

THE INTERVIEW GAME

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Introduction

Every Sunday I used to read a weekly column in the New York Times called “The Corner Office.” Written between 2009 and 2017 by Adam Bryant, the column featured an interview with one CEO each week. The kinds of companies represented ran the gamut, including pharmaceuticals, housecleaning, restaurant chains, web services, banks and more. Because Bryant’s questions for the CEOs remained pretty much the same for over six years you can get a pretty good picture of how different CEOs think about the same things. The questions included “Tell me a one lesson you’ve learned about leadership,” and “What is your leadership style?” They also included “How do you hire?” and “What questions do you ask during job interviews?” These last two always fascinate me because I am interested in how people make hiring decisions and in the kinds of questions they ask during interviews. Each week as I read the interview, I would say to myself “Everyone is asking different questions and everyone has their own ‘make it or break it’ question. It seems like there really is no commonality in how people interview - there is no playbook.”

Eventually I decided to test this conclusion by logging into the New York Times archives and examining nearly all (there are over 400) of the interviews. I was looking for differences and overlaps in the kinds of questions the CEOs asked when interviewing a candidate. What I found surprised me. While each CEO seemed to think that they had their own “secret sauce” for what to ask during an interview as a way of identifying winners and weeding out losers, the reality was quite different. I found a lot of overlap in the interview questions. In fact, in sharp contrast to the impression I had from reading one interview each week – that there was no overlap - when I read them one after another overlap was mostly what I found. In the following, I have collected the most common interview questions CEOs said they asked and have organized them into categories.

As I reviewed the questions and the CEO’s commentaries on why they asked them, I also drew some general conclusions about what CEOs were looking for from the candidate during an interview.

Overwhelmingly, the CEOs said they are looking for honesty, openness and even humility (or at least an appearance of the same). In my experience, most interviewees believe that there is just too much at stake in an interview for them to be any of those things. The reason they feel this way is that they’re afraid of misspeaking or revealing something during the interview that will kill their prospects. By contrast, my reading of what the CEOs said is that in nearly all cases, honesty will be valued and admired

while minor mistakes or lapses will be quickly forgotten. Of course, honesty isn't the same as total transparency. You don't need to say or reveal things that may hurt your prospects.

In Bryant's interviews, many CEOs said they valued candidate's self-knowledge and emotional intelligence more than almost anything else (nearly all the candidates were interviewing for management or leadership positions). They said that they looked for candidates' ability to talk about their background and work history in a way that highlighted what motivates them - what gets them out of bed each morning.

Bryant's interviews also reveal that it's OK (and for some interviewers mandatory) to admit that you're not perfect as long as you know why and as long as you're working on becoming better. While you should have a list of things that you're really good at, it's OK (and, again, for some CEOs even mandatory) that you talk about things you've failed at (if asked). The CEOs said that they were looking for resilience and what you learned from the experience. It's also OK to talk about things that annoy you, as long as you show that you're aware of this and that you work hard to make sure that your annoyance doesn't negatively impact your interactions and performance (more emotional intelligence).

All of the CEOs said that you need to have done your homework about their company and have a long list of questions to ask. CEOs want you to have a good reason why you want to work for THIS company specifically. What's in it for you? What's in it for them?

If you're applying for a management level position use more "we" than "I" words when you talk about projects you've worked on. The CEOs said that they are keen to hire people who see themselves as team players and many said that this verbal cue is something that they listen for as a tip off.

None of the above are things that we think about much in our day-to-day lives, so don't expect that you will be able to "wing it" in your interview. You need to practice not just answering interview questions but more importantly, you need to learn from this practice who you are and be able to talk about that.

Because you cannot anticipate every question, your answers need to come from honesty and self-knowledge, not from a crib sheet. This ability assumes added importance with CEOs who bridle at what seem to be overly rehearsed answers. Consider this quote from a CEO, "It's usually the people who have a very well-formed speech they give when they go to a job interview who are incapable of really getting away from that. They've practiced the questions that they think they're going to be asked, and that is a disaster. I actually think that a lot of coaches do a disservice in this area because they get you to over-prepare and get you to think about what are generic questions. That's really not what someone's looking for most of the time when you're recruiting for a senior job."

From this CEOs perspective, it's more important that you have thought about and be in touch with your core values and ideals so that you can build answers on them rather than reciting packaged answers that seem rehearsed.

