

Behavioral-Based Interviewing: Telling your Story

Last summer, a recent graduate came to my office and complained, “None of my interviewers are asking me things like ‘Why should I hire you?’ or ‘Why are you the best person for the job?’” She went on, “Instead, they are asking things like ‘Tell me of a time when you took initiative, and ‘Can you give me an example of a time when you led other people?’ How do I respond?”

The types of interview questions that took this recent grad by surprise are called Behavioral-Based Interview questions and are commonly used by large corporations, as well as small organizations. How can you prepare to answer these questions? By choosing and rehearsing several “stories” which illustrate what you learned and how you applied it: a story with a moral.

Why is telling these stories so important? According to Scott Weighart, Senior Coordinator of Cooperative Education at Northeastern University, “[A] vivid, specific behavioral-based story can highlight that you really have a competency that the employer seeks... And if you think through your range of experiences in advance, you can weigh which of your stories is going to show you at your best.”

So how do you choose the best stories? 1) Read the job description and think of ways you can illustrate the skills they are seeking eg: leadership, initiative, organizational, strategic, teamwork. 2) Within the context of your story, list the transferable skills that can be demonstrated.

Here are some key principles to bear in mind as you choose from your many and varied experiences. [Please note that the italicized portions are from internshipratings.com and written by Scott Weigert]

1. Think outside the job. Your illustrations don’t have to come from “relevant” experience! Think of examples from extra-curricular activities, travel experiences, camp stories, volunteer opportunities, and part time jobs. Choose experiences that show you at your best! Mission trips or experiences that take you out of your comfort zone make for great illustrations. The better the experience, the more Behavior Based examples you can pull out of the situation.

Succeeding in a tough class can make for a good story, as can just about any menial job. Inexperienced job candidates are too quick to think that such experiences don’t count, but these stories will give employers an insight into your personality and character. And while they can change your level of skill and experience, they know that can’t change your personality or character very much.

2. Overcome a Challenge. Employers want to gauge your character, and what better way to show how you’ve grown from an experience than to illustrate it with a challenging or conflict driven situation. Present the situation and the conflict or challenge succinctly and conclude with how you resolved it and what you learned.

You want your stories to have affective, behavioral, and cognitive details. So dig deeper into describing your emotions (affective), actions (behavioral), and thoughts (cognitive) to help us understand HOW you got through this situation. All too often, job candidates focus too much on the actions without getting us inside of their heads by incorporating their thoughts and emotions.

3. Be Specific and Clear. Remember that a good story has to have a beginning, middle and end. Describe the situation logically or the interviewer will get lost. You also want to be very focused in your analysis of the situation. *“If you find yourself repeatedly using words like always, usually, generally, and sometimes, there’s a good chance that your story is too general.”*

4. Show how you contributed. No matter what situation you choose to describe, make sure you emphasize your role and your contribution.

You don’t have to be the leader of the team. Maybe you were the “glue” of the team—someone who was a peacemaker or liaison between two conflicting teammates. Perhaps you were more of the outstanding individual contributor—the person who tirelessly worked to make the project error-free. .

5. Emphasize what you learned. The “take-away” from the experience you describe is essentially the moral of the story: what did you learn and how did you apply it in the future. *For example, if you have a great story about how you calmed down an irate customer and sent them away satisfied, it would be even better if you described how you then went on to take steps to prevent such customer dissatisfaction in the future.*

Great Student Examples of Successful Stories

1. With this story, one first-time co-op candidate, Rachel, wanted to show a Big Four accounting firm that she has demonstrated leadership skills. Here’s what she used:

“Throughout my four years of high school I was the Class President. Along with this title came many responsibilities such as fund raising and planning our sophomore semi dance, our senior prom, and homecoming dances, along with budgeting the money we raised for graduation caps and gowns, yearbooks, and much more.

“It was hard to get other people besides class officers to help and dedicate their time for the class. As our junior and senior year approached, we had many tasks to take care of and we needed as much help as we could get from class officers and other representatives of the class. Our vice president for the class is a very good friend of mine. However, he didn’t put more effort towards our projects than regular representatives of the class did. This left me with much more work to do, and other people in the class angry that he was getting this Vice President title, yet they cared more about doing the work than he did.

