



Interviewing for Leadership

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○ Interviewing is indeed an art form. As such it requires a disciplined approach.



Human beings are the most wonderfully complex inhabitants of our planet. Their fit with your culture and the honesty of their statements are vital to your customers, colleagues, suppliers and stockholders.

Research shows that untrained job interviewers make up their minds on a candidate in less than a minute. They then spend the remainder of the interview confirming their prejudices. This guide is intended to prime senior executives on important interviewing skills.

Boyden professionals interview over 15,000 executives on behalf of our clients every year.

The interview and evaluation process is at the very core of our business, and the methods we have developed in over six decades of search work have been critical to our organization's continuing success.

The purpose of the interview is to evaluate the mutual fit between the candidate and the leadership role in the hiring organization. Effective interviewing is for the ultimate benefit of both parties.

Interviewing is indeed an art form. As such it requires a disciplined approach — one that is outlined here for clients and friends of Boyden.

We examine the basics of the interview process in the pages that follow, including a discussion of the most common interviewing errors. In the section entitled **"Leadership Competencies"** we focus on ways of assessing the key leadership competencies we believe to be essential in evaluating an executive level employee: integrity, problem solving, communication, motivation, interpersonal and execution skills. The closing section provides a library of questions to be used in interviews.

Getting the Basics Right

Start before the interview to avoid potential problems. Try to interview in a relaxed business environment, at least on the first occasion. Noisy restaurants and bars can give the wrong impression and cloud communication and judgment. If use of video links are necessary at this stage, then use the most professional equipment available. Cheap or home computer links will not enhance the reputation of your firm or make for a smooth interview.

Anyone involved in interviewing and hiring should be aware of the basic courtesies toward a candidate and possible legal issues involved in the interview process in the country in which you are located at that time.

Preparation is critical to a successful interview. In particular, you should have detailed knowledge of the position for which the candidate is being considered, the competencies required, and all existing information on the candidate. Have a "game plan" for each interview. Evaluate, if possible, the candidate's resume and determine areas to be filled in or clarified with more information. If you do not have a CV or have only a vague resume, you will spend vital time gathering basic data. Insist on having it and reading it first.

The interview itself should be private, and you should maintain control at all times, which means keeping the initiative and progressing at a steady pace. It is important, as discussed below, to draw the candidate out and encourage discourse, but not to let the conversation ramble along unproductive paths.

One of the important keys to a successful interview is the establishment of rapport, encouraging the candidate to "open up" and respond more spontaneously than one would in a rigid question/answer interview. Care should be taken to make the candidate feel comfortable and develop confidence in the interviewer. The less guarded responses elicited in this kind of setting are likely to be both more reflective of true feelings and more revealing as to shortcomings.

Techniques aimed at establishing the desired relationship vary from interviewer to interviewer, but the general practice is to accustom the candidate to talking freely at the very outset of the session.



The interview itself should be private, and you should maintain control at all times.

Typically, this is achieved by opening up with a non-threatening “small talk” question aimed at easing initial tensions and requiring some elaboration. The subject matter might be how the candidate enjoyed living in a certain location or became interested and involved in a particular pastime or community project.

Throughout the interview, the interviewer should strive to be pleasant, maintain a conversational tone and be prepared to be supportive of the candidate’s accomplishments, offering praise where appropriate. All of this helps establish a bond between the participants. As the ice-breaking stage draws to a close, the interviewer should be prepared to move into the business part of the interview with a broad introductory question (contrasting previous work experiences, for example) that is designed to keep the candidate talking freely.

As soon as possible after the interview, take time to reflect. Carefully evaluate the information you have obtained, interpret the facts, rank them and determine a course of action. Make notes of salient points, especially personal impressions, and write a summary of your observations.

Interviewing Errors

One of the quickest ways to understand what makes a good interview is to take a look at the most common interviewing errors.

Poor Homework — The interview is ineffective due to a lack of preparation by the interviewer. Do your homework on position specifications before the interview. Avoid over-generalizations about the job and the company. Reviewing a CV and as much available information as possible on a candidate in advance facilitates the interview.

Rambling — The interviewer is confused and does not concentrate. Have a plan for focusing on specific areas for inquiry.

No Notes — The interviewer walks away with no written record. Be receptive and be thorough — know what you are after and keep a record by taking notes.

Leading Questions — The interviewer telegraphs the desired response to your questions. Keep your opinion to yourself and never over-question.

Air Time — The interviewer dominates the conversation. Be a good listener. Use silence — it’s difficult, but let the

applicant be the first to break the silence.

