



## **"Don't Hire Anyone Without Me!"** *A Revolutionary Approach To Interviewing And Hiring The Best*

(Excerpt From Pages 85-91)

### **The Basics About Interview Questions**

Your ability to listen for the information woven within an applicant's answers will be more important than the questions themselves. But that doesn't make the questions you ask unimportant. Asking poorly designed questions instead of good ones can reap different information from the same applicant. Don't think the information you gather doesn't make a difference it does. *Bad or irrelevant information, or information that doesn't predict future performance, is the reason behind most bad hires.*

We will be working specifically on designing behavior-based interview questions. If you don't know anything about behavior-based interviewing, that's OK. It's simple. It merely involves asking interview questions that solicit actual examples of an applicant's past behavior as opposed to hypothetical responses about how he would handle the situation if he encountered it. Yes/no questions are avoided because they yield little to no information.

Behavior-based interviewing is a great information-gathering tool, but most people who advocate it fall short on explaining how to assess the information you gather. Don't worry, we will take care of that by using Motivation-Based Interviewing<sup>1</sup>.

Even though skill level does not determine performance level, many if not most jobs require an adequate set of skills to do the job. Interviewers do best at asking skill-related questions because that is what they have already been doing. The good news is you shouldn't have to change too much just refine.

To better understand the questions you should ask and the information you need to gather, you need to know a piece about assessment now. When assessing skills, you ask a skill-related question and then you rate the applicant based on his answer. Basically, you ask a question, listen to the response and then grade it. Assessing locus of control<sup>2</sup> doesn't work that way. There is no

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<sup>1</sup> Not all employees put themselves into motion to overcome obstacles and produce results to the degree the High Performer does. Untrained interviewers may not realize that accurate motivation assessment may actually differ from what the applicant says or implies during the interview. Motivation-Based interviewing allows interviewers to quantify an applicant's motivation. More information about Motivation-Based interviewing can be found throughout the book.

<sup>2</sup> There is a behavioral psychology dedicated to the study of perceived control. It is called *locus of control*. It is the perception of what people believe is under their control – what they believe they can and cannot do. Locus of control is directly linked to motivation and job performance. More information on locus of control can be found in Chapter 4.

single question or one answer that will determine an applicant's level of motivation.

Locus of control is determined by using an accumulation of responses. Throughout the entire interview process, applicants will verbalize their perception of control without even realizing it. From the very beginning of the interview to the very end, you should be on the lookout and listening for locus of control responses. By doing this, you step back and take a look at the applicant from a distance and are able to see a bigger picture. You can see things you normally missed while conducting the traditional interview. Once you learn how to do this, you won't go back to using the old way of looking at applicants.

The majority of the interview questions will focus on gathering information in two areas: skills and interest level<sup>3</sup>. Creating good questions in these areas will be sufficient. These questions will also supply the locus of control information that is needed. Asking skill-related questions is a good and easy way to harvest locus of control information as long as the questions are asked properly. Plus, the applicant does not even realize the additional purpose of the question. That helps prevent answers from being altered.

### **Designing Effective Interview Questions**

Let us focus on designing the actual questions. You should realize by now from what you learned in previous chapters that high performers view adversity as something they can conquer, whereas low performers don't. For high performers, it's not "I can't" but rather "How can I?" High performers are shining stars. So let's sing a few bars of "The Star Spangled Banner" in their honor:

?? "*Oh say can you see...*" ??

OK, that's enough. Why, you ask, did we do that nonsensical exercise? "Oh Say" is the formula for writing effective interview questions that will help you determine an applicant's skill level as well as his view toward conquering adversity, all in one step. It is the "Oh Say" method or "**O-S A E**":

#### **"Oh Say" METHOD**

<b>O-S</b>	<b>Obstacle Situation</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>Actions taken</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>End results</b>

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<sup>3</sup> A high interest level in doing a particular job is a key component of the High Performer's success. Lack of interest has a negative or draining affect on motivation. Accurately assessing motivation involves assessing an applicant's interest level in performing the tasks of the job.

## Sample Questions

- O-S**     **Tell me about a specific time when you** *dealt with an irate customer.*  
**A**        **Tell me what you action you took.**  
**E**        **What was the end result?**

The O-SAE method uses a set of three questions for each skill that needs to be measured not just one question. Customizing the question to fit your needs is easy. All you have to do is change the second half, or italic portion, of the first question (**O**bstacle **S**ituation) to reflect a scenario or situation an employee would encounter in the job you're trying to fill that's all. Begin the question with "Tell me about a specific time when you..." and then customize the ending for your job opening, such as, "had a crisis concerning one of your software applications," or "discovered that your labor costs exceeded your budget."

Remember, the question must include an obstacle or an adversity. Words such as "toughest," "most difficult" or "biggest obstacle" can be useful. Both high performers and low performers can perform well when the circumstances are obstacle-free and easy. But when the going gets tough, lower performers throw in the towel. Without an obstacle in your question, you can't see who is who. By inserting an obstacle, you will receive more of a range of answers than you would if you asked about a situation that was easy.

