

Interviewing with impact

Kathleen Sullivan gives her tips on being the perfect interviewee

Creating a confident, competent impression from the minute you walk through the door right down to the moment you leave the room can be tricky. However, it is within your ability to master the art and skill of successful interviews with a bit of focused preparation. The secret to being the best match for the job—giving you a distinct advantage over other candidates—lies in your finesse at depicting a confident attitude, which translates into a calm, professional demeanour.

This article will look at how to maximise your impact and get the best outcome in any interview situation. Included here are some practical techniques that you can master, enabling you to communicate in a way that lets your true personality shine through. By sharpening your personal skills and adopting a more professional approach, you will have the advantage needed for a successful interview so that you get the job you want right now.

Confident and positive first impressions

Let's face it, interviews are not something that we do every day. We may only have five interviews in a lifetime, and, like public speaking, our lack of practice can make these occasions feel uncomfortable and unnatural. We've all experienced strange contortions of our facial muscles or awkward, overexaggerated hand and arm movements, which under more relaxed situations would

not occur (for example, nervously tapping a foot, biting a lip, or even hunching our shoulders in an attempt to shrink in size—in the hope of disappearing like a turtle into its shell). There's no harm, therefore, in having a few ideas on how to make the most of a challenging situation. Below are some steps that you can take so that you come across as your absolute best.

The handshake

When you shake hands, the last thing it should be is memorable—if it is, then there's something wrong. The most memorable aspects of your handshake should simply be good eye contact, a tall posture, and a genuine smile. Practise a grip that doesn't linger excessively, isn't too limp, and isn't overbearing (no knuckle breakers).

What to wear

It seems too obvious to even mention, but check that you're well groomed and your clothing is clean, tidy, and appropriate for the occasion. And if you stand out from the crowd, ask yourself if it could be for all the wrong reasons (a garish tie, cheap jewellery, nightclub outfit). In a survey of NHS consultants (Sullivan K, personal communication, *Seven things I wish I'd known before becoming a consultant*, 2009), most respondents recommended that good candidates "dress professionally—neat, tidy, and conventional." A dark blue suit with

a white shirt and black shoes is always the safest option.

Eye contact

Engage your listeners by establishing good eye contact with everyone on the interview panel. Rather than staring, eyes fixated on just one person, remember to acknowledge everyone, moving your eyes around the table and spending at least six seconds with each person.

Posture

An open, relaxed posture not only affects how confident you feel, but also how confident others perceive you to be. If your body is acting confidently, your mind will become more confident too. Try it now: sit up straight, shoulders dropped, allowing your chest to open by bringing your shoulder blades together slightly. Look ahead and up a bit—and smile. Feeling more poised and confident already?

