

THE ULTIMATE SITUATIONAL INTERVIEW Q&A GUIDE

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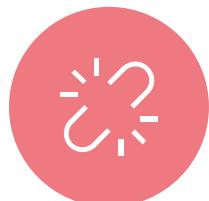
What You'll Get In This Guide:



My Approach



Fill in the blank templates
for each question



The SARI Formula
Breakdown



25 Questions to come up
with your own stories



10 In-Depth,
Concrete Examples

My Approach

Let's face it - job interviews are not a piece of cake. Most of us aren't great at selling ourselves in front of a bunch of judgmental strangers, especially when it comes to remembering specific stories and situations and talking about them gracefully.

The good news is that by being one of the few people who has downloaded this guide and read through it, you'll stand head and shoulders above the other candidates when you find yourself answering these questions. By being aware of some key fundamentals, along with a little practice, you'll do better than most, because most people honestly don't take the time to learn this stuff.

In this guide, I'll show you straightforward examples on how I've answered the 10 most common situational interview questions.

I also want to let you know that I don't believe the 'one-size-fits-all' job interview answer scripts work. After all, another person's answer is never going to be the same as yours. You have your own unique stories and experiences, and by the end of this guide, you will know how to share them. What you'll get here is insight into the psychology behind the questions and the lowdown on what you should know, plus a ton of solid examples. (If you didn't already figure it out, I LOVE examples. I hope you do, too.)

If you go through this guide step by step and apply the knowledge, you will get better at interviewing. I promise you.

You *might* even start to like it.

The SARI Formula

This formula comes in many forms. Some people just refer to it SAR (Situation, Action, Result). Some people use STAR (Situation/Task, Action, Result). In this case, I want to use the most comprehensive example, which is SARI or STARI (Situation/Task, Action, Result, Interesting features).

To introduce the formula, I'll use the example question below:

Example question:

"Tell me about a time that demonstrates leadership skills and abilities."

SARI Answer

Situation:

Set the stage so that it gives the interviewer context. Be careful not to get into too much detail, but give enough of it to paint a picture.

Quick Example:

"I was transferred into a new department at work, I was assigned a new team to lead. Before I was introduced, the team was disgruntled and had low morale because the department was not staffed properly and turnover was high. There were a lot of office politics going on. People were unhappy."

This is where you explain your situation: You were moved to a new team that had been floundering before you were assigned, and your task was to make the team successful.

The SARI Formula

Action:

Here is where you explain the specific actions you took to ensure success. Talk about yourself in “I” statements, and do not make the mistake of saying “we.” You are the leader here, remember? Not only that, but you’re the one interviewing, so your answer should describe your specific behaviours, and no one else’s should come into play.

Quick Example :

“First, I scheduled one-on-one meetings with each team member. I really wanted to understand what the issues were, and I wanted the team to be heard. I asked them a series of questions, including what they thought I should do next and what the biggest challenge was that each of them faced, as well as what they thought was really holding the team back. I then followed up with everyone as a group. The most important thing was that I took action quickly to repair the issues that were causing them the most stress.”

You can tell up to 3 actions you took. This is the part of the answer on which you’ll want to spend most of your time.

Result:

In this part of the answer, you share the end result of your actions. You should quantify this part with numbers or other business metrics, if it’s possible. That really puts the icing on the cake for these answers. Even if the numbers are a little fuzzy or rough guesstimates, you’re better off doing it than not doing it.

The SARI Formula

Quick Example :

"The results of my leadership actions were that morale was significantly improved after 90 days. It was apparent in the energy of the department that everyone was in much better spirits. From these actions, the department's turnover rate was brought down from 40% annually to zero."

Obviously - and I mean obviously! - pick a story where the ending is happy and the result was positive.

Interesting features:

This is where you tell the interviewer something special and/or memorable about the story, so it can really stick in their mind.

Quick Example :

"I think this example really demonstrates a servant-leader approach to getting business results. My team still talks about the turnaround sometimes. I'm proud of this example, because even though I'm sure there were many ways to turn this failing team around, the actions that I took worked best for the team in this situation."

Interesting features are bonus. They often can include a resource, book, or technique that you used to get your result, and the goal should be to make the interviewer say, "Hmm, that's very interesting! I would like to learn more about 'servant leadership,'" for example.

The end. Phew - that was a long explanation!

