

Let the Interview Begin

By Cheryl Crumb

This article will examine the fourth step of our Systematic Hiring Process: conducting the interview.

Opening Scene, Take 1: You're facing a job applicant across the desk. Thorough job definition – check. Competencies identified – check. Questions prepared – check. You open your mouth....How do you begin???? Cut!

The key here is to think of yourself not just as the actor, but as the director of this interview. You need to elicit the most predictive information in the shortest period of time: efficiency + effectiveness. The following roadmap will help you in your task to pick the best and avoid the worst:

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

1. Establish rapport
2. Set the agenda
3. Collect information
4. Describe your company and the job
5. Invite questions and respond
6. Close the interview and set expectations

ESTABLISH RAPPORT

Let's assume there's a lot of solid knowledge and experience in the mind of your applicant...but there is some emotional garbage too. "Am I dressed ok? I'm one of 138 applicants! What if I give the wrong answers?" These are typical negative thoughts masking the real applicant. Nervous candidates will give you poorer answers than one who feels comfortable. So, our first objective is garbage removal. It's best to avoid the usual: "Nice weather we're having; or, How 'bout them Jays." Instead, show empathy and acknowledge the validity of the candidate's excitement. Welcome them. Be a genuine host. Keep the smiles coming. Eliminate the barrier of a desk. Try.....

- "It's great that you were able to get here on such short notice."
- (Walking through the area where the applicant will be working).... "You can see that we've got a lot going on. That's why we're eager to know you better."

SET THE AGENDA

Anxiety lessens with information. Tell people where you're going. Consider saying something like the following:

Let's set out how we'll proceed over the next 45 minutes or so. First I'd like to know more about you and your experiences. Your resume looked really interesting, so I have a lot of questions to ask you to learn more. Because you're also going to be making a decision about us, you'll want to know about us. I'd like to give you some background on the company and the job. You'll likely have some additional questions to ask me, and I'll be happy to answer them for you. Then we'll end by discussing what's next. How does that sound?"

COLLECT INFORMATION

(30-40 minutes or more)

- This is the real guts of the interview. In our last article we discussed how to relate questions to necessary competencies. Start with the general and go to specifics. A comfortable beginning for the applicant would be "Tell me about your present job."
- Probe for specific information. Look for places, dates, names, and numbers. They indicate you're getting a real answer rather than a "snow job". Probe for the "why" behind their responses. Don't assume you understand motive.
- Don't waste time asking what's already stated. You can build from the resume: "Your CV shows an interesting job path: telemarketer – data entry – supervisor – web designer...What does that path most tell me about you?"
- Ask open rather than closed questions. Start with What-How-Why-Tell me-Help me understand....rather than Can you-Do you-Have you-Are you-Will you. The former will encourage the applicant to elaborate while the latter shuts him down.

DESCRIBE YOUR COMPANY AND THE JOB

(5-10 minutes)

There are two keys to this. The first is the sequencing. Too many interviewers describe the job first and then question the candidate. That strategy telegraphs what you want to hear. Most candidates will oblige you.

The second point concerns honesty. Paint yourself as you are. Start with an overview of

what your organization does and what makes it unique in its industry. Explain what the job does and how it fits in with the company's strategy. Present a balanced picture. Share the good aspects, and then identify the speedbumps. There's good and bad in every organization. Hiding the negatives sets false expectations, and may lead to failure.

INVITE QUESTIONS AND RESPOND

(5-10 minutes)

The active inclusion of this phase demonstrates to applicants that you realize you are also being interviewed. Too often bosses see this meeting as onefold: "Do I want you?" The smart interviewer knows there are two decisions to be made, yours and the applicant's.

CLOSE THE INTERVIEW AND SET EXPECTATIONS

(5 minutes)

Thank the applicant and answer the unsaid question, "what's next?". If the candidate dazzles you, it's easy. Explain what steps still remain in the hiring process and make a commitment to get back to the applicant by a certain date. Find out how your process and timing fits in their decision-making process. Don't hesitate to show your enthusiasm. You'd hate to lose your dream candidate because he didn't have a solid sense of your feelings.

But what if the candidate is a "dog"? Again, I'm a firm believer in the truth shall set you free. However, never do anything that causes a person to lose his self-worth. If you know that this person will not fit, tell him. How? "Joe, thanks for taking the time to come here and share your experiences with us. I have really enjoyed talking with you. We've discussed what you were looking for in a job and what this job offers. It seems pretty obvious that this position isn't right for your particular mix of skills. It wouldn't be fair to you to put you in this position or to keep you waiting while you could be looking for the right job. Do you agree?"

The watchwords: be structured and methodical but not mechanical. Let's go back to the beginning, a wiser more skilled interviewer: Opening Scene, Take 2 - You're seated away from your desk and....Action!