Follow the first question by next requesting the **A**ctions taken by the applicant and finally the **E**nd result. You do not need to customize either of these questions, but you can if you'd like. If it's more comfortable asking certain questions a different way, go for it. For instance, for the **A**ctions question you can also say, "So, what did you do?" or "What steps did you take?" or "How did you handle it?" or any similar variation. Same thing with the **E**nd result questions. You might be more comfortable saying, "So, what happened?" or "What was the outcome?" or "How did it turn out?" All of these are acceptable, and others are fine, too. Here are a couple sample questions:

**Obstacle Situation (O-S):** Tell me about a time when you worked at improving an employee's poor work performance.

**Action Taken (A):** What steps did you take?

**End Results (E):** What was the outcome after one month?



**Obstacle Situation (O-S):** Tell me about a time when labor costs were too high and why.

**Action Taken (A):** What did you do to try to lower them?

**End Results (E):** What was the outcome?

Sometimes an applicant will give an example from when he was part of a team effort and will use the “we” word. I recommend that you not move on from “we” answers until you find out exactly what role the applicant played and his level of participation. To clarify, ask for specific details about what he did. This will help circumvent vague or generic responses, which you do not want to accept. It is up to you as the interviewer to gather quality information.

### **Wide Open Range**

A positive attitude toward conquering adversity does not produce happy endings every time. A positive attitude produces the fuel for continued perseverance that’s necessary for not quitting. The important issue is the quantity of effort expended or opposite, the ease with which a person gives up. Both supply valuable information for predicting future performance.

Failure that involved effort and failure with little or no attempt both provide useful clues for future performance, but each means something different. Accomplishments that include conquering obstacles are a better indicator of a high performer than successes that came easily.

Failure has not truly occurred until a person throws in the towel. Defeat cannot be acknowledged while a person is still trying. For a high performer, failure is merely “success in progress.” For low performers, however, defeat is often the uncontrollable outcome. It’s the reason effort is aborted.

Understand it’s not failure that’s the big issue, it’s how much effort was put into achieving and how long that effort was continued. The difference between applicants will be how much detail they can supply about their sustained effort. An explanation can’t and won’t include a detailed account of action taken when action was limited or lacking. It will be one filled with excuses instead. If you understand the differences here and ask the right type of question, the applicant will give you what you need to know but not necessarily what you want to hear.

As the interviewer, you should avoid phrasing questions that retrieve only “happy ending” results. They are dangerous because they can mislead you and cause you to overrate the applicant. For example “Tell me about a time when you exceeded a customer’s expectations” will elicit only positive answers from anyone and could cause you to rate an applicant too highly.

It’s best if you do not ask for a certain outcome or end result, such as a time they succeeded or failed. Leave the end results open in the **OS** question. Save it for the **E** (or end results) question, that’s its purpose. Trust me, it works most effectively that way. You want to create questions that can potentially obtain a full range of possible answers. You will be surprised how mixed the end result answers will really be.

Interviewers quite often don’t realize just how poorly phrased their interview questions are. The above interview question “Tell me about a time when you exceeded a customer’s expectations” is a prime example. It is a behavioral-based interview question, but not a good one. It was being used by a

large retail organization that wanted to hire managers who would go the extra mile to “wow” the customers. The intention was to measure customer service skills, but it requests only “happy ending” responses. District managers were using this question for years. It is true that some examples would be better than others, but all responses would be of customer service success stories. Does that mean every applicant who answered this question well would exceed customer expectations? No way, not even close!

I had a neighbor who was talking about this applicant he had interviewed for an executive secretary position. He said he knew very early on that he liked this one and just knew she would do a great job. He hired her. Whenever I hear an interviewer say this, the first thing I ask is, Did you conduct a thorough interview? He assured me that he had.

To give you a little history, we got started on this conversation because in the past, this particular position had been somewhat of a problem. It had been filled with one person after another who had performance issues, and this time he really wanted to hire someone good.

Well, as it turned out, after two or three weeks on the job, this new employee started showing up about 15 minutes late for work. Then it became later and later. Soon she started calling in sick. He said she was doing more socializing on the job than working. It went even further downhill from there. He admitted that this was one of his worst hires ever. By month three, she was terminated.

He couldn't understand what had happened. How could someone be so good in an interview and turn out to be so bad? He said the applicant did a great job answering all of his interview questions and said all the right things. I asked him to bring home his interview questions so I could take a look at them and see whether I could find the problem or, better yet, a solution.

It turned out the questions he was asking the applicants weren't the type that would allow him to distinguish between different performance levels. They were all behavior-based interview questions, but many of them were phrased to elicit only happy-ending success stories. Most did not involve obstacles. High performers and low performers would be able to answer these questions equally well. My neighbor, the interviewer, didn't know any better.

We ended up having a detailed discussion about the fact that almost everyone can do a great job when it's easy, that the true test comes when obstacles clutter the path. This is when lower performers usually drop out, not when it's smooth sailing. I helped him rephrase many of his interview questions and I gave him a few more pointers. From there, he went back to the drawing board to fill this position again.

No surprise, he came back and told me what a difference the questions made. He also added that he felt much better and more confident as an interviewer knowing what information was important and how to assess it. And guess what? His next hire turned out to be a great one.

Improving your interview questions isn't difficult. For example, there is a better way to phrase that earlier customer service question, to determine whether an applicant is likely to “wow” the customer and go the extra mile. Simply

change the second half of the first question to include an obstacle, such as: **(O-S)** Tell me about a time you *dealt with an irate customer*. The key is to phrase the question so it requests specific and actual behavioral examples from a situation involving an adversity. This kind of question is more useful because it accomplishes two things: It measures skills and now it provides locus of control information.

Asking for happy ending examples is suggestive that only those who have surpassed customer expectation in the past can do so in the future. It does not consider those with high potential and no experience or the impact of training. Questions should be changed so they are able to elicit a variety of good and bad responses from applicants.

***For more on information gathering techniques that encourage applicants to reveal more about themselves, read Chapter 7. This chapter will provide effective ways to get the applicant's guard down and explain how to build a rapport when one doesn't automatically exist.***

***For additional information on applicant assessment, read Chapters 9 & 10. This book is designed to be a quick-read for busy professionals who want to improve their ability to recognize High Performers.***