me that you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations and environments.

23) Give an example of a time in which you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.