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THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

How to Interview Job Candidates Like a CEO

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Over the last 17 years, I have interviewed more than 1,000 leaders, mostly CEOs but also CHROs and board directors, for the Corner Office series I created at *The New York Times* and for my leadership newsletters on LinkedIn. I've always focused on how they handle the universal challenges of leadership rather than on their company's strategy or competitive landscape.

In almost every interview, I've asked the same simple questions: "How do you hire? What do you ask in job interviews?"

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Their answers still surprise me. Among them: “If time, money, and talent were no object, what would you do?” “What is the biggest misperception people have about you, and what is the difference between perception and misperception?” “If you woke up tomorrow and there were no humans left on Earth, just animals, what kind of animal would you be?”

These aren’t random icebreakers. The leaders who ask them have thought hard about how to get people past their rehearsed answers (“My biggest weakness? I care too much.”). I think of them as “bank-shot” questions: they come at the issue from an angle to get around the polished front people present in interviews and reveal what a candidate is really like.

A few years ago, I started wondering whether there was a pattern in the hundreds of interview questions I had collected. Rather than asking AI to sort through them, I went old-school: I wrote each question on an index card and sorted the stack into categories.

For each question, I asked myself what the leader was really trying to learn about the person across the table. I call these the “essential questions.” Is this person self-aware? A team player? Do they take personal responsibility?

It would be far more efficient to ask those questions directly and get an honest answer. But most candidates are savvy enough to give the answer they think the interviewer wants to hear. That’s where bank-shot questions come in. Because candidates usually haven’t prepared for them, they’re more likely to produce authentic, revealing answers.

What follows is a guide to interviewing like a CEO, organized around eight essential questions, each with bank-shot questions you can use. It works from both sides of the table. If you’re hiring, it offers fresh ideas for your interviews. If you’re the candidate, it will help you prepare and avoid being caught off guard.

Essential question #1: Do you really want to work here?

It’s the natural place to start. Is the candidate playing a numbers game, sending out a hundred applications? Or have they done their research and have specific, meaningful reasons for wanting to work at *your* company?

Bank-shot questions:

> **Hiring will never be an exact science, but these questions can make the crystal ball a little less cloudy.**

- Why is our company, and this job, the right next step in your professional and personal journey?
- What have you learned about our company beyond what’s on our website?
- What might you do differently from what we’ve done?

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- What precisely appeals to you about this job?
- What do you think will be hardest about this job?

Susan Salka, the former CEO of AMN Healthcare, explained why she asks the first question: "I find that when I ask the question that way, people open up about where they are in their professional journey. I don't want somebody who just sees this as a job. I want it to be really important in their life somehow."

Essential question #2: What makes you tick?

With so much disruption, and nearly every company in the middle of some transformation, the job someone is hired for will likely change. So employers want to understand a candidate's strengths, work ethic and source of drive, and whether they have the fortitude to work through whatever comes next.

Bank-shot questions:

- What early influences shaped who you are as a leader and colleague?
- What do you enjoy most and least in your current job? When are you in a state of "flow"?
- What values matter most to you at work? Why, and how have they shown up in your career?
- Why did you switch jobs and employers when you did?
- How do you define professional fulfillment?

That last question is a favorite of Marcus Ryu, a partner at Battery Ventures and the co-founder and former CEO of Guidewire Software. "I find that it's very hard for people to lie about that question because stock answers sound so phony," he said. "People who have reflected on that generally can speak from the heart."

Essential question #3: Do you take personal ownership?

Here is a crucial test for any employee. They're handed a difficult assignment with no obvious solution and plenty of gray areas. Do they say, in effect, "I've got this. I'll figure it out"? Or do they push back, ask for more clarity and list reasons it can't be done? Call it grit, resilience or comfort with ambiguity. Every employer wants that resourcefulness, and nobody wants a finger-pointer.

Bank-shot questions:

- What's the hardest problem you've tackled, and why was it hard?
- How have you shown leadership in your job?
- What did you learn from a time you disappointed yourself?
- Tell me about a time you enlisted others to help solve a difficult problem.
- Tell me about a time you were given a broad goal and had to figure out the playbook yourself.
- How have you led change in previous roles?

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That ability to lead change is essential for Cindi Leive, who was the editor of *Glamour* when I interviewed her. "The people on my team who can come up with an idea, put together a plan and presentation for getting it done, pick up the phone and find partners, are gold," she said.

Essential question #4: Are you hungry to learn?

