

CHAPTER 9

Acing the Interview

*“A bad interview dooms all chances of demonstrating
the many leadership and management skills you possess.”*

If you're invited to an interview with a nonprofit organization, you'll probably have 30 to 90 minutes to persuade the employer that you're a strong candidate. Although there's no correlation between interviewing well and success on the job, you do need to perform impressively at this meeting. And “perform” is definitely the right word. An interview is not simply a meeting or a conversation. You are on display as the interviewer judges whether you possess the skills and experience to do the job well and a personality that's appealing. Ultimately, the employer will give the thumbs-up to only one person.

Accept this fact, but recognize that the interview is a chance for you to learn about the employer as well. You might find that the people, or the surroundings, or the exact nature of the work once it's described in more detail, offer less than what you want in your next job. It's far better to learn this now, bow out, and move on rather than accept a position you want to leave a few months later.

I've spent many hours with search committees interviewing candidates for CEO positions. These committees are typically seeing the top eight or so people out of an applicant pool of 100 to 300 people. It's disheartening that so many of these candidates—who clearly are successful at their jobs—fail at this key stage. Typically, only two of the eight finalists excite the committee and remain under serious consideration. For the rest, a bad interview dooms all chances of demonstrating the many leadership and management skills the applicants possess.

Whether you're interviewing before a search committee or just one person representing the potential employer, there are five important steps you can take to increase the chances you'll perform well and pass this important test.

1. Tie your past to their future. The employer will ask you a number of questions about your skills and experience, which will tempt you to give chapter and verse about all the great things you've done. Before you submit to temptation, remember this: Interviewers don't care what you did elsewhere—they probably don't even know much about those organizations. What they care about is what you can do for them.

So do tell about your success in developing a new source

of revenue, or influencing a key piece of legislation, or implementing a new strategic plan. But then move on quickly—very quickly—to why this accomplishment will help you be a successful staff member for them.

2. Be concise. Many interviews, especially those with members of a search committee, begin with an icebreaker question such as, “Please take three or four minutes to tell us about yourself.” This doesn’t mean they want to know where you were born. When you hog the floor—giving a detailed account of every job you’ve held since college—you keep them from more important questions they won’t have time to ask.

So when you get this common question, try a brief, targeted reply like this: “You have my resume, so I won’t walk you through it. But as I think about my career, I realize how much I love to build/lead/manage/turn around organizations. Becoming your next CEO/vice president/director of development is a logical extension of the path I’ve followed over the past few years. That’s why I’m here today, and I hope I’ll have time to elaborate over the coming hour.”

If they then want a 15-minute soliloquy, they’ll ask for more details. But keep your answers brief. And keep their questions coming.

3. Know the organization. You’re not ready to sit down for an interview until you’ve read key organizational documents that should be easy to get, such as the annual report, the IRS Form 990, the most recent audited financial statements, the strategic plan (assuming it’s available to candidates; at a certain point in the process, it should be), the list of board members (if you’re interviewing for the CEO or other very



"I SURE APPRECIATE ALL YOUR
TIME INTERVIEWING, MEETING THE
STAFF AND OUTLINING YOUR
VISION. TELL ME YOUR NAME AGAIN."

senior position), and everything on the website. Don't be caught asking about anything you should have found out from doing your homework.

Assuming you know what you're talking about, don't be reluctant to demonstrate your command of a few key facts. You don't have to come off as an expert on all germane topics, especially since some interviewers won't know a lot of details anyway. But do make it clear that you understand the environment you may be entering.

4. Bring three questions. If you're concise, the interviewers will complete their agenda and let you use the remaining time to pose questions of your own. Don't pull out a folder containing a list—you're having a conversation, not taking a deposition. But do plan to ask three or so questions. These may be ones that emerged from what you've already been asked, what you've memorized, or what you've written on a small note card. Ask questions that show you have a strategic, creative, and curious mind. Good possibilities include "What are the most significant competitive pressures the organization will face over the next three years?" or "What does the leadership think is the most appropriate financial strategy for the next two years?" Then use the answers to drive home more reasons why you'd be a good CEO/vice president/department director for them. Concisely, of course.

5. Be animated. Think about the session from the interviewers' standpoint. If you're talking to the members of a search committee, they may be seeing eight people over one or two days. They're sitting the whole time. Getting up for yet another Diet Coke and a few pretzels becomes the highlight

of the day, especially if some of the candidates perform poorly. Or if the interview is with members of the staff, they might be seeing other candidates that day or feeling anxious about getting back to a project that is due soon.

The interview is the ideal time for you to be a breath of fresh air. Be energetic without being in overdrive. Bring a warm smile, humor, and a sense of confidence and self-assurance. Shake hands with each and every person who's interviewing you, and don't appear to ignore anyone in the group when you're answering questions. If you're in the running for a CEO position, the interviewers are trying to decide if they want you to lead and represent the organization—that is, them—over the next few years. And if you're interviewing for a senior staff position, they're thinking about whether they want you as a colleague whom they'll work with every day for many years.

Even seemingly small things can undermine a successful interview. In the no-detail's-too-insignificant-to-overlook department, here is additional advice to help you perform well.

- **Come 15 minutes early.** I once arrived on time for a job interview only because I ran the last three blocks. My perspiration and breathlessness made this all too obvious.

- **Stop by a restroom or someplace with a mirror before you enter the meeting room.** Check your necktie, lipstick, hair, etc. I remember when the members of one search committee commented on the red lipstick on a candidate's teeth—they found it distracting and questioned whether she could represent the group in public.

- **Accept a glass of water if offered a drink.** Even if you

don't expect to get thirsty, it's handy to have when you need a few seconds to think before speaking.

- **Turn off your cell phone.** Or if you must keep it on, explain why at the outset. (You could say, for example, "As you know, I currently work at the White House and must be reachable at all times by the chief of staff.")

And finally, don't even consider uttering the phrase "think outside the box." It's OK to be the only candidate who doesn't mouth this ever-present cliché. It might even get you the job!

Doing Well in the Interview

At the strategic level:

1. Connect your past to the interviewer's future.
2. Be concise when answering questions.
3. Know the organization before you sit down.
4. Bring three questions.
5. Be animated.

. . .and at the tactical level:

1. Arrive 15 minutes early.
2. Stop by a mirror to check your appearance.
3. Accept a glass of water even if you're not thirsty.
4. Turn off your cell phone.
5. Avoid clichés.