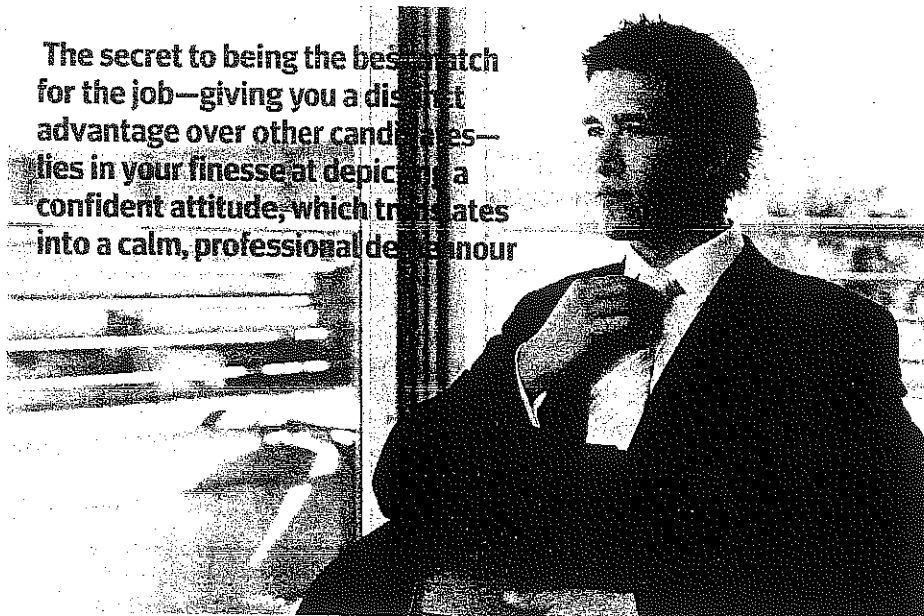
Facial expressions

Smiling, not only at the start of the interview, but at appropriate times during the interview and on leaving the room, is a surefire way to build rapport with your interviewers. Make a habit of relaxing your facial muscles and breaking into a gentle, pleasant smile that's appropriate for the situation. Who knows, by focusing on smiling, you might actually find that you are enjoying the interview. Your smile is one of the most powerful tools you possess. Use it to establish a positive connection. But beware of the subtle difference between a fake smile and an authentic one. The latter, known as the "Duchenne smile," requires the muscles located at the corners of the mouth and encircling the eyes.

Body language

Consider what your body language is indicating about you—spend some time sitting in front of a mirror when practising your answers, ensuring that your body is conveying the same message as your words. When what you are saying in words isn't congruent with what your face and body are saying, the listener will believe the non-verbal communication—pictures always speak louder than words. And our bodies never lie.

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POWER WORDS

advised	ambition	achieved
appraise	aspired	analysed
approve	completed	delegated
assess	consolidating	developed
capable	cooperated	effective
communicating	created	enabling
confidence	decided	enhanced
delivering	demonstrated	established
designed	determined	exceptional
devised	eliminating	experience
efficient	enthusiasm	flexibility
evaluated	exceeded	helpful
executed	implemented	impact
increased	improved	ingenuity
initiated	influencing	inspired
integrity	innovated	introducing
judgment	launched	led
mediated	managed	loyal
obtained	opportunity	organised
motivated	originated	overcome
perceived	perfected	performed
permanent	persuading	planned
pioneered	professional	preventing
practical	progress	punctual
produced	qualified	recognised
proposed	reduced	providing
reliable	reorganised	reported
represented	researched	resolving
responsible	results	reviewing
satisfied	saving	scheduled
selected	significant	simplified
sincerity	solved	standardising
stimulated	strategic	streamlined
structured	substantial	succeeded
supervised	supported	team building
testing	thorough	thoughtful
tolerant	trained	transferred
transformed	understanding	upgrading
useful	utilised	validating
verified	versatile	vital

Find common ground

As you're getting to know someone, an important component of building rapport is having something in common with that person. Look out for similar research interests, colleagues, or places you've worked. Your aim is to put them at ease and make it easy for them to enjoy meeting you.

Match and mirror

If you watch two good friends talking, you will probably notice how they copy each other's gestures, facial expressions, and body language. This matching and mirroring is all happening at a subconscious level. As they match and mirror each other, they each perceive the other to be like them and this creates a deep, unconscious rapport. As a result, the degree of trust, comfort, and respect between them builds. The conscious mind follows what the subconscious mind does. If the other person's subconscious mind trusts you, then his or her conscious mind will trust you too.

If you want to create a strong connection with another person, try matching and mirroring their actions and see what happens to the way you communicate and how comfortable you feel. Matching is doing what the other person is doing, but simply in reverse; if a person crosses their left leg, you cross your left leg. Mirroring is being the mirror image of the other person—when they tilt their head to the left, you tilt yours to the right.

Active listening

All too often we're so busy thinking about what we want to say next that we fail to concentrate on what the other person is saying. If you want to communicate effectively you must listen actively and be present at all times. Send the other person some reassuring signals that you really do value what they're saying. Nod, use "ums" and "ahs" at the appropriate points, and let your facial expressions reveal your thoughts rather than interrupting the person in mid-sentence.

Copy talking

Studies have shown that a mere 7% of what is communicated is transmitted through the words themselves. A whopping 38% comes through the individual characteristics of the voice—the tone, tempo, volume, and timbre. You can match the tonality and phrasing, the pitch, the speed, volume, and tempo of the other person. Also, consider the words that your interviewers use—are they formal or casual? Do they use short sentences or long ones? Do they talk in jargon and acronyms? Pick up on their approach and integrate it into your own delivery.

