Responding to Behavioral-based interview questions

How to interview well when they are asking Behavioral-based interview questions

Theory: Past performance is the best predictor of future performance

Employer may be looking for how you:

- handled pressure
- worked with difficult co-workers
- creatively solved problems
- proposed a solution to a team
- went above and beyond on a project
- failed, but learned from your errors

You know it’s a behavioral-based interview question, when you hear:

- give me an example of a time when . . .
- describe how you handled . . .
- how have you responded . . .
- tell me about a situation in which you . . .

Interviewers are looking for answers that fit the STAR format (or CAR for some interviewers)

Situation  Task  Action  Result

(or Challenge, Action, Result)

When answering these questions:

- Think of a specific example that answers the question
- Think of an example that is work-related, if possible (use school, professional organizations, or volunteer activities; avoid church and personal, unless related to the organization)
- Think of an example that is not more than 2 years old whenever possible
- Give an answer that is 2-3 minutes long
- Give specific information in your answer, such as names, dates, dollars, places, clients, etc.
- Don’t hypothesize or generalize
- There is no “right” answer, the interviewer wants to learn about how you might work as a future employee
- Ask the interviewer to repeat the question if you missed any of it
- Pause and think through your answer before starting – know where the story ends before you start talking

If the question is one for which you have no examples, say “Hmmm. I haven’t had that experience and can’t think of a specific example.” “Or, my only example is about 10 years old, is that okay?” The interviewer will move to the next question, or ask a similar question hoping to jog your memory for an example. Or you can ask to answer the question in how you would handle that experience. If the interviewer is okay with that, then you can hypothesize.
Example Question:

Give me an example of a time when you were working on a project that was going smoothly and you were on schedule. However, partway through the project, you realized that if you changed something, it’d be more work, but you’d have a better outcome.

Weak answer:

In that type of situation, I would consider the extra effort that I’d need to input in relationship to the output that I’d get and the value that would have for the project. If the value was great enough, I would work extra hours in order to improve the project. I know that the project would have a better outcome and my team would be recognized for the exceptional work.

Weak answer:

In the past when I’ve been in that situation, I have demonstrated that I can go above and beyond to enhance a project. I have worked extra hours, negotiated for additional resources on my projects, and utilized technology to save time and money. I always have strived for the best possible result, even if it meant extra work on my part. I feel it’s worth it to kick in the additional effort in order to have a project outcome that will benefit the company. You’ll find that I’m constantly looking for ways to get the best result possible.

STAR answer:

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<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<td>When I joined ABC company two years ago, I was given the task of developing a training module for our XYZ product for the sales reps. The product was ready to launch and everyone was eager to have the orientation developed and delivered immediately. There was lots of pressure to get this project done quickly.</td>
<td>During my first week, I worked really hard to get the module created. I collaborated with the other trainer, Jack, a lead developer on the project, Joe, and my manager to ensure that what I was preparing was what was needed. I was on schedule. By chance, I overheard in the lunchroom that the XYZ product was going to be launched early in Japan and that the development staff was scrambling to get the help manual translated into Japanese as soon as possible.</td>
<td>I went to my manager and asked if I should be also working on a translation of my materials. He checked, and yes the training materials would also need to be translated ahead of schedule and someone had forgotten to pass that information along to our department. I requested help from Jack as to how to get our materials translated as well as extra resources from my manager. With Jack’s help I was able to locate a qualified translator quickly. My manager approved extra funds so that the translator could begin work as soon as I had each section created and approved.</td>
<td>Fortunately, the training materials were ready in Japanese right when they were needed by the Japan sales reps. If we hadn’t heard about the early launch and I hadn’t requested the resources, we would have had a delay in launching our product in Japan. My manager was very pleased with our efforts and the timeliness of our delivery.</td>
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**Result**

Sometimes the Result is not a positive outcome. For example, if the question was “Give me an example of a time when you did not meet the expected outcomes for a project”, the Result will show that there was some type of failure. As part of the Result, you should explain what you learned from the situation. You can say what you did differently on another Task with your new knowledge or what you would do in a similar situation in the future (okay to hypothesize).