Prejudices and Stereotypes — They get in the way. Review your prejudices and don't let them influence your judgment.

Theoretical Questions — The interviewer tends to ask too many "What if..." questions. Questions should be skewed toward specific behavior patterns, responsibilities, accomplishments and methods used in getting results.

Chemistry — The interviewer doesn't hit it off with the candidate. Don't let poor personal chemistry cloud the interview. Be careful, too, when the chemistry is very good. In that case, be certain that you still evaluate the candidate's qualifications thoroughly.

Pop Psychology — Shun the role of amateur psychologist.

Tough One — Don't shy away from asking the hard questions. Similarly, ask follow-up questions — details should be developed rather than overlooked. "Why" is an invaluable probe and can be used frequently.

Halo Effects — The interviewer tends to judge by inference from answers not thoroughly provided by the candidate and allows personal opinion to become too influential. This behavior can tend to "wish someone" into a position. Again, follow up and seek specific answers. Have data to support your assessments and conclusions. Beware of the halo from the candidate's existing employer's reputation.

Buying vs. Selling — The interviewer fails to differentiate between the two. You should evaluate the candidate's experience from a buyer's perspective, make a value judgment and then decide upon the degree of persuasion needed or not needed to "sell" the individual.

Executives often say proudly; "I don't want the person if they don't want to come here." However, if the candidate is desirable and is currently employed, strong reasons must be given to induce a change. This requires a shift from "buyer" to "seller."

Evidence — The interviewer fails to identify sources of corroboration for what the candidate says. This can apply to performance figures, salary, bonuses and personal versus team achievement.



○ Will he/she do the right thing in preference to the easy or expedient thing?

Six Leadership Characteristics

In every search conducted by Boyden, we evaluate those candidates on six leadership characteristics, while looking at many others. Overall, each candidate is rated, on a scale of one to five, on each characteristic.

1: Integrity

We were reminded of the importance of integrity by the accounting scandals of the early 2000s. Today, we still see CEOs resigning because of tax fraud, pre-dated stock options and other behavior which can wipe out value built over a lifetime in a few days. We emphasize the importance of checking the integrity of candidates through interviews, as well as through the reference and due diligence process.

Key questions and issues to consider:

- Does the candidate recognize the rights and expectations of shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers and the wider community relative to his or her career and compensation? How would he/she handle trade-offs?
- Will he/she do the right thing in preference to the easy or expedient thing?
- Has he/she the independent judgment of moral issues to question advisors such as accountants, bankers and lawyers on matters of integrity?

Honesty — Keeping promises, being straightforward, respecting the law and regulations, declaring any conflicts of interest, and having a strong sense of right and wrong without preaching or being judgmental.

Reputation — Concern for his/her own reputation as well as that of the corporation, recognizing that a strong reputation is hard won and easily lost.

2: Problem Solving

- Does the candidate grasp the source, nature and key dimensions of a problem?
- Does he/she reach appropriate conclusions from available information?

Problem Analysis — Proficiency is indicated by such accomplishments as involvement in turnaround situations; penetration of a new market; successful handling of a start-up situation, or design of a successful course of action to deal with problems.

Judgment — A record of constructive job changes; success of executives or employees promoted; skill in budgeting; ability to stay on a career path with few lateral moves and ability to make significant policy decisions.

3: Communication Skills

Key questions and issues to consider:

- How effective is the candidate in person-to-person discussion and expression in small group situations?
- How well does he/she listen and extract relevant information?
- Does he/she express ideas to others with poise, relevance, persuasiveness and clarity?
- How well can a candidate write?

Dialogue Skills — Appointment as a group leader; representation of a unit or the company; success in negotiations/training of subordinates; successful avoidance of pseudo-technical vocabulary.

Listening Skills — Corrects remarks, indicating he or she has listened; goes to others for advice; asks sensible questions and summarizes discussion or statements made.

Presentation Skills — Success as a teacher or trainer, often a speaker to large groups; member of speaker's bureau in a civic activity. Measure the effectiveness of his/her communication during the interview.

Intercultural Skills — Success in previous interactions with people of different gender orientation, religion and cultures.



Does he/she express ideas to others with poise, relevance, persuasiveness and clarity?

4: Motivation

Key questions and issues to consider:

- Is he/she a self-starter, prepared to initiate?
- How much directed, sustained energy can the candidate bring to bear in accomplishing objectives?
- Does this person function in a controlled, effective manner under stress?
- Is there the resilience to manage in a crisis?
- Does the candidate set high standards and express a determination to see tasks done well?