In my view there needs to be a balance. You would be a fool not to review the following interview questions and not to have outlined you answers to them. Make sure that your answers are genuine and are based on who you are rather than on who you think you ought to be or who you imagine the interviewer wants you to be. In the end, the best preparation you can have for a job interview is to be a great person with a great background, have deep self-awareness and emotional intelligence and an inspiring and participative management style.

While you're working on that, get going on the following, which are the most common questions asked by the CEOs whose interviews I read, and which I have organized by theme.

TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF QUESTIONS

Interviewers are trying get a sense of “who you are.” You need to have a succinct one to three-minute story. But you need to be able to tell it like you're just putting it together at that moment - i.e. it shouldn't flood out like a speech and shouldn't sound rehearsed. Like your resume, your story can and should be tweaked for each person, company or interview. Decide what aspect of your experience needs to be emphasized based on the position you're applying for and the focus and needs of the company. If you don't know this in advance listen hard for clues during the interview and especially when you get a chance to ask them questions.

“Tell me about your background.”

“Tell me about how and where you grew up. What did your parents do?”

“What were your goals were when you were growing up.?”

“Walk me through your résumé, particularly why you changed from one job to the next.”

“Give me a tour of your life.” I'll also ask, “Tell me three things about how you define yourself,” and, “When you're not at work, what do you do two standard deviations better than anybody else?”

“I'll ask people for their elevator pitch. You've got three minutes. What will you tell me about yourself? It's interesting to hear the traits that people focus on.”

“When nobody is watching you, outside of work, what do you do to be great that is only for you and that no one else will ever see?”

“What do you want? If you were to spend the next 10 years working here, what do you want? I’m looking for clarity in their answer, in one or two sentences.”

“What magazines or papers do you read in your spare time?”

“First, I ask them what their passion is. I can get a good sense of who they are, and it helps me understand how they’re going to fit culturally in the organization.”

SELF-KNOWLEDGE, WEAKNESSES, MOTIVATIONS; LISTENING FOR MORE “WE” THAN “I”

People ask the questions below to get a sense of how self-aware you are. More than 50% of CEOs ask some version of “Tell me what you don’t do well” or “What’s your biggest weakness or deficit?” These questions have become so ubiquitous that candidates have started offering soft-ball answers like “I work too hard and stress others with my perfectionism.” That is, they offer up a “weakness” that’s really a strength. You may be able to get away with that kind of answer with an unsophisticated interviewer, but a more perceptive one may challenge you. My suggestion is to prepare for this question and come up with a genuine developmental need that you have (albeit one that won’t disqualify you for this job) and talk about how you’re working on improving. They’re looking for people with a “growth mentality.” Never give the impression that you have all the skills you will ever need.

“When things weren’t going well how do you get yourself motivated?”

“What are you most proud of?”

“What are you good at and why do you think so?”

“What irritates you?”

“What matters most to you?”

“If you failed at this job in your first 90 days, what things wouldn’t you be doing well? And what don’t you know, but know you need to know, in order to be successful at this job?”

“What are you genuinely bad at? What does your spouse or partner or the person you’re dating tell you you’re bad at? Because if they haven’t told you, then you

shouldn't be sitting here because I can't work with you if you don't know what you're bad at."

"Six months from now, we're going to know each other very well. What will your team and what will I say that you do really, really well? And then what will they say that we all wish you did better?"

"Tell me about the first experience in your life when you realized that you had the power of change or the power to do something meaningful."

"What are you working on developing within yourself right now?" If someone can't answer that honestly and rather quickly, if you have to think too hard about what you're working on developing, are you really working on it? I'm looking for a commitment to self-development and personal growth. "What do you want to do?" If you don't know what you want to do, you're letting chance dictate your future. Then I look for patterns in their life that show they've conceived of a plan in the past and accomplished it."

"Tell me who your favorite boss was, and why, and who your least-favorite boss was and why." And you quickly get a sense of what leadership styles work best for them."

"Around here, you need to be better tomorrow than you are today and you need to make the company better tomorrow than it is today. So if you start here, what do you want to focus on to be better?" That stumps some people."

"Take me through what your past employers said to you in your reviews about what you do well and where you need to improve."

"So, what makes you really special? If you were writing 500 words about yourself, what would you say?"