Building a strong rapport

Members of the interview panel are looking to appoint a candidate whom they believe is the best fit for the job. People generally like people who are like them. Their perception of you will be based not only on what you say, but also what your face, posture, tone of voice, and gestures are

saying—the non-verbal cues that influence how we are perceived. Some research suggests that up to 93% of the impression we make is based on non-verbal factors. The unconscious signals that you transmit can considerably affect the extent to which the interviewer believes that you are a great match for the job.

Be careful to avoid mimicry when matching voice and words (don't do an impression of their pronunciation and dialect) and make sure you always use it in helping you to build rapport with a sincere intention. Combine this with matching the interviewer's body language and the level of rapport will grow faster. In no time you will be locked into strong rapport because although the words are working on the person's conscious mind, the physiology is working on the unconscious mind and the brain receives the message loud and clear—"you're like me."

Competency based questions

Competency based (also sometimes called "behavioural" or "situational") interviewing techniques help interviewers to separate out the good candidates from those who are simply trying to bluff their way into the job without the right skills or experience.

The theory behind competency based interviewing is that past work behaviour is a good predictor of future job performance. When interviewers ask you competency based questions, they want you to talk about how you have actually tackled real problems in the past. From this, they are trying to infer how effectively you would tackle future problems if they were to offer you a job.

Questions are likely to start, for example, with: "Please give me an example of when..." or "Please describe an occasion..."

In responding to a competency based question, the most important principle is to give a real example that actually happened to you. Don't talk in broad terms about how you generally tackle those sorts of situations. Talk about a specific example.

The STAR question structure

STAR stands for:

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

This is a universally recognised technique designed to enable you to provide a meaningful and complete answer to questions asking for examples. When you provide examples of how you have worked in the past by outlining the main points in a structured manner, the interview panel will become more receptive to the messages you are trying to communicate.

The ideal time to use the STAR structure is when answering competency based questions, because this approach will showcase all aspects of your example, making it easy for the interviewer to identify the skills you have used (for example, leadership,

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teamwork, conflict resolution, motivation, in depth knowledge, and technical skills related to the job specification) and the results that your activity produced.

Step 1—Situation and task

Describe the situation that you were confronted with or the task that needed to be accomplished. With the STAR approach you need to set the context. Make it concise and informative, concentrating solely on what is useful to the story.

For example, if the question is asking you to describe a situation where you had to deal with a difficult person, explain how you came to meet that person and why they were being difficult. If the question is asking for an example of teamwork, explain the task that you had to undertake as a team.

Step 2—Action

This is the most important section of the STAR approach because it is where you will need to demonstrate and highlight the skills and personal attributes that the question is testing. Now that you have set the context of your story, you need to explain what you did. In doing so, remember these points:

- Be personal—talk about you, not the rest of the team
- Go into some detail
- Do not assume that the interviewers will guess what you mean
- Steer clear of technical information, unless it is crucial to your story
- Explain what you did, how you did it, and why you did it.

The interviewers will want to know how you reacted to the situation. This is where you can start highlighting some important skills.

Be aware also of describing why you took the action you did, because this will provide extra clarification to the interviewer that you were fully aware of the consequences of your actions.

Step 3—Result

Explain what happened eventually; that is, what you achieved through your actions. Also, use this moment to describe how the situation ended and what

you learnt in that situation. This helps you make the answer personal and enables you to highlight further skills.

Describing the result is a crucial part of your answer. Interviewers want to know that you are using a variety of generic skills in order to achieve your objectives. Therefore, you must be able to demonstrate in your answer that you are taking specific actions because you are trying to achieve a specific objective and not that the objective happened simply by chance.

It also enables you to finish each answer on a high note through highlighting the benefit that you brought to specific situations through your actions. Don't forget to incorporate power words here to emphasise the positive results.

A few tips on using power words when responding to interview questions. Select five words from the list and use these when formulating highly impressive responses. Write down your most powerful interview answers, including at least one of your five power words in each sentence. Now rehearse your replies by saying them out loud to someone else. You will begin to feel much more at ease talking about your achievements and blowing your own trumpet.

Although the STAR approach is particularly relevant to competency based interviews, it provides a very clear and concise way to structure any response. When preparing your answers, following the structure will also help you to clarify what is important in

a certain scenario and include it, leaving out any superfluous information.

Competing interests: KS runs life coaching company KS Coaching.

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About the author

Kathleen Sullivan is a professional coach. She will be speaking on several topics, including interviews, at

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