

THE INTERVIEW GAME

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Introduction

Every Sunday I read a weekly column in the New York Times called “The Corner Office.” Written since 2009 by Adam Bryant, the column features an interview with one CEO each week. The kinds of companies represented run the gamut, including pharmaceuticals, housecleaning, restaurant chains, web services, banks and more. Because Bryant’s questions for the CEOs have 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 include “Tell me a one lesson you’ve learned about leadership,” and “What is your leadership style?” They also include “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.”

Recently 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 your 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.

The full version of "The Interview Game" is available exclusively to Dr. Cohen's coaching clients.