By now, most people are thinking, "Wow, this is all useful info, but come on, Natalie! I can't remember all that in the middle of an interview! I do understand why you would have that thought, which is why I created this guide. If you practice (which is what this guide will help you with), this will start to become second nature very quickly.

The SARI Formula

Think of it this way: A good story flows.

It has a beginning, a middle, and an end, all following in a natural progression. Think of these as little mini stories: the Beginning (situation, setting the stage etc.), Middle (the meat, literally where the action happens), and the End (where you wrap it up and conclude with that happy ending). Insert these parts into your story, and you'll be off to the races.

Have a friend (or anyone for that matter) ask you some of the questions in this guide, and practice answering them using the SARI formula. If you don't master this technique, I think you might be SARI. (OK, I know that was pretty cheesy, but we gotta have some fun here right?)

QUESTION 1:

“Tell me about a time
you failed at work.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

It comes from the theory that “Your approach to failure defines your success.”

The question is designed to see how you approach failure, how you think about it, and what your attitude towards it is. Are you bitter or eager to learn from it?

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

Tell a story. What was the failure, and why did you see that particular thing as a failure?

Example Answer 1: Bad Hiring Decision

Set the stage:

“I decided to hire someone who didn’t work out.”

Why was this a failure?

“It cost money for the company to hire and train this person for that person to not work out after just a couple of months.”

What did you do to try to fix it?

“I owned up to the mistake and saw clearly what we could have seen after the fact, and I made sure to clearly articulate the red flags. Now I take a good look at the situation and ask the hard questions early on to avoid wasting more time and resources on someone that wasn’t going to make it long term.”

How did you proceed?

“I presented options and then recommended the one I thought was the best:

a) Start the process to let the person go

b) Try to keep training and working with the person in the hopes that they would improve and become a strong employee”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“I learned about the characteristics that set apart A players from B and C players, and I now include a series of questions to ask candidates and I learned what to look for.”

What did you learn?

“I am now extra careful and ask more specific questions both in the interview and when checking references. I look for different things in interviews, and I learned more about hiring in the process than I ever have before.”

Example Answer 2: Failed Marketing Campaign

Set the stage:

“The marketing campaign was sent out to over 10,000 recipients with {First Name Here} instead of people’s actual names. Not only that, but it was the entirely wrong message!”

Why was this a failure?

“It squandered an opportunity to reach a major milestone in the company’s marketing plan.”

What did you do to try to fix it?

“First, I owned my part in the mistake, saw what I could have done differently, regrouped, and looked for where the breakdown of communication was. I tried to salvage the campaign, but the emails had already gone out, and they were not performing well.”

How did you proceed?

“I came up with a re-engagement campaign, and I held a meeting and had suggestions for next time to improve upon what had happened.”

What was the result of your action?

“The re-engagement campaign helped the numbers a little bit. It still wasn’t optimal, but learning from the experience set us up for the next campaign we did, which ended up being the most successful campaign of the entire year.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

An interesting feature here might include an insightful quote or comment like:

“You can’t fail if you don’t give up.”

OR

“You learn more from your failures than you do from your successes.”

Failures are rich with experience. They mean character building, learning, and lots of growth, so don’t shy away from talking about them. Embrace them, own them, and believe that they make you a better person.

What did you learn?

“We learned to structure our meetings differently, so we could make sure we were all working towards the same result. We had a breakdown in communication that could have been avoided by asking better questions in meetings. From now on, the first thing I’ll be asking the team is “What’s the outcome? Why are we committed to this outcome? What do we need to do to get there?”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I was in a situation where _____.

(Set the stage here and explain the mistake.)

The action that I took was _____.

(You can include up to 3. Tell them how you were the hero here who took effective action.)

What ended up happening was _____.

(Explain how the situation panned out. What was the result from the action that you took?)

What I learned was _____.

(Whenever possible, highlight what you learned from the experience.)

What was interesting about this was _____.

(Talk about a cool resource you discovered in the learning process, like a book or an approach to a topic.)

QUESTION 2:

“Tell me about a time you had a conflict at work.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

This question is designed to see how you approach a stalemate, a draw, a situation where there's no clear move because you're at an impasse. They want to know how you are going to react when you get into a disagreement. When you have had a different opinion than someone else's, how did you communicate with that person to get to a solution?

Communication is the number one skill you'll demonstrate when answering this question.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

You want to tell a memorable and interesting story that includes enough detail to paint a picture.