"What gets you out of bed? What gets you excited?"

"Tell me about a time on a Sunday that you were thinking about going back to work and you hated your job. Why? What was it?" That tells me a lot about the type of team member you're going to be."

"What are the three things you do best and why? What are the three things they feel you need to improve on and why." And I'll ask them if they are happy with their choices."

"What kind of cultures do you like to work in?"

"What do you think would be challenging for you to be working in this environment?"

MANAGING ADVERSITY

Here the CEOs are looking for evidence that you can admit failure and learn from it. For most CEOs how you respond to adversity or failure is a key indicator of strength of character and perseverance. Have a failure or adversity story that you can tell. Tell the story as if you are ad libbing, but know where you're going with it. The take home message should be "I'm not perfect but I try to learn from my mistakes." Make sure you take ownership for your own failures – blaming others may be viewed as a sign that you can't take responsibility for your own actions.

"Give me some examples of when you've failed?"

"What were the things you had to overcome?" I always ask about their weaknesses, and I listen pretty carefully to that, because it's often a good gauge as to how self-aware they are."

"Tell me about a time you experienced a really difficult situation. I don't care whether it happened at work or outside of work. What did you do?"

"Tell me about situations that were really tough, and how you got out of them. I like to hear how they tell stories."

"How can I tell if you're having a bad day? What things irritate you? What do you do about it? what do you do if you don't agree with a decision?"

"Tell me about the toughest situation you've faced over the last two or three years where you faced a fork in the road. How did you figure out which path to take? Once you were clear about the path, how did you drive everyone toward that goal? If people disagreed with the direction, what was your reaction? Was it "my way or the highway," or were you curious about their point of view? (I also look for people who are very clear that they are going to make mistakes, and that it's perfectly fine to make mistakes. If you don't make any mistakes, you're not taking enough risk. When have you encountered complete failure and how did you deal with it? Did you learn from it?)"

"Tell me something you did that was really hard, and that you didn't handle as well as you wish you had." Part of being a leader involves a willingness to step up and do things that are hard. You don't always do that perfectly. It's precisely because they're hard that they require some willingness to learn and get better."

“Where do you excel? How do you excel? If you find yourself in situations where they’re not going the way you want them to, what do you do?” How people conduct themselves when they face challenges is really important.”

“I would also ask them about a time they took a risk and failed. I have not hired people who have told me they’ve never failed. You don’t learn if you don’t fail.”

HOW OTHERS SEE YOU

Another sign of emotional intelligence that CEOs look for is an awareness of and curiosity about how others see you. Don’t get stuck with self-defeating thoughts like “Well, I don’t really know what they think of me since they’ve never told me in so many words.” Think through your history with your colleagues and supervisors – have you been promoted? Have you been given key responsibilities? Do people come to you for advice? Weave the answers to these questions in a story about what you conclude they think of you – reliable, trustworthy, insightful, etc. Remember, they’re asking you what YOU THINK they think of you.

“What would your boss say about you?”

“If I could pick up the phone right now and call all of your peers at your office, what would they say to me about you?”

“I also always ask people, “What will your company think when you tell them you’re leaving?” It can help you get at other aspects of the person — how they work with others and how they’re perceived.”

WHY ARE YOU APPLYING FOR THIS JOB?

CEOs want you to show them that you have done your research on their company and that there is a strategic reason why you are applying for this position. CEOs want applicants to know their company’s mission, to love what the company does and to show a drive to contribute.

“Why are you interested in the role. How has your career path brought you to this point? Where have you been, and where are you going?”

“If this interview were reversed and I was coming to your house and you were interviewing me because you had 16 different job offers to choose from, what would you be looking for from me?” That helps me understand their aspirations for the job.

“Well, my first question is always, “Tell me what you think this job is all about.” And I think just allowing them to speak about what they want to do, and what they think the job is about, is actually very useful, because it sheds light on what they think they want to do in the company. I typically also end an interview with asking them how they can make a difference.”

“Why are you leaving your current job?”

“What concerns you about our organization? What makes you feel a little bit afraid? What is it that you’re not sure about — whether you can meet certain expectations or maybe something you’re not sure you’d like to be a part of?” And that gives me another dimension of the person.”

“What are the qualities of a job you’re looking for?” Do they talk about the workplace? Do they talk about the kinds of people they want to work with? Do they talk about what kinds of responsibilities they want to have?”

