TOUGH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND GREAT SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO ANSWER THEM

The following answers are provided to give you a new perspective on how to answer tough interview questions. They are not there for you to lift from the page and insert into your next interview. They are provided for you to use as the basic structure for formulating your own answers. While the specifics of each reply may not apply to you, try to follow the basic structure of the answer from the perspective of the interviewer. Answer the questions behaviorally, with specific examples that show that clear evidence backs up what you are saying about yourself. Always provide information that shows you want to become the very best _____ for the company and that you have specifically prepared yourself to become exactly that. They want to be sold. They are waiting to be sold. Don’t disappoint them!

1. **Tell me about yourself.**
   It seems like an easy interview question. It’s open ended. I can talk about whatever I want from the birth canal forward. Right?

   Wrong. What the hiring manager really wants is a quick, two- to three-minute snapshot of who you are and why you’re the best candidate for this position.

   So as you answer this question, talk about what you’ve done to prepare yourself to be the very best candidate for the position. Use an example or two to back it up. Then ask if they would like more details. If they do, keep giving them example after example of your background and experience. Always point back to an example when you have the opportunity.

   “Tell me about yourself” does not mean tell me everything. Just tell me what makes you the best.

2. **Why should I hire you?**
   There’s a fine line between boastful and confident. And you need to learn it.

   When an interviewer asks you why they should hire you, you’re going to have speak confidently and honestly about your abilities. But you should avoid sounding overly boastful.

   Aim for earnest and prepare by practicing. That’s right: Stand in front of the mirror and acknowledge your abilities and accomplishments to your reflection. Tell yourself: I have a very strong work ethic. I have integrity. I have excellent industry contacts. I aggressively pursue my goals.

   It’s sometimes hard to praise yourself, but after a few sessions you’ll sound sincere.

   The easy answer is that you are the best person for the job. And don’t be afraid to say so. But then back it up with what specifically differentiates you.

   For example:
   “You should hire me because I’m the best person for the job. I realize that there are likely other candidates who also have the ability to do this job. Yet I bring an additional quality that makes me the best person for the job--my passion for excellence. I am passionately committed to producing truly world class results. For example . . .”

   Are you the best person for the job? Show it by your passionate examples.
3. What is your long-range objective? or Where do you see yourself in five years?
Otherwise known as the "big picture" question.

The best tactic: Talk about your values. Don't get too detailed about your specific career plan. Instead, discuss things that are important to you professionally and how you plan to achieve them.

If growth is a goal, mention that. You can also talk about challenge, another value that employers prize in their employees.

The key is to focus on your achievable objectives and what you are doing to reach those objectives. For example:

"Within five years, I would like to become the very best accountant your company has on staff. I want to work toward becoming the expert that others rely upon. And in doing so, I feel I'll be fully prepared to take on any greater responsibilities which might be presented in the long term. For example, here is what I'm presently doing to prepare myself . . ."

Then go on to show by your examples what you are doing to reach your goals and objectives.

4. How has your education prepared you for your career?
This is a broad question and you need to focus on the behavioral examples in your educational background which specifically align to the required competencies for the career.

An example:

"My education has focused on not only the learning the fundamentals, but also on the practical application of the information learned within those classes. For example, I played a lead role in a class project where we gathered and analyzed best practice data from this industry. Let me tell you more about the results . . ."

Focus on behavioral examples supporting the key competencies for the career. Then ask if they would like to hear more examples.

5. Are you a team player?
Almost everyone says yes to this question. But it is not just a yes/no question. You need to provide behavioral examples to back up your answer.

A sample answer:

"Yes, I'm very much a team player. In fact, I've had opportunities in my work, school and athletics to develop my skills as a team player. For example, on a recent project . . ."

Emphasize teamwork behavioral examples and focus on your openness to diversity of backgrounds. Talk about the strength of the team above the individual. And note that this question may be used as a lead in to questions around how you handle conflict within a team, so be prepared.
6. Have you ever had a conflict with a boss or professor? How was it resolved?
Note that if you say no, most interviewers will keep drilling deeper to find a conflict. The key is how you behaviorally reacted to conflict and what you did to resolve it.

For example:
"Yes, I have had conflicts in the past. Never major ones, but there have been disagreements that needed to be resolved. I’ve found that when conflict occurs, it helps to fully understand the other person’s perspective, so I take time to listen to their point of view, and then I seek to work out a collaborative solution. For example . . ."

Focus your answer on the behavioral process for resolving the conflict and working collaboratively.

7. What is your greatest weakness?
Most career books tell you to select a strength and present it as a weakness. Such as: "I work too much. I just work and work and work.” Wrong. First of all, using a strength and presenting it as a weakness is deceiving. Second, it misses the point of the question.

You should select a weakness that you have been actively working to overcome. For example: "I have had trouble in the past with planning and prioritization. However, I’m now taking steps to correct this. I just started using a pocket planner . . ." then show them your planner and how you are using it.
Talk about a true weakness and show what you are doing to overcome it.

8. If I were to ask your current or previous boss to describe you, what would they say?
This is a threat of reference check question. Do not wait for the interview to know the answer. Ask any prior bosses or professors in advance. And if they’re willing to provide a positive reference, ask them for a letter of recommendation.

Then you can answer the question like this:
“I believe she would say I’m a very energetic person, that I’m results oriented and one of the best people she has ever worked with. Actually, I know she would say that, because those are her very words. May I show you her letter of recommendation?”

So be prepared in advance with your letters of recommendation.

9. What qualities do you feel a successful manager should have?
Focus on two words: leadership and vision.

Here is a sample of how to respond:
"The key quality in a successful manager should be leadership--the ability to be the visionary for the people who are working under them. The person who can set the course and direction for subordinates. The highest calling of a true leader is inspiring others to reach the highest of their abilities. I’d like to tell you about a person whom I consider to be a true leader . . .”

Then give an example of someone who has touched your life and how their impact has helped in your personal development.
10. If you had to live your life over again, what one thing would you change?
Focus on a key turning point in your life or missed opportunity. Yet also tie it forward to what you are doing to still seek to make that change.

For example:
“Although I’m overall very happy with where I’m at in my life, the one aspect I likely would have changed would be focusing earlier on my chosen career. I had a great internship this past year and look forward to more experience in the field. I simply wish I would have focused here earlier. For example, I learned on my recent internship…” then provide examples.

And last but not least:

11. The Seemingly Silly Question
If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be? What if you were a car? Or an animal?

These type of questions can bring your interview to a screeching halt.

First, don’t panic. Pause and take a deep breath. Then remind yourself that there’s no “right” answer to these questions. The job isn’t hinging on whether you choose to be a spruce versus an oak.

Interviewers usually ask these questions to see how you react under pressure and how well you handle the unexpected. It’s not so important what type of tree (or car, or animal) you choose as that you explain your choice in a way that makes you look favorable.

So, be a spruce -- because you want to reach new heights in your career. Or be an oak -- because you plan to put down roots at the company. Either way, you’ll get it right.

12. The 'Salary' Question
This can be an extremely tricky one to deal with. As you know, salary is generally not discussed in the first interview and therefore will only occur either during the second interview or when the employer is ready to narrow down his candidate selection.

However, when the time does come to discuss salary and the interviewer asks your salary requirement, try first to gently deflect the question by inquiring about the salary for the position.

If the interviewer presses you for a number, give a range. To decide on a range, think about the salary you want, your salary at your most recent position and the industry-standard salary for the job.

The bottom line: The salary question is one of the most important, so you should prepare for it in advance and plan what to say.