Example Answer: Disagreement on Software

Set the stage:

“The team wanted to use Excel for tracking our event attendees, but I wanted to use a different software. It was something I had used in the past that I found to be a great tool. The whole team was stuck on continuing to use Excel. I wanted to use the new solution, because it was going make things so much easier during the event itself.”

What did you do?

“I asked if they would be willing to hear me out if I did a short presentation on the software and showed them a few of the features we could use right away that would save us time and keep more organized. If after my demo they were still against it, then I was happy to use Excel.

I presented data and showed measurable ways it could help right away. I showed the team reliable resources and testimonials from people who had used it for the same thing we would be using it for. I suggested doing a quick test drive, to let them try the software and see how they found it.”

What was the result of your action?

“After hearing the demo and trying it out, they really liked it and they agreed to give it a try. We still use the software today, and we’ve expanded out to using it for other things as well, including setting our team goals in our planning sessions.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“A key belief of mine is to let the best idea prevail, no matter whose idea it is.”

What did you learn?

“The main thing I learned was the value of explaining something in a way people understand and see what’s in it for them really clearly.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

My co-worker and I disagreed on _____.

(Set the stage here. Explain the point of conflict.)

The things I suggested were _____.

(Tell them how you communicated and what you suggested as resolutions.)

The result was that _____.

(Explain how the situation panned out. What was the result from the action that you took?)

What I learned was _____.

(Whenever possible, highlight what you learned from the experience.)

QUESTION 3:

“Tell me about a time you had to make a difficult decision.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

Behavioral questions around decision making come up a lot. This question is around how you had to make a decision when you didn't have all the information you needed, a time when your decision was unclear, and there was no manager there for you to ask. What did you do? Basically there was no way for you to be sure you were doing the right thing here, so how do you decide?

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

When the question is phrased in the “tell me about a time” way, this means that a story will produce the best answer, because they’re looking to hear a specific story.

Example Answer: A tough call on a flight booking

Set the stage:

“I was asked to book a flight for a candidate who was being flown in by our company for an interview. The day they wanted the interview to happen was one on which everyone was available. When I checked flights for this day, they were very expensive - more than I had ever paid for a flight before. I tried to contact my manager, but he was out of town and unavailable. I knew that flight prices were only going up as more seats were booked. I had to make a decision quickly.”

Why was this important?

“The decision was a tough call to make. I saw the options as:

A) Try to make a reschedule work with the available time of five different people on another day with a better flight price

OR

B) Book the more expensive ticket on the appointed date and hope that the price would be OK.”

What did you do?

“When my boss got back, I told him first thing that I made the decision to book the ticket at the more expensive price. He said, ‘Holy! That’s expensive!’ He didn’t seem happy about it at first, but when I explained and he thought about it, he said, ‘Yeah, we needed to get this guy in for the interview, so I think you did make the right call.’”

What was the result of your action?

“To show that I was aware, I let him know that I knew the flight was over budget. I made some suggestions on how we could save on other things to even out the extra cost for the ticket. He appreciated that thinking. Did I make the right call? In the end it depends on the company, the manager, and the situation. The point is that I made a decision. Whether it was the right one or not is impossible to tell until after the fact.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“Airline prices are tricky. I did some research after this happened, and I learned a few tricks to get cheaper flights that I would be happy to share with you, if I ever need to book flights for you!”

What did you learn?

“It takes more courage to make a tough decision than to not make any decision.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I was in a situation where _____.

(Set the stage here and explain the mistake.)

The action that I took was _____.

(Tell them how you were the hero here who took effective action.)

What ended up happening was _____.

(Explain how the situation panned out. What was the result from the action that you took?)

What I learned was _____.

(Whenever possible, highlight what you learned from the experience.)

QUESTION 4:

“Tell me about a time you made a mistake at work.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

The question is designed to see how you overall attitude towards screw ups.

What do you do when you make a mistake, and how you do you see mistakes?

How do you deal when things don't go perfectly?

How do you take responsibility for your failures or mistakes?

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

What was the mistake and why do you think it was a mistake?

Example Answer: CEO no-show!

Set the stage:

“Three hours before a new-hire meeting, I realized I forgot to invite our CEO to present at it. When I emailed our CEO, I got an auto-response back saying that he was on vacation. It was unlikely he would even get my messages, let alone show up to present to our large group of eager new employees.”

Why was it important?

“There would be twenty people expecting to hear their new CEO speak, and he was not going to make his appearance, all because I forgot to invite him.”

What did you do?

