How to ace any interview

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Sell Yourself

> There's only one thing you'll ever get 100% commission on, and
> that's yourself.

An interview is a sales pitch. Even when it doesn't look like it, even when it looks like they're asking a bunch of technical questions, at the end of the day somebody's making a business decision about whether or not to buy you. Your job is to get them to yes.

Always be closing

> Want to make sure your worst enemy never gets a job again? Just
> tell him or her that it's all about not failing. That the
> default is "hired" and every mistake you make is like damage.
> Make it through the gauntlet without your HP going to zero and
> you'll get the job.

In reality, like with any other sale, the default is "no." Your job is to move them to "yes," and that means you have to give them reasons to hire you. Suddenly, easy questions like the universal "tell me a little bit about yourself" and the more "tell me about a time when you did. . ." are your most valuable assets because they give you complete freedom to sell yourself.

Questions like "what is your greatest weakness" or "what would your co-workers say about you" are designed to trip you up and disqualify you. Think of it this way: nobody's going to hire you because your greatest weakness is being disorganized. Learn how not to screw up on these questions, but once you've mastered that go right back to closing.

In fact, most questions can be treated with this two-stage approach. Take a casual question like "why do you want to work here" and "if you could change anything about this company, what would you do?" First, don't screw up: have a cached answer so you don't blurt out something about money or perks or a dumb suggestion. After that, sell. Find a way to talk about the culture and how you're a good fit who values the same things the company does.

Storytelling 101

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Picture a stereotypical beer ad: bros drinking in slow motion
while beautiful women gyrate. Even without words the message is
clear. Drinking this beer will make you like these people.
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Interview storytelling works roughly the same way. You're
telling stories and the interviewer is reading the subtext. So
make sure to tell attractive ones.
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Because you're selling yourself, you're trying to present the best version possible. But saying you're really amazing sounds silly. So you have to show it, by talking about things that you did that fit the character of this super-amazing person who is also you.

If you have a strong idea of how to brand yourself, go with that. Otherwise, I suggest the following as a good default package: stories should show how you're 1) capable, 2) competent, and 3) likable. In other words, you're smart and get things done and are easy to work with. If you have default answers to "tell me a little bit about yourself," rank them according to how well they satisfy 1, 2, and 3. Very few will satisfy all three; most will focus on one. This is ok! The point of this exercise is to see if your default tilts too far to the edge, and to then try and tell stories that show a balance.

Be honest. Mostly.

"All my stories are mediocre, so why don't I dream up some better ones. It's not like anybody's going to go back and check." This is true. Nobody's going to fact check. But just because you can lie like a rug doesn't mean you should. Lies are fragile; followup questions are much harder and usually when people lie they come up with answers that are too pat, too much a perfect morality play.

I'm not saying that you should say the literal truth 100% of the time and satisfy your conscience with linguistic games. Sometimes, a simple lie may be better than a complicated truth. Just don't build furniture out of particle board when there's a hardwood forest just waiting to be carved.

Practice with Structured Interviews

Structured Interviewing is the new hotness: the idea is that interviewers ask everyone the same questions, write down responses, and later grade them on a 5-point scale. The intent is to reduce the sort of bias where people decide early on whether or not they like the candidate and then spend the rest of the interview building up to those expectations. A couple of studies have shown that it actually works too.

What's awesome about it is that lists of questions & grading rubrics are now available on the internet! Simply Googling "structured interview questions" gives you the following hiring guide, produced by none other than Uncle Sam: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CCsQFjACahUKEwjDuJS-8ZrIAhWLRIgKHRJhD-w&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.state.gov%2Fdocuments%2Forganization%2F107843.pdf&usg=AFQjCNFDClSD37ubufLOpL0p2fTIRDCUaA&sig2=yveyFSmonT6KnM2LnX6UAQ

I **STRONGLY** recommend reading this, looking over the questions, and trying to figure out how to game the interview. If you're reading this and actually want to get

better at interviews, stop reading after this paragraph! Instead take the next half hour, read through the list of questions, and think about how you would answer every single question on that list. Write at least two of your solutions down. Edit them until they don't sound dumb. Then read the rest of this blog.

Be a player, not a piece

In general, the more responsibility you can convey the better. I would say that "I did X because it had business value Y" is good, while "I saw X and caused other people to do Y" should only be presented if it's true.

For example, there is no such thing as lousy project allocation. Either you worked on interesting / speculative / learning projects or business critical ones. Or both.

Note that there's a related but distinct concept: agency vs. subservience. Every job has a rough level of what they're looking for: how much should you take initiative and do what you think is right vs. how much are you expected to play by the rules. Responsibility and agency often go hand in hand, and in general the more senior you are the more the balance tilts towards agency.

So in the midst of showing responsibility, make sure you have at least one story that shows subservience. If someone's hiring you, he or she expects to tell you to do things and have you do them.