Initiative — Getting the company involved in new products; working successfully on commissions; starting his/her own business or division, initiating projects, going to college at night; dissatisfaction with status quo; using innovative methods and making constructive organizational changes.

Drive — Rapid advancement; involvement in outside affairs; success in meeting goals in a Management by Objectives (MBO) program; determination to exceed goals; ability to handle multiple assignments well and put in long, productive hours.

Reaction to Pressure — Maintains composure during interview; functions effectively in crisis situation; maintains good human relations and meets imposed deadlines.

Commitment to Excellence — Has an outstanding academic record; frequent reference to high standards and a desire to do the job better than anyone else.

Orientation Toward Achievement — Goals achieved; recognition attained; honors bestowed; competitions won.

5: Interpersonal Skills

Key questions and issues to consider:

- Does the candidate direct or support the behavior of others toward achievement of common goals by charisma, insight or assertion of will?
- Does he/she demonstrate due consideration to the needs and feelings of others?

- Does the candidate create a positive impression of self-assurance, which gains recognition and commands respect?

Leadership — In past positions, a strong track record of ability to direct a large staff; head up a task force; develop subordinates.

Sensitivity — Rate of turnover among subordinates chosen personally vs. turnover among subordinates not chosen personally; relationship with people he/she has fired; reference to others in interview; demonstrated understanding of people's needs and sensitivity to social considerations.

Impact — Personal impact during interview; representation of the company in public; work as a sales leader or consultant; considers arising problems as personal challenges.

6: Execution

For most clients this is the overriding competence required.

Key questions on which the candidate should be evaluated are:

- Does he/she anticipate situations and problems and prepare in advance to cope with them? Is there an ability to establish priorities and coordinate activities?
- Can the candidate assign work and responsibility effectively, and follow up on progress?
- Has the candidate consistently delivered results throughout his/her career?
- Does the candidate get things done?

Planning and Organization — Preparation and organization for interview; setting up a new department; holding a planning position; successful non-crisis handling of a dynamic job; ability to prepare budgets, marketing plans, etc.

Delegation — Developed a strong organization; delegates authority to others; holds regular meetings with subordinates; refers to accomplishments of others; is not swamped with details in present position; is able to define duties of subordinates.

Delivery — Results generated to a timetable; action taken to remove blockages. Did the candidate lead or participate in getting the results?

In this section we offer a collection of potential interview questions arranged under the six key characteristics, plus a concluding section entitled “Self-Analysis.”

The interviewer should select questions with which he or she feels comfortable and that fit the game plan established for the interview.

Integrity

- In your present role, how have you balanced the needs of customers, shareholders, management, employees and others? Please give examples of conflicts, trade-offs and how you handled them.
- What are your views on governance and the role of the Board of Directors? What governance issues have you personally encountered? How have you dealt with them?
- How have you handled cases of dishonesty in your business career?
- How would you react to an accusation of dishonest dealings against your company and/or against yourself?
- How do you evaluate and manage the advice of lawyers, accountants, bankers and other professional advisors?
- How do you feel about diversity and minority issues?
- How do you balance your personal and business life?
- Is there anything you feel we should know which might raise questions about your integrity regarding this role?

Problem Solving

- In your present position, what problems have you identified that had previously been overlooked?
- How have you changed the nature of your job?

- What are three basic managerial criteria you use in judging a colleague?
- Have you helped reduce costs? How?
- Have you helped increase sales? Profits? How?
- Describe typical problems you are likely to face during the day and ways in which you reach solutions.
- What was your most serious problem in the last year?
- What was your worst mistake in recent years?
- Describe changes you have recommended.
- Describe situations where your judgment proved valuable.
- How do you measure a subordinate's judgment?
- Who has sought your opinion in the last month and what was the nature of the inquiry?
- Why did you take your company into "X" market?
- What are some difficult decisions you have made?
- How would you evaluate your present firm?
- When you are making a decision, how do you go about acquiring the right information?
- In what situation has your work been criticized?
- Would your colleagues rate you as the person with whom to discuss their problems?
- Describe several successes you have had in problem solving for your company.
- What was the most difficult problem you have faced?
- How do you go about solving a business problem?
- What human relations problems have you faced?

