

**Bzarg**

On the future, science, &amp; tech

# Interview tips for moving up to leadership

At my [previous job](#) I sat on both sides of an interviewing table on various occasions, and over the years I wrote down a few things I learned or noticed and put them into this guide. I posted it to the internal Wiki, with the goal of helping to lift up individual contributors ready to try for leadership, help them present their best selves, and build confidence.

I've reproduced it below, with permission. (Note that these tips are my advice; not official policy!)

The skills listed below are just as important for **being a good lead** as they are for acing an interview. That's not a coincidence!

## What to know

Before you walk into the room— and ideally before you apply— you should have a good sense of:

### Know why are you applying

- What interests you about the position?
- In what areas are you looking to grow / learn?
- What impact would you like to have?

Know what you want out of the role. You're going to put a lot of time and effort toward it, so it should be rewarding to you.

Know that leadership is not the only path to success or esteem. If the problems of leadership are not exciting or interesting to you, that's okay! When that's the case, it is probably better to focus your ambition in some direction you find more rewarding. (And re-assess where you stand every so often).

It will reflect positively if you have genuine interest and excitement. Excited people do a better job, and motivation is infectious.

### Know the nature of the role you are applying for

- What responsibility will rest on you?
- What is your team expecting of you?
- What does the department need of you?
- What are other departments, and the show/studio as a whole expecting of you?
- And also, what does *not* fall on your shoulders: What are the limits of your domain / responsibility?

Understanding this is not just important for being able to give relevant answers in your interview, but also for being a good lead.

Don't be afraid to seek out mentorship from existing leaders! Some things you don't know until you get there, but people who have been there before can tell you.

If you are not clear on some of these things when you're applying / interviewing, *ask*, and then be sure your answers are relevant to what you've learned about the role.

## Know the role of your department

Similar to the above, in addition to knowing what is expected of you *specifically*, know well what part your department plays in the bigger picture.

This seems obvious, but one can be a TD <sup>(1)</sup> Read: "Individual contributor"; TD is the commonly-used term for such roles in the effects industry and not think too deeply about these kinds of things! As a TD, you are often handed tasks by your lead. Ultimately those tasks come from needs in other departments. Your interviewers are going to be trying to assess whether you can wisely balance priorities **on your own**.

## Have a picture of how you would like to run things

- How would you ensure smooth communication / cooperation between departments?
- How about communication within the team? How do you ensure that everyone knows what's going on and is focused on the right things?
- How would you prefer to manage tasks and team members, and keep work organized?
- How do you keep people motivated and happy?

## Know the problem space

This topic is often easier for TDs to focus on, as you often have a very clear picture of how well things work (or don't work) when you are down in the trenches. Sometimes this is good fuel for new ideas and new directions.

- What are the scariest, most dangerous problems your department will face?
  - How would you choose to face them?
- What problems have other shows faced in the past, and how will you avoid / improve / handle them proactively?

- What different major categories of work are done by your team, and why are they important? When in the project's lifecycle do they come up?

Note that your picture of the problem space (and also how you'd like to run things) will likely change at least a little bit after you enter the role and learn more, and you will need to adapt— That is fine and normal; your interviewers will understand this too.

## What you bring to the table

First, solidly knowing all of the above already puts you in a very good place. Implementing known systems well is often enough to get a smooth-running show, and a good experience for the department. It is not always necessary to reinvent everything to do a good job.

Of course if you do have **fresh ideas** for improving how things are done / organized, it reflects well if they are of **realistic scope** and **appropriate importance**; do mention them. Creativity and initiative are good things and attract positive attention. Leadership is an opportunity for you to exact **positive change** on the way things are done.

## Your technical skill

At the time of your interview, you've either got it or not. Your interviewers will likely already have a sense of your technical strength<sup>(2)</sup> Caveat: This is a safe assumption at Pixar, which has about 1300 employees, and where you'd likely be interviewing in your own department, where the leadership already knows you. It may be less true at a large company.— as a TD, most of your career is spent demonstrating this— so don't focus too much on trying to prove this in your interview.

Your interviewers will be more concerned about the things you *haven't* demonstrated yet, so it is better to highlight your strengths in those areas.

## Answering questions

### Answer with the right level of detail

Your interviewers are looking for someone who communicates well, and can suss out which information is relevant. Often you'll be the interface between technical and non-technical people, so having a strong [Phlebotinum Analogy](#) game is an advantage.

- Use a level of detail **appropriate for your questioner's knowledge**. Some or all of your interviewers might not be technical (or have whatever domain knowledge you have), so low-level details might not be meaningful or useful to them.
- Use a level of detail **appropriate for the question**. Philosophical questions invite abstract answers, questions about specific technologies / techniques invite concrete ones.
- **Don't waste too much time** drilling into one idea. A good interview should flow from topic to topic, and it is good to show your breadth of knowledge and opinion.

- It is possible to be **specific** without getting **lost in details**, and it is possible to be **general** without being **vague**.

TDs newly applying for leadership tend to be more toward the side of excessively focused on details. Be aware of this tendency if you have it in yourself.

## Be comfortable

I mean this **not** in the sense of “it’s bad if you’re nervous” (it isn’t), but more “you have nothing to worry about”.

- Your interviewers know you are a little nervous, and will generally be forgiving. We’ve all been in the hot seat, and they’ll know not to scrutinize every word and mannerism.
- Your interviewers are your peers and coworkers, and they want to see you succeed. They’re on your side!
- Nobody’s grilling you or trying to get you to trip up. This is an opportunity for you to talk about something you care about, share your ideas, and bond with your potential future team. Your interviewers want to hear what you have to say!

Even if you screw up or are underqualified, interviewing *still* shows your interest and initiative, and helps put you on the radar next time around when you are more ready.

## Give and take; pace

Make sure a dialogue can happen!

- Don’t dominate the conversation; give your interviewers an opportunity to interject with questions.
- Take a moment to think before answering if you need to.
- If you’re truly stuck, work through your thought process out loud. Sometimes your interviewers can nudge you in the right direction.

## Approach willing to learn

- You are not expected to know everything up front or be an expert on every topic.
- Don’t be afraid to **say so if you don’t know** something. It is an opportunity to ask a question and patch the gap in your knowledge.
- A good leader is ready rely on and draw from the knowledge and expertise of their peers.
- Asking questions, learning quickly, and adapting to new information is much more important than having answers up front.
  - It is better to ask a “dumb” question, and then respond with a well-directed answer, than it is to ramble on blindly!

## Have a few questions of your own

Your interviewers will leave 5 to 10 minutes near the end for you to ask questions of them.

Some things to consider:

- What do you want to know about your superiors' philosophy on running their domain?
- What can you ask that will inform the challenges you're planning to face?
- What can you ask that will inform the nature of your future relationship with your interviewers?
- Are there logistical questions (start dates, etc.) that you need to work out?

## Footnotes

---

1. ↑ Read: "Individual contributor"; [TD](#) is the commonly-used term for such roles in the effects industry
  2. ↑ Caveat: This is a safe assumption at Pixar, which has about 1300 employees, and where you'd likely be interviewing in your own department, where the leadership already knows you. It may be less true at a large company.
- 

This entry was posted in Uncategorized on November 6, 2019 [<https://www.bzarg.com/p/interview-tips-for-moving-up-to-leadership/>] .

---

---