“I owned up to the mistake. That was the only thing I could do first. No excuses, just a flat-out ‘This is what happened. It was my fault, and this is what I plan to do about it.’ We set up a pre-recorded presentation for the new hires to watch. It may have been a little out-dated, but it was certainly better than nothing.

Secondly, I let the new hires know about our miscommunication and assured them that we would do our best to set up another time for them to hear from Troy, and we kept them posted on when would be able to schedule that.”

What was the result of your action?

“The CEO was happy that we found a plan B quickly and said that we’d do a remote meeting for everyone later on - not to worry, not a big deal.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

An insightful comment on how you view mistakes and failure:

“It not a mistake it’s a lesson, (if you vow never to repeat it)”

OR

“Growth moments happen from mistakes.”

This works well as a nice sound bite that they can easily remember. Mistakes and failures are rich with experience. They can demonstrate character building, learning, and lots of growth, so don’t shy away from talking about them. Embrace them, own them, and believe that they make you a better person with better experience behind you.

What did you learn?

“I learned that sometimes things are not a big deal, unless you make them a big deal.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I made a mistake when I _____.

(Set the stage here and explain the mistake.)

The action that I took was _____.

(1) own up to it, 2) proceed to present solutions/fixes and implement the best one)

What ended up happening was _____.

(Explain how the situation panned out. What was the result from the action that you took?)

What I learned was _____.

(Whenever possible, highlight what you learned from the experience.)

QUESTION 5:

“Tell me about a time when you were part of a failing team.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

“Here the secret question they’re (really) asking is: ‘Do you really have what it takes to turnaround a team that wasn’t going to succeed?’ Do you have the tools in your personality toolbox to figure sh*t out when a group of people are sucking at getting something done? Tell me how you brought them together and turned it around, I want to hear it.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

You can incorporate a story from any area of your life. For example, if you worked on a team project at school or work, a story from either one will work.

Example answer: Executing a big office move with a panicking team

Set the stage:

“I was tasked with moving a large office of 75 staff within a short period of time. There were so many moving parts to keep tabs on: IT department, physically moving everything, movers, parking, communication with staff, and so on. People started to panic and stress out about all the changes coming their way.”

Why was it important?

“This was important because it couldn’t have been done without the cooperation of the entire team. The move would be very rocky and bumpy if we didn’t have a clear framework and plan identified for the whole team. I stepped in and made that happen.”

What did you do?

“I identified a relocation team, selecting one key person from each department. There was myself leading the team, and one person from IT, one from development, and one from operations and administration. I made sure we all had the same clear outcome in mind, which was to move the office smoothly without interruption of service to our customers.”

What was the result of your action?

“Holding the team re-location meetings once a week was the best thing we could have done. Each and every time we met, new things came up, and we dealt with them quickly and put things in place accordingly. In the end, everyone was super impressed with the efforts of the relocation team, and we were treated to a fancy dinner by the CEO. Not one person could have done it alone, yet everyone was trying to do it themselves before I brought the team together and clearly identified an outcome to work towards.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“I think this is a great example of a ‘pop-up’ team that was needed for only a short period of time to work together efficiently. I am proud to say that I identified the pop-up team and hosted the meetings to bring everyone together. I also had a lot of fun doing it.”

What did you learn?

“The biggest learning I got from this was that not everyone will want to work together, unless you give them a clear reason why it’s important to work together. Each person on the team was an integral part of the success. If everyone had continued to do their own thing, we would have been in hot water when it came to moving day.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I was on a team that was tasked with _____.

(Set the stage here and describe the team's mission.)

The team was struggling with _____.

(Explain why the team was struggling to succeed.)

The action that I took was _____.

(What did you do to get the team back on track? Proceed to present solutions/fixes and implement the best one for the situation.)

The results that came from my actions were _____.

(Explain how the the team came together in the end to see the project to success.)

What I learned was _____.

(Whenever possible, highlight what you learned from the experience, I.E. the team needed to communicate better, etc.)

QUESTION 6:

“Tell me about a time when you had to meet a tight deadline.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

They want to see some sort of creative problem solving ability. They want you to demonstrate how you got a seemingly impossible task done.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

Example answer: The presentation that was now due tomorrow

Set the stage:

“I was given a project on Monday afternoon that needed to be completed by Tuesday morning. The deadline seemed impossible to meet. I couldn’t get it done without some miracle. I had less than a day to prepare a presentation on a difficult HR topic in front of a group of executives.”

