

# Jacob Kaplan-Moss

[ARCHIVE](#)

Unpacking Interview Questions:

## "Tell Me About a Disagreement..."

*Each day this week I'll be sharing one of the questions I use when I interview for technical roles. I'll unpack the question, when to ask it, and how to evaluate answers. [You can see all articles in this series here.](#)*

## Background

*Who this is for:* everyone.

*What it measures:* ability to disagree and resolve disagreements professionally.

OK, this one's a classic. This is one of those hokey old interview questions that's been used forever, and shows up in nearly every "how to prepare for an interview" guide. Except, unlike many of those "classics" this one's actually good.

Disagreements at work happen everywhere. How people deal with disagreement can make the difference between healthy and dysfunctional organizations. At healthy organizations, they're addressed, worked through, and resolved quickly with no lingering resentment. Seemingly paradoxically, the better an organization is at resolving conflict professionally, the easier it is for individuals to speak up!

But, unlike some aspects of organizational culture, [like the values I wrote about yesterday](#), conflict resolution doesn't come from the top. An organization's ability to smoothly resolve conflict is largely dependent on the conflict resolution skills of every individual staff member. (Any manager who's had two people on their team be unable to get along knows this quite well.)

So, this question is a great one to ask of every candidate. If everyone on the team has a baseline ability to resolve conflicts professionally, this will go a long way towards building a healthy team.

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## The question

**"Tell me about a time that you disagreed with a coworker (a manager, a peer, someone from another department, etc.). What was the situation, and what did you do to resolve the conflict?"**

Follow-ups:

- What was your point of view?
- What was theirs?
- How did you resolve the disagreement?
- What was the final decision?
- How did you feel about the outcome?
- How did the other person feel?

## Behaviors to look for

- How do they describe their point of view? The other party's point of view?
- Do they use divisive or collective language?
- What's their tone when talking about the different points of view?

Positive signs

- 👍 Clearly understands and articulates both points of view
- 👍 Disagreement resolved amicably, to mutual satisfaction
- 👍 Uses collective language ("we") most of the time

- 📄 Easily admits that their position might be wrong, or has downsides, etc.

## Red Flags

- ➤ **Unable to articulate/empathize with the other point of view**
  - ➤ Unable to describe strengths or upsides of the other point of view
  - ➤ Uses a dismissive or condescending tone when talking about the other party or point of view
  - ➤ Uses divisive language (e.g. "their side", "us and them") most of the time
  - ➤ Disagreement not resolved
  - ➤ Resolution through avoidance (candidate "gave up", or stopped working with the other person, etc.)
  - ➤ Disagreement resolved through role power, escalation, or other non-collaborative method
  - ➤ Candidate dodges - [see below](#)
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## Discussion

You may notice that this question follows a particular common formula for interview questions: the "tell me about a time..." format. Several other questions [in this series](#) follow the same format.

These are usually called "behavioral" interview questions because they ask the candidate to describe some past behavior. The theory is that, unlike the stock market, past performance *does* predict future behavior. Someone who was able to resolve a conflict in the past is more likely to be able to do so again in the future. (This is hard to prove scientifically, but the research that does exist [seems to validate the premise](#).)

Behavioral questions are especially valuable when asking questions like this one. If you ask in a hypothetical or general way ("how do you handle conflict at work?") you're likely to get trite, best-case-scenario answers ("oh, it's important to understand both sides..."). Most

people know intellectually that there's a professional way to resolve conflict, and if you ask them to speak in generalities they can usually talk a good game.

But, faced with real conflict, not everyone responds as well as they'd like. Someone might know that they *should* attempt to understand both sides of a conflict, but still get caught up in their own opinion and not actually do that in real life.

So, the key to using this question effectively is to get the candidate to talk about a specific example – hence “tell me about a time...”. From there, you need to dig into the specifics; really get the candidate to talk in detail about the situation they bring to the table.

## What if they dodge the question?

Sometimes, candidates will try to dodge this question. They say they don't disagree at work, or they can't think of a specific example, or they'll choose a trivial example that doesn't give any real insight into their conflict resolution skill.

This can mean a couple of things, both of them pretty bad:

- If they're being accurate and they never disagree at work, that usually indicates avoidance. Lack of spoken disagreement is not the same as agreement! It's possible that maybe they're just the most agreeable person in history, but usually it means they'll always defer to others rather than disagree. This may be something you can accept if the candidate is otherwise great, but it can be a red flag.
- It's possible they're not being entirely honest. Most people are mostly honest during job interviews ... but it's also typical for candidates to omit stories that make them look bad. That wouldn't be dishonest, exactly, but another reason a candidate wouldn't give answers to this question might be because every story they can think of is one where they behaved poorly.

In either case: if a candidate dodges I recommend pushing them, fairly hard, for an answer. If they really don't have one, then dig in with them on *why* they've never had a disagreement at work. Maybe the situation is that they've never worked in a place with enough psychological safety that they've been able to disagree? (This tends to be more likely for underrepresented candidates.) Spend some time trying to be sure that the situation isn't one of the ones above.

## Alternate versions of this question

This question is pretty tried-and-true; if you use it, I don't recommend changing it much. In particular, **avoid making it a hypothetical question** for all the reasons articulated above.

For management roles, it can be useful to slightly modify the question and ask them specifically about a disagreement they had *with a direct report*. This can gather the same signals as the more general version, and also help you see if and how they used their role power.

Likewise, for executives it can be useful to ask about disagreements with other executives, specifically, and/or disagreements with investors, their board, etc. These are all specific kinds of disagreements that have massive consequences if handled poorly, so a candidate with a solid track record of navigating these politically-fraught conflicts is a very strong candidate.

## See also

- For more on the relationship between professional disagreement and healthy teams, see Patrick Lencioni's [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#) (one of the top books I recommend for new engineering managers).
- The [How to Create a Simple Behavioral Interview Question](#) episode of the Manager Tools podcast is a good introduction to behavioral interview questions in general.

## Questions

Next week, I'll publish a series wrap-up, summarizing the series as a whole and addressing a few big-picture topics. If you have questions, [tweet at me](#) (DM are fine too). I'll address common questions in the wrap-up.

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