



---

Digital Article / Job Interviews

# What to Do If Your Job Interviewer Is Biased

A toxic hiring manager can equal a toxic company culture. *by Shanna Hocking*

Published on HBR.org / June 19, 2022 / Reprint [H0743A](#)



Getty Images/Pandagolik

**One day, many years ago, I sat** at my desk and scrolled through my email for the millionth time. I had been applying to new jobs and hoping for exciting news. Among the spam mail and mundane messages, there it was: an invitation to interview at a company I'd dreamed of working for.

On the day of the big event, I mentally rehearsed my answers to a few common questions and walked toward the room where the hiring

manager waited. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves and entered. Quickly, I sensed that this wasn't going to as planned. The manager shot off his questions in rapid-fire succession. Across the table, I answered, a smile plastered on my face. I pictured myself holding a tiny shield, dashing it left and right to block his blows. The entire room seemed to be filled by his presence, but my armor was equally strong. Instead of trying to wow him with my expertise, I steadied myself. I focused on being warm and approachable in attempt to forge a connection.

It was clear through his questions that he had hesitations about me as a candidate. But I didn't have to wonder for long. He ended by confirming, "I'm not sure this is the right job for you."

As much as I wanted to disagree with him, he was right. Why would I want to be a part of an organization that judged, as opposed to welcomed me, when I walked through the door?

This wasn't the first difficult interview I had encountered. Throughout my career, hiring managers have openly asked about my age, religion, marital status, and whether I have children (and how I expected to do the job if I did). My clients have similar stories of interviewers commenting on their race, ethnicity, and pregnancy status, among other inappropriate topics.

In a perfect world, the job interview process would have one goal in mind: to learn about candidates and how they can uniquely contribute to an organization. Unfortunately, that doesn't always happen. Even in the 21st century, offensive and often illegal questions are sometimes asked — questions that can lead to discrimination against your candidacy. In extreme cases, these questions may reflect the interviewer's bias against you. In other cases, interviewers may ask something they don't realize is inappropriate. Whatever the intention,

pay attention when this happens, as it may reflect a larger problem with the organizational culture.

If you find yourself in an interview that isn't going well, or worse, in which the interviewer is displaying obvious bias, here's how to respond.

### **Maintain your composure.**

My experience tells me that it's not uncommon for some interviewers to try to see if they can get a rise out of you. While it's not okay to irk someone, and it's definitely not okay to ask something that introduces bias into the conversation, it's in your best interest to stay composed. Recruiters sometimes test candidates to see how they can handle difficult situations. If you sense this is the case, as hard as it may be, maintaining your composure can diffuse the situation.

Use simple, in-the-moment techniques, like pausing and taking a deep breath to calm yourself before you answer. Strengthen your body language to take up more space by sitting up straight, sustaining eye contact while you speak, and keeping your feet firmly planted on the floor. Remind yourself of the value you bring and that you have significance, even when someone tries to make you feel small. Say to yourself, "I belong at this table."

That said, if the interviewer says or asks something obviously biased or something that makes you feel unsafe or uncomfortable in any way, it's more than okay to excuse yourself. You can say, "Thank you for your time. I don't think this role is the right fit for me and I've decided not to move forward with the process."

### **Know your rights.**

On that note, know that you don't have to answer illegal questions, such as whether you are married, plan to have kids, your age, or

your ethnicity. It's likely the interviewer may be attempting to make conversation or connect with you on a personal level, and they may not realize they shouldn't be asking this. It doesn't, however, change that it's not okay to ask. Furthermore, your answer can lead to unintentional bias about you as a candidate.

Prepare in advance a general response you can use to graciously deflect and shift the conversation back to your experience and skills. Your planned response might sound like, "I'm excited about this role and bringing my experience to your company. I'd welcome hearing more about you and your team." The interviewer will hopefully get the message to return to questions related to the role. If they don't, however, you can be more direct to say, "I can certainly address that, but I'm not sure how that question is related to this role."

### **Deflect with questions.**

When you're asked inappropriate questions or something that can signal a microaggression, and if you're uncomfortable calling the interviewer out directly, another option is to turn the conversation back to them and their experience. This will give you a chance to shift the direction of the dialogue and reflect more thoughtfully on the experience afterwards (as opposed to reacting in the moment).

For example, if your interviewer asks, "What country are you from?", you can respond with, "I've really enjoyed living in [your city] for the last few years. What brought you to this area?"

Depending on what you're asked, if you're able to get them to focus on your questions, it will shift the uncomfortable attention off of you. This strategy often works, because research shows people enjoy talking about themselves. Studies also show that deflection, even during a

tense exchange, is more positively received than declining to answer a question and can even build trust.

You could ask them how long they've been at the company, what makes them love working there, or what advice they have for job candidates. When I tried this approach during the challenging conversation I shared at the beginning of this article, my interviewer divulged that he tends to play it tough. I used this opportunity to press a bit further.

"How do you feel about being the bad guy for a place you love so much?" I asked — and I watched the tenor of the conversation change.

### **Consider what this means for your interest in the role.**

When you reflect on the interview process, consider how the negative experience affects your interest in the role. The bias may be unique to one person, and it will be good for you to be aware there may be a challenge working with this person in the future. On the other hand, if they're difficult in the interview, this may be a precursor of what the company culture will be like for you as a full-time employee.

The few times I have not trusted my intuition during the interview process and taken the job anyway, the issue has emerged again later. Always remember you are interviewing the company as much as they are interviewing you.

Though I hope these situations won't affect you, realistically, they could. Be proactively prepared to handle a difficult interviewer — and also be prepared to walk away from the potential job opportunity if this happens to you.

*This article was originally published online on June 19, 2022.*



**Shanna Hocking** is the founder and CEO of Hocking Leadership, which specializes in leadership development and philanthropic strategy. Previously a senior executive at billion-dollar nonprofit organizations, she is a sought-after coach, consultant, and keynote speaker. She is also the author of One Bold Move a Day: Meaningful Actions to Help Women Fulfill Their Leadership and Career Potential (McGraw Hill, 2022). Connect with Shanna on [LinkedIn](#).