Communication Skills

- How do you generally function in group discussions?
- Have you ever led a workshop or seminar?
- What makes you effective person-to-person or in small groups?
- What accomplishments can you tell me about to show you are a good communicator?
- Do you prefer to communicate by memo, phone, email or face-to-face?
- How do you communicate with individuals who work for you? Within your organization?
- How do you rate yourself as a presenter?
- Describe your “platform” skills.
- How do you go about selling your ideas?
- How would you improve your communication skills?
- Do you volunteer to speak at gatherings?
- Describe some of your presentations.
- From whom have you sought advice in the last five years? Last month? Last week?
- When you are in discussion, do you consider yourself a good listener? Why?
- For whom are you a mentor?

Motivation

- Where are you now in your career and where will you be in three years?
- What are your short-term objectives? Long-term?
- What do you look for in a job?
- Give me the reasons for your last three job changes.
- What new goals or objectives have you established recently?
- What is the best aspect of your current position? The worst?

- Given the advantages you started with, how far have you really advanced?

What interests you most about the position we are discussing? The least?

- What factors would lead you to leave your present position?
- What aspects of your previous positions have you liked/disliked?
- Do you prefer staff or line work? Why?
- Describe a crisis situation when energy was an important consideration.
- What kinds of events make you emotional?
- How do you react when your boss, (clients or stockholders) puts pressure on you?
- What are the aggravations of your present position?
- Do you enjoy hectic activity?
- What would your colleagues say about your drive? Your boss?
- What failing situation have you rescued?
- How do you get things done?
- How did you find your first job?
- How would you react to heading a start-up situation?
- In describing your leadership style, what is more important — form or content?
- Have you ever left a position because the standards set were not high enough?
- In your expectations for others, how close do your colleagues come to meeting the mark?
- Describe situations in which you have had to “bend” to achieve objectives.
- Which is more important — completing a job on time or doing it right?

- What are your outside interests — social, community, arts, sports?
- What does success mean to you?
- What is most important in your life?
- Who is a well-known figure (dead or alive) that you admire? Why?
- Did you have a mentor and, if so, how did that individual affect your career?
- What is the legacy you will leave in your current job?
- What might it be in this new role?

Interpersonal Skills

- Describe an ideal subordinate.
- What perceptions do employees have of you?
- How have you improved subordinates' performance?
- What do you think of your boss?
- What do you look for in hiring people?
- How would you go about firing people?
- To what degree have you developed subordinates who have been promoted to other executive positions?
- What techniques have you used to build team spirit?
- How have you supported the weaker members of your group?
- Do you generally speak to people before they speak to you?
- Have you been a spokesperson for your company?
- Are you asked to take on special assignments?
- Describe special projects or task forces for which you were selected.
- How would you describe your impact on your company?

Execution

- What results have you delivered in previous and present jobs?
- What are the obstacles to results in this new role?
- How would you overcome them?
- How do you allocate your time during a typical day?
- How do you set priorities?
- How do you assign tasks? What controls do you use?
- What types of tasks do you feel you cannot delegate?
- Do you have a succession plan?
- How have you contributed to change in your organization?
- How do you determine if a subordinate is effective?
- Have you used MBO? What were the results?
- Describe how you plan to organize delivery of results.
- Do you have many “crises” in your job? Why?
- Are you a better planner or implementer?
- How do you administer the subjective part of your incentive program?

Self-Analysis

- How would your boss rate you in the following areas and why? How would you rate yourself?
 - > Integrity
 - > Problem Solving
 - > Communication
 - > Motivation
 - > Interpersonal Skills
 - > Execution

- What might your closest personal friend say they disliked about you?
- What would your direct reports say about you?
- What is your greatest strength? Weakness?
- Why should we hire you?
- What can you do for us that another candidate could not do?
- How would you describe your personality?
- Why didn't you do better in college, or in your job?
- If you could start your career again, what would you do differently?
- What are your five biggest accomplishments in your present job?
- How do you know when you've done a good job?
- Why aren't you earning more?
- What are the most important criteria involved in good management?
- Why do you feel you have top management potential?
- What are the weak spots in your work habits?
- Tell me what you consider your greatest abilities and how they will help you in this job.
- Don't you feel you might be better off in a different company or career?
- Are you creative? Give several examples.



Interviewing is an art form Boyden professionals have been perfecting for over 70 years. It requires a disciplined approach. Be prepared for the interview, maintain control throughout and carefully evaluate the candidate. These techniques are crucial when it comes to selecting the right candidate for your organization.

The interview is only one part of the recruitment process. Post interview evaluation, thorough reference checking and closing a deal with the chosen candidate are also crucial steps.

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