“I was confused about what to do. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but I had to tell him to step it up, and try to work harder. During the fall of our senior year, when we were trying to figure out a few fund raisers that we were holding, our homecoming dance, our prom, and graduation, we needed everyone’s hard work and effort to get all of it done. I was completely stressed out, trying to get college applications out, do my school work, and focus on the class’s activities. A few weeks before the fall homecoming dance I took Will, our vice president, aside and told him that I didn’t mean to hurt his feelings, but I thought he could put much more effort into helping us and that I needed him to step it up as a class officer. Luckily, he didn’t take it to heart, and really stepped it up to help out our other class officers, representatives, and myself especially. I had always felt like I was the only one in charge, where he should’ve dealt with some of the responsibility as well. I was glad to have solved this problem, which made my life—along with many others—much easier. The lesson I learned from this is that sometimes you need to confront issues directly and in a solution-oriented manner as opposed to getting emotional or playing the blame game.”

2. Jared’s story below proves a useful point: Many first-time job seekers take their retail experiences for granted.

“One time at BJ’s Wholesale club where I worked, it was incredibly busy. All the lines at the registers were filled almost to the middle of the store. My supervisors were busy helping customers and the managers were too busy to assist customers. My supervisor told me to take over some of her responsibilities. She told me one of the freezers with dairy products was broken and that I needed to find one of the managers to fix the problem. She told me afterwards to help a customer with a problem she was having. I went to the produce section but the manager was busy. He told me to get another manager to handle the situation. This manager however, was unavailable to fix the freezer.

“I realized that the freezer would not get fixed for possibly hours. I took matters in to my own hands. I got three carriages from the parking lot, filled them with all the dairy products from the broken freezer, and brought them into the storage section of a nearby freezer. After that solution was resolved, I found the very frustrated customer who was trying to buy a computer and was in a rush because she had to pick up her daughter. The computer she wanted was not on the shelf but she wanted the one on display. I had dealt with a situation like this before but with a supervisor’s help. However, due to the chaos within the store I was told to handle the situation on my own. I wrote down the codes of the computer she wanted, being unable to look it up on the system’s computer because it was being used. I then went to the storage room and looked for the empty display box with the same code. I found it, went back down to the display shelf, and packed it along with all its parts in the box. I then assisted the customer bringing the computer to my register line, since all the others were filled and she was in a rush. The manager said this was alright to do because she had been waiting for a long time. After ringing up the customer’s computer, she thanked me and said that I had “saved her from a terrible day. That was great, but I still recognized that we needed to revamp our system. After talking

to my manager, we decided to keep a ready supply of boxes nearby so we could package any displayed item quickly if necessary.”

Jared picked this story because he wanted to show the ability to handle multiple projects at one time—a qualification for a specific job that he was seeking. However, that employer also wanted an excellent team player who is highly organized—two other qualities that this story captures. It also could be used to show an ability to work independently, perseverance, and customer service—to name just a few qualities! That’s the power of a rich story—you show so much about yourself.

3. This next story is one that Isabelle used to prove that she has outstanding customer-service skills. Notice how injects plenty of emotion and descriptive detail to make the story really come alive.

“While I was working at The Beechvale Maple Syrup Co., a small family-owned farm and store, I had to deal with a lot of customers over the phone about regarding their orders. This was mostly due to the fact that 80 percent of Beechvale’s business was mail and during the busy holiday season. On one of these busy nights in December, the 20th to be exact, I received a phone call from a customer in California. She was desperate to place a last minute order for a family member also in California. Now, being located in New York and doing our order shipments through UPS, five days is necessary to guarantee a shipment to California. Needless to say, the woman wanted the package delivered by Christmas. I had to tell her truthfully that our last pick-up for that day had already left and if I sent her order out tomorrow (the 21st) I couldn’t guarantee it to arrive there by Christmas. She sounded completely crushed when I told her this news, then suddenly I thought of a plan! I asked her politely if I could call her back within the hour as I was going to speak to UPS regarding her situation. I promptly phoned UPS explaining the situation. I told them the name of our driver who normally came to pick-up our shipments and they actually gave me his cell phone number after hearing my situation! Without delay, I called him up and it turned out he was only about ten minutes away finishing his route and was happy to stop back quickly! I was so excited to be able to tell the customer her order could now guarantee delivery by Christmas! Better still, I was able to tell my fellow employees how they could handle a similar crisis again in the future.”