CAREER SKILLS

Advice on Mastering the ‘Behavioral’ Interview

Deborah Walker, an interview coach and president of Alpha Advantage Inc., a consulting firm, believes that some of the most challenging interview questions are found in so-called behavioral interviews, which are designed to test applicant’s abilities in three specific ways:

1. determining how well you work under pressure;
2. finding out how well you work with others; and
3. establishing whether you can resolve conflicts.

Behavioral interviews can be disastrous if you don’t know how to prepare for them, Walker says. Employers want to know how much stress an executive can take, fearing that an employee with low tolerance for stress may increase the workload for others while destroying team spirit among colleagues—a terrible one-two punch.

A common question, she says, might be something like, “Tell me about the most stressful situation you’ve encountered in your current position.” To find out how well you work with others, you might be asked: “Tell me about a time when you strongly disagreed with your team” or “Tell me about a time when you thought your boss was wrong? How did you handle it?”

To discover your conflict-resolution skills, she says, you might be asked: “Tell me about a time when you had difficulty resolving a customer conflict.”

To prepare for what may turn into a behavioral interview, Walker urges executives to:

- Notice that behavioral questions ask you about specific events, so take inventory of the stressful or difficult situations you’ve encountered at work. Think back to times when you didn’t agree with your boss, or when your peers drove you crazy or when customers made unrealistic demands.
- Once you’ve thought of several situations, plan how to present them in a positive light. For situations you didn’t handle well, present them in terms of what you learned, like this: “Yes, I learned an important lesson about following directions and asking questions for clarification when...” For situations that did turn out well, on the other hand, present them based on what was accomplished, she says.

With the right interview preparation, Walker says, nightmare behavioral questions can be turned into opportunities to sell yourself.

EXECUTIVE SUITE

Strategy Officers Create New Challenge for CFOs

While the CSO, in theory, is focused more on the longer-term future, there clearly is potential for friction between the two executives.

While both CFOs and CSOs agree that a working relationship with the CSO is critical to their success, according to new research by Accenture, the chief strategy officer is still a fairly rare breed, mostly confined to Global 2000 companies where they do exist. But in companies with CSOs, most CFOs agree that a working relationship with the CSO is critical to their success, according to new research by Accenture.

While both CFOs and CSOs admit that this new relationship could spark disagreements, the research shows they currently recognize the basic principles on how to embrace “creative tension” to remain productive. These include:
- Recognizing that each role is critical to execution, thus aligning business priorities and working jointly on projects;
- Finding sufficient time for the senior team to meet and to have active debates and discussions that involve the whole senior team; and
- Focusing on common activities and objectives—not just at the C-level but also within each of the functions (i.e., have mid-level finance executives involved with strategy initiatives and vice versa).

Daniel T. London, managing director of the Accenture Finance and Performance Management service line and co-author of the report, said in an interview that many Global 2000 companies view strategy formulation as its own discipline. In naming a CSO, they are recognizing that strategic execution happens in real time and isn’t just a topic for an annual retreat.

Traditionally, London says, CFOs have owned the facility planning process and going from topline strategy to annual operating plans and budgeting and forecasting. That process draws from multiple disciplines and departments in the organization, and in recent years, the CFO has become, as been widely noted, more of a business partner than a chief accountant.

While the CSO, in theory, is focused more on the longer-term future, there clearly is potential for friction between the two executives, London says. Inherent in that tension is “what do I need to do for the future, versus what has to happen today. Getting that balance right is incredibly important.”

He adds that the CFO/CSO dynamic is just part of the overall need for senior executives to meet on strategic initiatives. “It’s critical for management teams to come together to have that debate, regardless of the impetus.”