URL: <https://capd.mit.edu/resources/the-star-method-for-behavioral-interviews/>

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Title: Using the STAR method for your next behavioral interview

Date Access: Jan 25, 2025, 2:00 PM EST

The purpose of behavioral interviewing is to objectively measure a potential employee’s past behaviors as a predictor of future results. In behavioral interviews, candidates are asked to give specific examples of when they demonstrated particular behaviors or skills. Here are some example behavioral interview questions:

Tell me about a time when you worked as part of a team to successfully execute a project.

Do you have any experience with solving complex problems?

What is a project that you are most proud of?

Tell me about a time you failed.

You may notice that a couple of these questions are close-ended, meaning that in a normal every-day conversation you may respond with a simple “yes” or “no.” In a behavioral interview, it is important to practice a “yes, and…” mentality. In other words, provide context for your interviewer with an example that can help you demonstrate the depth of your skills and knowledge.

Interview Tips

When preparing your responses for a behavioral interview, you will also want to keep in mind the following:

Focus your responses on actual behaviors and emotions. It can be tempting to say what you think will help you get the job, but bending the truth in a job interview can be risky. What you say, if not truthful, can come across as disingenuous to an interviewer, and may not match up with your application materials (resume, CV, cover letter) or what a referral has shared about you.

Describe your role in past situations. When it comes to sharing your experiences with a potential employer, it is important to show ownership of accomplishments by using “I” statements. This can be especially tricky when giving examples of teamwork or collaboration, but using “we” statements can make it difficult for an employer to have a clear understanding of what your skills are. Instead, focus your response on how you contributed to the outcomes of the team efforts.

Provide specific examples of your actions. Avoid giving answers that are too generalized. When responding to behavioral interview questions, it is important to share specific and clear examples that can give your interviewer insight to your potential as a candidate.

Reveal your skills related to the job. Your interviewer will prepare questions that will relate directly to the responsibilities of the role. For example, if the target role requires supervision of others or working in a team-based environment, you may be asked to share examples of times when you demonstrated effective leadership or collaboration. If you are asked to share your strengths, refer to the job description to hone in on what skills are important to the role. The ability to communicate effectively, work well with others, and think creatively are a few common descriptors used in internship postings.

The STAR method

S.T.A.R. is a useful acronym and an effective formula for structuring your behavioral interview response. Let’s start by breaking down the formula:

Situation (20%), explain the situation so that your interviewer understands the context of your example, they do not need to know every detail!

Task (10%), talk about the task that you took responsibility for completing or the goal of your efforts.

Action (60%), describe the actions that you personally took to complete the task or reach the end goal. Highlight skills or character traits addressed in the question.

Result (10%), explain the positive outcomes or results generated by your actions or efforts. Here, it is important to highlight quantifiable results. You may also want to emphasize what you learned from the experience or your key takeaways.

Situation, 20%, Explain the situation so that your interviewer understands the context of your example, they do not need to know every detail! Task, 10%, Next, talk about the task that you took responsibility for completing or the goal of your efforts. Action, 60%, Describe the actions that you personally took to complete the task or reach the end goal. Highlight skills or character traits addressed in the question. Result, 10%, Explain the positive outcomes or results generated by your actions or efforts. Here, it is important to highlight quantifiable results. You may also want to emphasize what you learned from the experience or your key takeaways.

The percentages listed in the graphic above represent the time to dedicate to each section of your story. These numbers are meant to guide you, but don’t worry about getting it exactly right! The most important thing to keep in mind is that most of your response should focus on your Actions.

Sample response

Here is an example STAR-formatted response for the prompt, “tell me about a time when you demonstrated leadership.” Instead of responding simply with “I tutored kids in math,” provide context for your interviewer and demonstrate your skills through an engaging example.

Situation: When I was a junior in high school, there were several students in my math class who were struggling with some of the more difficult concepts.

Task: With an upcoming national exam, I was asked by my math teacher to start an after school session to assist the other students.

Action: I stayed after school twice a week to review class materials and homework. I created a comprehensive study guide. I demonstrated the best methods for solving difficult problems, explained strategies that worked for me, and developed new problems to help them practice.

Result: Our class average for the national exam was the highest it had been in over ten years, and overall the students I helped were able to develop a better understanding and appreciation for math.

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Preparing your responses

When preparing examples to share in an interview, it can feel overwhelming and unrealistic to predict and prepare responses for all questions that may (or may not) come up. While the example shared above was in response to a question about leadership, it could also be adapted to questions regarding communication skills, work ethic, and time management/organization. Consider how the examples you prepare may connect to one or more question, and prepare to adapt your responses on the fly.

Start by identifying both technical and transferable skills needed within a particular role. Review the job description and role responsibilities, paying close attention to the usage and frequency of certain action verbs. Depending on the size and age of a company, you can also use Glassdoor Interview Reviews to learn about others’ experiences and find potential interview questions. Prepare 3-5 stories by creating a bulleted outline or jotting down notes using CAPD’s STAR method worksheet. It can be tempting to script or memorize certain stories, but doing so may limit your ability to adapt as needed in an interview, and can seem unnatural or disingenuous to an interviewer.

Want to learn more as you prepare? Here are more interview tips.

Time to practice

Ready to start practicing? Schedule a behavioral mock interview with a CAPD staff member to practice your responses, receive feedback, and gain confidence before the real thing. With MIT’s Alumni Advisors Hub, you may be able to find alum from your target company who are willing to provide insight and conduct behavioral mock interviews, as well as coding or technical question prep. You can also use LinkedIn’s Interview Prep tool to receive instantaneous, AI-powered feedback on pacing, how many times you’re using filler words, and sensitive phrases to avoid.

After the interview

Take some time to reflect. What went well? What could go better next time? Jot down some notes to celebrate your wins and to help yourself prepare for future interviews.

Lastly you’ll want to email to your interviewer(s) within 24 hours to thank them for their time and reiterate your interest and excitement for the role. If you spoke with multiple interviewers, consider emailing each one individually. It doesn’t hurt to include some reasons why you think you’d be a great fit, and mention anything worth noting or revisiting from the interview. Our professional correspondence samples can help you to get started.