



# How to prepare for behavioral interview questions

**D**uring the past 10-15 years of my 30-plus years of assisting clients with their career needs, I've continued to receive comments from at least half of my clients on how much they dread interviews. When I question the cause for this "dread," the reason is usually "those darn behavioral interview questions." I agree that those questions can be cause for apprehension. Yet, there are reasons why recruiters and hiring managers use behavioral questions as part of the interview process.

For those of you unfamiliar with behavioral questions, they ask about specific situations in your past work experience. For example, "Describe a project that you worked on where the results did not meet your expectations. In retrospect, what would you have done differently?" These questions are designed to have you recount a past experience that will enable the interviewer to assess the likelihood of future performance. The theory is that past behavior is usually a reasonable predictor of future behavior. A few more common behavioral questions may include:

- Tell us about a time you had a conflict with a co-worker. How did you handle it?
- Tell us about an unpopular management decision you made and how your team handled it.
- Talk about a time when you had to bring a diverse group of people together to gain consensus on a major issue. What were the results of this endeavor?
- Please share an experience where you helped others deal with a

major organizational change. Tell us specifically how you approached the situation, your concerns and, finally, the results of your efforts.

- Walk us through your typical approach for implementing policy or program changes. How do you ensure changes are implemented, and how do you measure their success? Discuss a recent situation in which you employed this approach and the results achieved.

Would you say that it might be slightly difficult to respond to those types of questions off the top of your head? For most of us, absolutely! Put your fears aside, though. There is a technique for preparing for behavioral questions. Here are four steps to success:

**Step 1:** In addition to exploring commonly asked behavioral questions, spend time reviewing the specific job posting for which you are interviewing.

**Step 2:** Examine, identify and make a list of the key competencies, qualities and functions mentioned in the minimum requirements and preferred/desired qualifications, as well as the duties and responsibilities that could develop into potential behavioral questions. Your list might include competency areas such as leadership, problem solving, communication, conflict management, operations management, project management, financial services, teamwork, time management, goal setting, staff supervision, training and development, coaching/mentoring, quality assurance and safety, as well as job-specific areas of expertise.

**Step 3:** Now that you have a sense of what the employer is looking for in an ideal fit for the position, use each item on your list to develop and practice talking about at least two experiences or situations which you can derive from work, school, volunteer or internship roles that relate to your background. After you complete this process, you should find yourself in a mindset to answer most behavioral interview questions related to the specific position. Keep in mind that as the jobs you interview for change, this process may need to be updated with new information.

**Step 4:** Finally, when preparing and practicing your behavioral interview responses, you will want to apply the four-step "STAR" interview response technique. I'm sure many of you are already familiar with this formula. It helps you provide clear, concise answers about how you have handled specific work situations and challenges while also staying on track with your responses to avoid going off on a tangent. Here is the four-step STAR formula:

- **Situation:** Set the scene by describing the situation.
- **Task:** Describe the issue or problem you were confronted with.
- **Action:** Describe the steps, procedures and actions you took to handle the situation.
- **Results:** Describe the results and overall outcome of your actions.

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