What did you do?

“First off, I didn’t panic. I needed to be in a resourceful state in order to figure it out. I wouldn’t be able to think clearly to figure out how to tackle it if I was in a state of panic and overwhelm.

I created a plan of work to do the research, prepare the first version, make the corrections, prepare the presentation, and then practice it. It was close to impossible to do it in the small amount of time I was given. However, I asked two of my colleagues for help on the research part. Because of their help, we were done in about 6 hours.”

What was the result of your action?

“Getting help was crucial. I had an overall view of how long it would take and all the pieces that needed to be done. I organized research, preparation of the first draft, revisions of the draft, and then practice of the final presentation. Working as a team, we were able to complete it in time for the meeting.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“Some people are just not deadline people, and sometimes they will need help and reminders along the way.”

What did you learn?

“You have to get creative, but you’ll be able to figure it out, even if it seems impossible at first. First thing is not to panic and freak out, because then you won’t be in a resourceful place, and that’s where you need to be when these challenges come up.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I was assigned a project that was due in X amount of time _____.

(Set the stage here. Make sure to demonstrate that it's no small feat to achieve what was asked of you.)

I figured out that this was going to take X amount of time, and I only had X amount of time to _____.

(Explain here why this deadline was hard to meet)

The action that I took was _____.

(1) How to did you get help from someone, (2) prioritize accordingly, and (3) find hidden resources, such as help from a mentor or co-worker who could assist or give advice on how to deal with it.)

The results that came from my actions were _____.

(Explain how the project was completed (or just a part of it) and how things turned out in the end.)

What I learned was _____.

(Not to panic or freak out, stay in a rational state with the open mind, know that it can be done, then your resourcefulness can come out instead of your panic.)

QUESTION 7:

“Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your boss.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

They want to see your attitude towards conflict, specifically your attitude towards conflict with an authority figure.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

A story of how conflict here can be helpful and can demonstrate how you can show the tools you use to manage it.

Example answer: Changing company event date

Set the stage:

“My boss wanted to have a big staff event on a Sunday that would cost the company a lot of money. I knew that people would rather be with their families, so a lot of them wouldn’t show up to a company event on a Sunday. The money spent wouldn’t achieve the objective my boss hoped to achieve, but how do you tell your boss that?”

What did you do?

“I said to my boss, ‘You probably already thought of this, but could we host the event on a Friday or a Saturday instead? At my last company, we did the event on Friday and we found that we had a lot better attendance. Would you be open to this?’”

What was the result of your action?

“After explaining the situation from my last company and how that worked out, my boss decided that it was the right course of action to move the date of the event.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“My boss was open to hearing my opinion and appreciated it. This isn’t always the case, but disagreements can strengthen a working relationship if they are handled correctly.”

What did you learn?

“If you have information that needs to be shared for the good of the company or the project, then share it in the nicest way possible. If I had stood by instead of saying something when I had the chance, we could have failed.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

My boss wanted to do _____.

(Set the stage to describe clearly what your boss wanted to happen.)

I disagreed with my boss, because _____.

(Explain here what your thoughts were.)

I broached the subject with my boss by _____.

(Explain the methods that you used to communicate the disagreement.)

The results of what I said were _____.

(Explain the outcome, preferably telling a story in which your boss listened to you and agreed with you. If not, tell about how you came to a compromise, or how you ended up agreeing with him or her and moving forward with their point of view.)

What I learned was _____.

(Either that bringing up your thoughts was a good thing to do. Or if you ended up going with what your boss wanted, that you were open to not always knowing what was best, but that you’re open to talking about it to come to the best conclusion.)

QUESTION 8:

“Tell me about a time you demonstrated leadership skills.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

They want to see how you directed someone or led a team. How did you step up when no one else would?

The best type of story here is one demonstrating when you took action when everyone else did not, or when people didn't know what to do but you did something. If you don't have a story like that yet, you can use a story of how you were thinking ahead, started doing something, and others followed suit.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

You want to tell a story of when you took a leadership role. Tell a compelling, heartfelt story that shows that you have it in you to take leadership responsibilities, which I know that you do!

There are many ways to tell a story to show leadership, here are a few ideas:

- You showed someone else how to do something, trained someone, or successfully delegated a task to someone else.
- You made a decision that no one wanted to make, and you moved forward with it confidently.
- You took responsibility for something that wasn't your responsibility, which takes guts and leadership skills.
- You owned up to something if you made a mistake, instead of blaming another person or circumstance, which is a leadership quality.
- You put the people around you lead ahead of yourself - leaders eat last.