**Preparation**

Prepare for behavior-based interview questions by thinking of about six stories from the accomplishments on your resume. Most likely, you can use the same story to answer more than one question (but not to the same interviewer); you can focus the point of the story to a) the technical skills you used, b) the team interaction dynamics during the project, 3) the way you handled stress, 4) how you led or mentored others, 5) your communication skills, or 6) how you planned the project.

Practice telling your stories in the STAR format.

**Communicating during the interview**

One of the hardest dynamics of being interviewed is that you have to talk to answer the question you are asked while simultaneously watching your interviewer(s)’ body language. This is why you are so exhausted at the end of an interview.

You are looking for clues that you have confused the interviewer, said something wrong, are talking too long, are saying what he/she wants and you should give more detail, etc. You need to keep eye contact (not staring) with the interviewer(s) as you give your answer. Closing your eyes or looking at the floor while you answer robs you of the nonverbal feedback that you need. If you feel you have confused or said something wrong, stop and ask: “I feel my answer isn’t what you are looking for – am I on track?”
Other interview pointers from an HR Manager’s experience:

When the interview is being scheduled, either by phone or email, it’s okay to ask about dress code, parking, lunch (if your interview looks to run all day), if you need to bring anything, if there’s anything you need to prepare in advance, and who you should ask for at the front desk. Please ask who you should ask for at the front desk – it’s usually not the person who called and scheduled your interviews, but instead the first person on your interview schedule.

Practice your handshake and get feedback on it from a bunch of people (male and female) before the interview.

Smile when you are being introduced to people. It’s okay to show some humor and laugh, just don’t be goofy.

Show respect to everyone in the process. I’ve often looped back around to ask the Receptionist how he/she was treated by the candidate.

Let the interviewer lead the interview process. However, if it’s clear that he/she wants you to take over and start talking about yourself, go ahead. If instead the interviewer shows up with a list of interview questions, let him/her guide you through them. It’s okay to ask a follow-up to the interview question. Example: the question you just asked was about how I would interact with a difficult, hard-to-reach customer, if there is such a customer as part of my client list, how big of a customer are they?

Always be prepared to answer the questions:

- Why are you looking for a job at this time?
- Why are you interested in our company?
- Why are you interested in this position?
- What do you know about this position?

Lunch – if you have a lunch interview: it’s fine to mention to the person scheduling the interviews if you are vegetarian/vegan. Don’t order alcohol at lunch even if others do. Order a light meal. Work to make eye contact with everyone at the table. It’s okay to eat, but realize it’s an interview too. Don’t order dessert unless others do the same.

It’s okay to ask for water or to use the restroom – well-trained interviewers will offer this to you, but sometimes you just have to ask.

Thank everyone who helped schedule your interviews or guided you during the day (did an admin walk you between interviewers – did you get his/her name?).

Always have questions for every interviewer. You can always ask “why did you choose to come to work here?” and “why do you like working here?” if you don’t have anything specific for the interviewer.

Get business cards or write down email addresses of your interviewers. Send each one a thank you note or email. Each thank you should be personalized for the interviewer – recall something from your conversation to show him/her that you were listening.
Some big “duh!” comments:

Don’t chew gum – breath mints are small and can easily be stored in your pocket

Don’t bring in your Starbuck’s coffee – this is an interview, not a chat

Don’t be flirty – friendly okay, flirty not okay

Skip the perfume/aftershave/cologne/smelly deodorant on interview day – you don’t want your scent to make a longer lasting impression than you do. If someone has an allergy or gets migraines and is stuck with you in a small conference room, he/she will not appreciate your strong scent.

Don’t discuss your medical conditions, financial or marital situation. It does not help you for interviewers to know that you are going through a nasty divorce, your mother is living with you, your kidney stones are acting up, and you are broke. Instead, you can state that you are really ready to be back and work and can start immediately.

Don’t say anything bad about your previous company or boss. Be positive about your job search and the opportunity for which you are interviewing – look forward, not backward.