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN TO ASK QUESTIONS

As above, CEOs place a huge value on your curiosity about their company and on the research you’ve done on them. You need to have more questions for them than you can reasonably expect to cover. These questions should be based on research about the company. Show that you’ve read their publications, press releases, their financials (if you understand them) and are familiar with their products. Have questions about these as well as future direction, strategy and plans.

“What questions do you have for me?”

“The first thing I always ask is “Let’s start out with the questions you have for me. You’ve talked to a lot of people, but is there anything about the mission of the company, our board, my background, that you want to ask me about?” Believe it or not, seven out of 10 people say, “I’ve already gotten what I need.” Maybe they’re nervous, but I’m thinking: “You’re talking to the C.E.O. You don’t want to know what makes me tick?”

“What’s the biggest, boldest, greatest idea you have for us that we’re not doing that you think would help transform our business?” Or, “What do you think we’re doing that we’re not doing well enough, and that you think you could make better?”

YOUR MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP STYLE.

CEOs expect you to be able to talk about your management and leadership style. If you don't have that language at the tip of your tongue, start reading books on these topics. In a nutshell, stay away from "command and control" and lean towards "participative, collaborative and leading by example." Talk about mentoring and coaching your direct reports and about setting goals and holding people accountable for them.

Many CEOs say that they listen for how much you say "I" did this or that instead of "we" as an indicator of whether you see yourself as an individual player or a team player. If you're applying for a position as a bench scientist by all means use "I" to highlight all the skills that you have and the depth of your knowledge. If you're applying for a management or leadership position, the "we" is a tip off that you're thinking is team focused.

"How to you hire?"

"I want to hear about how you lead and manage, and I want examples. I want to understand how you think about managing people who are struggling, and how you bring out their best."

"Pick a project and tell me about it (listening for use of "I" vs "we")

"Talk to me about one of your greatest achievements," and I'll listen to the story from the perspective of whether it was an "I" and "me" achievement or a "we" achievement.

"Tell me who your favorite boss was, and why, and who your least-favorite boss was and why." And you quickly get a sense of what leadership styles work best for them."

"Tell me about a time when you really had to stick your neck out for the greater good of the mission." You want to see whether people were willing to take bold action to move the mission forward.

MIND GAMES

Many interviewers fancy themselves amateur psychologists and ask questions designed to reveal the inner workings of your mind or your motivations. While these questions cover too much territory to allow us to suggest glib answers, forewarned is forearmed. Read through the questions and practice answering them.

“My first question is always, “What do you want to talk about?” I get to understand how you think with that one question. I will understand your priorities and the natural flow of your thought process. I’m looking for someone who is naturally curious and has a good business mind, and is asking questions to understand how to win.”

“What would your enemies say about you?” If they say they don’t have any enemies, I’ll say: “Let’s pretend you do. What would they say?”

“Tell me how you spent your weekend.”

“What did you learn from your Mom?”

“What percentage of your life do you control?” is always a winner. It helps me understand how they feel about the world out there.”

“If you could do anything and money wasn’t an object, what would that be? What would your dream job be? Why aren’t you doing that?”

“What’s the biggest opportunity you’ve missed in your professional life?”

“When you’re at work what do you love to do every day? What do you hate to do?”

“What makes you want to howl at the moon? What makes you really mad, so that you feel your pulse in your throat and you want to puke?”

“What’s the one thing you’re doing in your job now that you hope to never have to do again?”

“Tell me what the inscription is going to say on the gold watch you receive from your last company when you retire.” It allows me to understand truly what they really think about themselves.

“I take people out to dinner and watch how they behave. Do they rush into the room ahead of others? How do they treat and respond to the wait staff? You can tell if someone is a good person by how they treat service people.” (One CEO recently said that on occasion he would invite a candidate to breakfast, get there early and instruct the restaurant staff to screw up the candidate’s order so he could see how the candidate managed adversity.)

This is a lot to remember. If you’re new to the interview game your first interview will probably be your worst. Debrief yourself after each interview and practice getting better at your answers and story. If you’re just starting a job search, work hard to get

early interviews for jobs that you want but believe you are not likely to get. Your goal is to get interviews for those positions as practice for the positions that you really might get. After your fourth or fifth interview you should have it down pat.

Good luck!