

# The Selection Interview: 25 Years of Training Managers

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You are all familiar with the various rules of interviewing: use a structured interview based on job analysis, let the applicant/candidate do most of the talking, stay neutral in your questions and probes, avoid leading questions or comments, etc.

I spent 21 years at the Life Insurance Marketing and Research Association (LIMRA). During that time, I trained over 1,000 managers and executives in interviewing techniques and procedures. Some were selection interviews; some were career development interviews. I was impressed by the fact that no matter how often I trained managers, or conducted selection interviews for potential LIMRA staff, I found that I often made mistakes in my own techniques and procedures. I would, for example, inadvertently lead, or express a judgment of an answer. I would begin to talk too much. I would interrupt, assuming I knew what the rest of an answer would be. The antidote? I taped about every fifth interview, with the applicant's permission, so that I could monitor my own performance. Not once, did I find that I didn't make at least three pretty obvious mistakes. When you are supposed to be the expert, that hurts, but it keeps you on your toes the next time.

While the interview rules result in a better interview, we sometimes don't think about why they work, or why the results are better. For the rest of this brief note, let's talk about those issues.

Why is a structured interview better than an unstructured one? If you are going to compare applicants, you can't do that unless you have comparable information for all. Asking different questions of candidates is like asking one fourth grader for the sum of  $2+2$  and another the sum of  $4,659+5,976$ , and deciding the first child knows more arithmetic because s/he got the answer right and the other child didn't. We need to compare oranges with oranges, and apples with apples. Further, unless we are consistent throughout, our interview results will not be reliable or consistent. Without reliability, our interview cannot be valid. Finally, if we ask everyone the same questions based on a job analysis, we protect ourselves from charges of bias.

Along the same lines, we have to avoid asking leading questions, expressing approval or disapproval of an answer, or interrupting because we think we know what the rest of the answer is. Some applicants are looking for clues in your behavior so they can shape their answers to fit what you want to hear. Leading questions, and signs of approval, are deadly in this regard. Interrupting is closely allied to skipping questions because you think you know the answers. Along the same line, if I know someone reasonably well, I prefer to assign the interview to someone who doesn't, just so I will not skip questions. You would be surprised at what you do NOT know about people who you think you know. In addition, you may not know because the person prefers that friends not know. So, don't lead, don't interrupt. In brief, interview from ignorance; that is, assume you don't know, and ask all the questions in a neutral fashion.

Why should you make sure the talk ratio is about 80:20 or higher in the candidates favor? You are not going to learn a lot about the candidate if you are doing all the talking. Thus, we must be sure we keep quiet and *listen* most of the time. While easy to say, that is much harder to do. Keeping quiet and listening carefully is very *hard work*! It requires a great deal of self-discipline over long periods of time.

But what, you might ask, about the fact that at least some of interview may have to be devoted to recruiting, or giving the applicant a picture of the job and organization? One has to talk a lot then. Absolutely, and that is why it is important to separate the recruiting and information-seeking sections of the interview. I typically explain that I need to know the person better, and that we will spend time at the end to talk about the job and organization, as well as to answer any question s/he may have. I have yet to encounter an objection to that procedure.

I also make it clear that I will be following an interview guide, and that I will be taking notes. The latter are required, I explain, so that I have an accurate picture, and that I will not confuse one applicant with another. Memories are faulty, and I want to be sure I record the correct information. As to the guide, I give an explanation similar to the one above involving a structured interview. Time after time, careful note-taking and adherence to the guide has left the impression with the candidate that you, the interviewer, really know what you are doing. I've even seen applicants who were skeptical about a job or company change their attitudes based solely on the professionalism demonstrated in a well-conducted selection interview. *If you were being interviewed by someone who made sure you did most of the talking, who listened carefully, and took careful notes on what you said, wouldn't you be impressed with that interviewer, and the organization represented?* Thus, using a guide, listening and note-taking not only comprise a valid selection step, but they serve as an effective recruiting tool, something to think about in these days of tight labor markets.

There are good reasons for these and other interviewing rules. I wouldn't conduct an interview without reviewing them and doing my best to follow them.