Leadership starts with one person.

You don't have to have led a group of people or have done anything amazing to have demonstrated leadership qualities and skills. You can talk about a time you showed one of your friends how to do something and they did it, or a time you made a quick decision that helped someone out in their time of need. Any of the above examples would work - the more the better.

Example answer: The Motorcycle Accident

Set the stage:

“We were driving and we saw a motorcycle had crashed on the side of the road. When I pulled over, we saw that someone was already calling 911, but other people were standing there not sure what to do or how to help.”

What did you do?

“I took action. I went over to the guy who was on the ground, elevated his head, and talked to him to keep him conscious until the paramedics arrived.”

What was the result of your action?

“When the paramedics arrived, they told me to ‘keep doing what I was doing’ as they were stopping traffic and clearing the scene so that they could take him to the hospital.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“The reaction in this situation comes from the ‘fight or flight’ we all have as humans. I chose to stay and fight, where others may have chosen flight. Both are understandable options.”

What did you learn?

“I learned that when things happen, not everyone knows what to do. Calling the ambulance is the obvious first move, but beyond that a lot of people panic. Everyone is different and reacts differently in times of high stress.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I was in a situation where _____ happened, and no one knew what to do.

(Set the stage here. In this case, you took action when no one else knew what to do.)

I stepped up to the plate and _____.

(Explain here what you did.)

The results that came from my actions were _____.

(Explain how the story ended and what the impact was.)

What I learned was _____.

(Before I might have driven away thinking everything was handled, but I was there at the right time when no one had taken action yet and they needed someone like me who could see what was happening and knew what I needed to do.)

QUESTION 9:

“Tell me about a time
when you had to work
with a difficult person.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

This is a chance to showcase your diplomacy, how you speak to someone who is being difficult or challenging to reason with. This happens all the time, so showing what tools you have to deal with these situations is important to employers. They want see that you don't get unnecessarily personal or get caught up in workplace drama. They want to see that you deal with the situation at hand diplomatically and are focused on the outcome that you want.

Talk about the key actions that you took. In the case of a conflict story, the focus should be on how resolved the disagreement in a professional and productive way.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

Example answer: Dealing with a lovely co-worker who is not deadline oriented

Set the stage:

“I managed the creation of our new hiring brochure. We were on a tight deadline, as we needed to get the brochures to the printer in time for the career fair. As the project manager, I was responsible for making sure it was delivered on time. The designer assigned to the project was excellent, but he was not deadline oriented. He missed several deadlines that I had assigned to him. When I talked to him about it, he panicked.”

What did you do?

“First, I empathized with him, acknowledging that the deadlines were difficult to meet, and I explained why we needed the brochures ready for the career fair. He calmed down when he realized that I was there to help. He told me about his huge workload and how he felt like he was drowning and unable to do everything that was required. I suggested we both brainstorm a solution.”

What was the result of your action?

“After brainstorming for a bit, we decided that the work wasn’t being evenly distributed and that it would help if his manager had a better understanding of how important and time-consuming this project was. We spoke to his manager together. She didn’t realize what was going on, and when she became aware, she reassigned some of his other projects to another designer. This freed him up to work on our brochure.

The designer was able to focus on the brochure and meet the deadline. He apologized for his freak-out and said he appreciated my help. He was able to think more clearly when he had someone on his side. The brochure was completed in time for the career fair and received numerous compliments.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“I realized I didn’t have to make another person wrong to get to the result we both wanted.”

What did you learn?

“I learned to go in with the aim to help the person in question, not to criticize or get annoyed, and to come from a place of understanding and offering to help.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I was working with a co-worker and _____.

(Set the stage here by telling why there was a problem and how your co-worker was blocking you in moving something forward.)

The action that I took was _____.

(I approached my co-worker and a) figured out what was going on, and b) offered to help, etc.)

The results that came from my actions were _____.

(Explain how the story ended, i.e. the co-worker was overworked and you were able to help him get some of the projects off his plate so that he could meet the deadline.)

I learned that understanding why is key, and then making it my job to help this person goes a long way _____.

(To seek to understand first, then seek to help)

QUESTION 10:

“Describe a time when you received criticism.”