Be Successful

> Convey that you are liked, respected, and advancing when asked
> about your current job. Ensure that your prepared stories
> support at least one of these.

Often this is simply a matter of details. Co-workers become friends, the company becomes "we," and projects become "my". This goes hand-in-hand with the previous section: people with autonomy are usually respected as well. Sometimes it brings up new stories: talking about your career prospects at your current company is often a good thing.

> If somebody asks you "how would X describe you" SAY ONLY GOOD
> THINGS.

The point of this question is to get you to sabotage yourself. You assume "oh shit they asked X person," immediately think of all the bad things they could have said, and promptly blow yourself up by saying all of these things. The best way to answer is to blurt "X really likes me / thinks I'm good" and then think of specifics "well X has told me that he wishes everyone on the team had my work ethic so he'd probably mention that. Also he might talk about Y project he was really impressed by it."

> Ooze enthusiasm for your current job.

This is ludicrously powerful for three reasons:

1) It conveys that you were successful.

2) You're likely to be engaged in your new position.

3) It does't look like self-promotion

As a personal example, when I was interviewing at Facebook and Google six months ago I realized that the math model work I had done at my last job made for an ideal story. So when the opportunity came up, I'd launch into a 30-second technical explanation of how slots math worked before asking "do you want me to continue?" The reason for this was not just to tell the story--if I wanted to do that I could have talked about what I did and what impact it had without the fiddly bits that people don't really care about. The point was to show that I **really cared** about my work.

Showing enthusiasm also helps you answer one of the trickiest questions in any interview: why are you leaving your current position? There are two ways to answer this. The first is to focus on the positives of the new position: you loved the old job but the new job will be even better! The second is to give an answer that doesn't say anything bad about anybody in particular. Something like "It was very hard to get things done; they had a lot of slow processes and meetings" is fine, "I had a shit boss" is not.

Winners move from success to success. Losers fail, then run from their failures. Winners are often excited about their jobs. Losers almost never are.

Be Specific

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Tell stories about a single instance of your work, and use
numbers to describe your impact.
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When done correctly, this ends up sounding a lot like a Malcolm Gladwell book.

Story: "I was trying to predict the impact of ads spending. Our current model was a linear regression run on weekly data in Excel. So I added daily signals and ran it in R using a cross-validated . . . "

Number: "Because of this, we increased our ad spend by 1M / month and expect a +2M/year impact on revenue."

Note that the numbers themselves don't really matter. You could replace the story with "+200K/year impact on revenue" and it would have the same effect. The point is that you did something and it had a quantifiable impact.

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Show Progression:  Describe what you did in the past, how it
failed, and how you've done something more recently that was
successful.
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Here's how I'd use this technique to build an answer to the question "tell me about an interpersonal conflict you had at work."

1) The situation: I had committed to a PM's request but my manager said it was a waste of time

2) What I did the first time it came up: set up a meeting between the two of them

3) First result: Situation was resolved but lots of bad feelings all around.

4) Second situation: A PM asked me to do something.

5) What I did the second time: politely requested that the PM help me out by saying what business decision he was trying to make.

6) Second result: I ended up refining the request, then doing it. When my manager asked I made a clear case and he agreed.

Let's tie it all together with an example

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"What is your greatest weakness?"
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I mentioned this as a gotcha question. Which it is. Assuming you're don't say something blatantly stupid like how much you hate authority, this is a test of self-awareness. Can you see the failure that lurks inside your heart? Can you use it to sell yourself?

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Storytime!
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"I don't know if it's my greatest weakness, but it's definitely the one that's hurt me the most. I'm terrible at setting accurate expectations. The only way I've figured out that sort

of works is to let my brain come up with an expectation and then multiply it by two. Partly it's because I'm used to figuring things out fast and sort of have this default assumption that even if I don't know how to do it now it's actually kind of easy. Haha nope learning still takes time. Also, and this is really hard for me, is when I say I'll have something done in Y and then somebody asks "well can you have it done in X." My impulse is to say "yes of course I'm actually lying about Y I can do it in Y/2 and X will be easy." So even though I know intellectually that sticking to my guns will make the guy happier it's hard to do and sometimes I end up promising it anyways and then I have to crunch and that's not really fun."

This is something I wrote in one go with minimal editing, and sounds better spoken than written. Notice that the problem comes across as substantial but not really a threat to my ability to perform. Check for examples of me being smart, sociable, and hard-working.

As a final note, giving an accurate answer to "what is your greatest weakness" is almost impossible: the question is badly formed and forces you to choose between a small-but-costly problem like biting your thumb versus a broad issue like procrastination. So don't bother trying, and instead answer the real question. "Give me an example of a

significant problem you've identified in yourself, so I can
check that you're not a narcissist."

Robert Cordwell

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