

Understand what an interviewer could ask at interviews



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This issue introduces the STAR technique which can be used in structured behavioural job interviews aiming to probe for details. Understanding how interviewers use the technique to ask questions can help you be prepared and succeed in getting the job you desire.

(I) What does STAR stand for?

STAR stands for Situation/Task; Action; Results.

S and T = situation or task

The interviewer asks the first question to help the candidate recall/talk about a specific situation or task where he/she had to use certain skills and competence to deal with an authentic problem or concern.

A = action

The interviewer asks questions to examine what actions the candidate took to resolve the situation or perform the task. Actions are important because they reveal the extent of the candidate's ability to demonstrate the skills required. The interviewer may ask as many follow-up probes as possible to find out what the candidate did.

R = results

The interviewer will conclude by finding out the result or outcome of the candidate's actions. Were the results those that are intended? What could the candidate have done better?

(II) Examples

Below is a list of skills employers are looking for. The examples that follow show how interviewers use the STAR technique to probe for details.

[Analytical ability](#)

[Commercial awareness](#)

[Computer literacy](#)

[Decision-making](#)

[Influencing](#)

[Initiative](#)

[Leadership](#)

[Negotiating](#)

[Networking](#)

[Oral communication](#)

[Planning](#)

[Presentation](#)

[Problem-solving](#)

[Self-awareness](#)

[Self-confidence](#)

[Self-management](#)

[Team-working](#)

[Tenacity](#)

[Time-management](#)

[Willingness to learn](#)

[Written communication](#)

1. Customer Services

Behavioural question: “Tell us about the most difficult customer service experience you have handled.”

Follow-up probes:

- “How were you made aware of the problem?”
- “What made the situation that challenging?”
- “What steps did you take to solve the problem?”
- “What happened as a result of your intervention?”
- “What could you have done better?”

2. Teamwork

Behavioural question: “Tell us about a time when you used a team approach to problem-solving.”

Follow-up probes:

- “How did the team work?”
- “What did you do to mobilize the team?”
- “What were your roles in the team?”
- “What specific actions did the team take to solve the problem?”
- “What difficulties had to be overcome by the team in solving the problem?”
- “What results did the team achieve?”

3. Integrity

Behavioural question: “Tell us a time when keeping your word to a customer or an employee meant having to endure a great deal of personal difficulty.”

Follow-up probes:

- “What was important about the commitment?”
- “What was required of you to keep the promise?”
- “What happened as a result of your attempt to keep your word?”



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(III) Ways to probe for details

Listening, summarizing and reflecting

Probing requires active listening. Focus on the objective, that is, the information you want to obtain and why you want to obtain it.

Summarizing plays a significant role in listening. It signals that you are interested in what people are saying. Summarizing can be particularly useful in

- (a) calming confrontational situations, where the speaker may not be willing to answer a question, as the summarizer shows that he/she is taking the speaker seriously;
- (b) avoiding someone speaking at length, as the summarizer can then move on to another area.

Let's look at the following example:

"I've phoned accounts and given them a reminder about next month's figures. Sometimes I feel disappointed. Honestly, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand's doing. Do you know what they did last week? They paid Sharon twice! Good job she's honest. Anyway, they said there should be no rush as we've told them there's plenty of time. Good that someone knows what they're doing. They said they'll be ready by the 14th." (Oriel, Edwards and Cowper 1998)

Summary: "So, you've reminded Accounts about next month's figures and they'll have them by the 14th?"

Reflecting is similar to summarizing, but it is not about simply repeating information, but the listener's interpretation of the feelings, attitudes and values of the speaker. For example:

"I've phoned accounts and given them a reminder about next month's figures. Sometimes I feel disappointed. Honestly, the left hand doesn't know what the right hand's doing. Do you know what they did last week? They paid Sharon twice! Good job she's honest. Anyway, they said there should be no rush as we've told them there's plenty of time. Good that someone knows what they're doing. They said they'll be ready by the 14th." (Oriel, Edwards and Cowper 1998)

Reflection: "So, you think Accounts are disorganized?"

Quiz:

Try to probe for details through summarizing and reflecting.

“I had a really good boss once. He always listened to what I had to say and used to ask me what I thought about things. He never bossed me about, telling me what to do, or shouted at me when I got things wrong; he had the time and patience to explain things. I mean, you can give 100% to a person like that, can’t you?”

Summary: _____?”

“I had a really good boss once. He always listened to what I had to say and used to ask me what I thought about things. He never bossed me about, telling me what to do, or shouted at me when I got things wrong; he had the time and patience to explain things. I mean, you can give 100% to a person like that, can’t you?”

Reflection: _____

Answer:

“I had a really good boss once. He always listened to what I had to say and used to ask me what I thought about things. He never bossed me about, telling me what to do, or shouted at me when I got things wrong; he had the time and patience to explain things. I mean, you can give 100% to a person like that, can’t you?”

Summary: “So, your boss listened to you and consulted you; he explained things?”

“I had a really good boss once. He always listened to what I had to say and used to ask me what I thought about things. He never bossed me about, telling me what to do, or shouted at me when I got things wrong; he had the time and patience to explain things. I mean, you can give 100% to a person like that, can’t you?”

Reflection: “You feel listening/consultation/patience is important in a boss?”

References:

Alpha (2002). *Every manager’s desk reference*. USA: Penguin Group.

Oriel, Edwards, L. & Cowper, G. S. (1998). *Out of the question: Successful questioning in selection interviews*. London: The Industrial Society.