What is psychology behind the question? (What you should know)

Like the mistake question, this illustrates your ability to learn. Being open to feedback is not easy for most people. They want to see that you can take it in, analyze it, and make changes based on the criticism. Good candidates don't take it personally, and a good answer will show emotional maturity, adaptability and open-mindedness. They want to see that you not only take criticism in stride, but also that you don't get defensive or blame others. Rather, you take it in and use it to improve.

Suggested approach to answering

Story framework:

Beginning (Set the stage)

Middle (Meat of the story - what action did you take?)

End (How did it turn out?)

Are there any interesting features to add?

#Bonus - What did you learn?

Example answer: Feedback on “family friendly”

Set the stage:

“I was responsible for a large staff event. At the end of the event, I sent out a survey to receive feedback on how the event could be improved. I received some good feedback which included criticism. Some of the specific criticism was that there were not enough activities for kids, and the kids were bored.”

What did you do?

“The feedback was appreciated, and I agreed that this was, in fact, the case. The next time I got suggestions for kids activities from people who had kids. I didn’t have kids, so I recognized I might not have done the best job the first time around.”

What was the result of your action?

“At the next event we had at which families were invited, we had a lot more kids activities. The bouncy castle was the biggest hit. It kept kids busy for hours. If it weren’t for that feedback, we would have continued to have events that lacked kids activities.”

Are there any interesting features to add?

“Without criticism you can’t grow, and you can’t aim to keep everyone happy, but you can aim to make sure everyone is heard.”

What did I learn?

“I learned that sometimes in order to consider all people, I need to consult with others and gather opinions, especially if they have more experience with certain things than I do. In this case, they had kids and I didn’t, so they would have better ideas as to what will keep kids entertained and happy at a family event than I would.”

Fill-in-the-blank template

I worked on _____ and I received criticism that said _____.

(Set the stage by describing the criticism that you received.)

The action that I took was _____.

(I understood what they were saying and agreed with it, instead of getting defensive and making excuses.)

The results that came from my actions were _____.

(Improvement moving forward was better events that more well-rounded and engaging for parents and kids. Parents could now relax as their kids were busy having fun.)

I learned that _____.

(Describe the wisdom that you took away from the experience.)



ADDITIONAL INSPIRATION

If you're still stuck for coming up with stories, here are

25 questions

you can ask yourself to see what's under the water in that iceberg of yours when it comes to good examples for your story file!

1. When did you change a process to make it work better?
2. When did you train someone to do something he or she didn't know before you trained them?
3. When did you get people who weren't cooperating to collaborate on something?
4. When did you help a customer or outside salesperson and save the day?
5. When did you write a newsletter, a report, a presentation, or a marketing piece?
6. When did you mentor someone who needed advice?
7. When did you design a report that was smarter than the one it replaced, or filled a need that hadn't been filled before?
8. When did you solve a tough process problem at work, simplifying something that was really complicated and confusing?
9. When did you suggest a good idea and keep pushing for it until finally was put into place?
10. When did you conduct a survey or gather opinions about the best way to proceed or to get to a goal?
11. When did you sell or help sell something – a product or service, a new idea to the management team, or the concept of working for your company to a friend?
12. When did you fill a key role on a team that would have been in a bind without you?
13. When did you jump into a bad situation and fix it?
14. When did you go ahead without any direction, because there wasn't any direction available, and figure out the right answer on your own?

15. When did you represent your employer in a public setting – an association meeting or a trade show, for instance – and help to enhance its reputation?
16. When did you develop a piece of training or instructional information that helped people understand their work better?
17. When did you save yourself or someone else time or money by using that thing between your ears?
18. When did you find a bug or a problem that no one else had spotted and fix it?
19. When did you manage a project to see it completed, whether it was in your job description or not?
20. When did you deal with an emergency or an unexpected situation in exactly the right way?
21. When did you get somebody to talk about and allow for the resolution of a problem that had been hush-hush before?
22. When did you serve as a conduit between people who should have been collaborating but weren't?
23. When did you come up with a better way to think about and/or evaluate something (a better frame, as we would say) and sell that perspective to the rest of your team?
24. When did you advise your boss or somebody else's boss?
25. When did you feel like you were really alive and successful in your job? Every time you had that feeling, there is at least one great example story there!

THANK YOU

Please feel free to email us at
natalie@asknataliefisher.com with any
feedback on this guide. Any 'aha moments'
or big wins? No win is too small.

Thanks for being a part of our community.
In work & life,
Natalie Fisher