The corporate shorthand for this is "growth mindset," a term popularized by Carol Dweck. Others call it curiosity. Whatever the label, it's a habit of mind that's essential for success. Companies want people with an innate drive to learn and raise their game, not people resting on past successes.

Bank-shot questions:

- What idea, challenge or question at work has captured your interest and is driving you to learn more right now?
- What interests you outside of work, and what have you learned about it recently?
- If your core expertise is your "major," what is your professional "minor"? Why does it interest you?
- How do you want to get better at your job over the next two years, and what will you do to get there?

The last question comes from Niki Leondakis, the CEO of CorePower Yoga. "If someone can't answer that honestly and rather quickly, if you have to think too hard about what you're working on developing, are you really working on it?" she said.

Essential question #5: Are you a team player?

When I give talks or run offsites for leadership teams, I often use this line: "There's a reason HBO ran *Game of Thrones* on Sunday nights: to get people ready for work on Monday." It always gets an uncomfortable laugh, because anyone who has spent a few years in the workforce has met the colleague who treats everything as a zero-sum game. Employers want to avoid those people, however talented, and find people wired to help their colleagues and who understand the power of teams.

Bank-shot questions:

- What's your playbook for influencing people who don't report to you?
- What were the best and worst teams you've worked on, and what were the dynamics of each?
- What's the most meaningful working relationship you've had?
- What does trust mean to you at work?
- How do you handle difficult interpersonal issues at work?

Tachi Yamada, the late chief medical and scientific officer of Takeda Pharmaceuticals, explained the thinking behind that last question when I interviewed him in 2010: "Intelligence is often more displayed in what I would call complex abstract thinking, and there's nothing more complex and abstract than human relationships," he said. "And if they can work their way through a human relationship problem intelligently, my guess is that they're very smart people."

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Essential question #6: Are you self-aware?

There is always a gap between how we think we come across and how others see us. And when it comes to how colleagues see you, there's no such thing as misperception. If they think you're a poor listener, disengaged or quick to blame others, that is what matters. To be an effective colleague and leader, you have to understand not just your strengths and weaknesses but how others experience you.

Bank-shot questions:

- What's the most surprising feedback you've received, and what did you do about it?
- Six months from now, what will we know about you that we don't know today?
- Think of a colleague you didn't get along with. What would they say about you?
- What will your references say about your strengths and the areas where you can improve?
- What are your triggers, and how do you manage them?

The last question comes from Corey Thomas, the former CEO of the cybersecurity company Rapid7. "If an executive can't answer what their triggers are, that's a nonstarter," he said. "We all have them, and if you're not aware of them, that probably means you lack maturity around them."

Essential question #7: Will you thrive in our culture?

Many companies used to hire for cultural "fit." Because that can work against efforts to build more diverse teams, many have shifted to looking for culture "adds," people who will strengthen the culture rather than simply mirror it. Either way, employers want people who can read the room and understand the nuances of the culture before trying to change it.

Bank-shot questions:

- What did you like most and least about the cultures you've worked in?
- What did you like most and least about your previous bosses?
- If you had five similar job offers, what would make you choose one company's culture over the others?
- How did you "merge into traffic" when you joined a new company?
- What lasting "fingerprints" have you left at companies where you've worked?

That last question comes from Laurie Havanec, the former chief people officer of CVS Health. "I define fingerprints as strategic initiatives that you're proud of and that endure after you've left," she said. "When people talk about their fingerprints, you learn a lot about how they think, how they innovate, how they lead, and how they measure results."

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Essential question #8: Are you an effective leader?

The stakes rise when you're hiring a manager or leader, because of the impact that person will have on the broader team. Do they understand the trade-offs that make leadership so challenging? Do they have the hard skills to drive results and the soft skills to coach people and build followership? Can they develop other leaders?

Bank-shot questions:

- If you took over a new team, what would you tell them about your leadership style: what you value most and what irritates you most?
- When you mentor and coach people, what themes come up most often?
- How do you make sure your teams operate as true teams?
- How do you balance compassion with holding people accountable?
- How do you hire? What qualities do you look for, and what questions do you ask?

That last one brings us full circle. It's the question I've asked hundreds of leaders, and it's also one many CEOs ask candidates, because the answer reveals what a candidate values most in other people.

The bottom line

Hiring is hard, and interviews are an imperfect way to predict how someone will perform, work with a team and handle pressure. Companies increasingly use assessments and structured processes to make hiring more rigorous and reduce bias. Research consistently shows that structured interviews, which ask every candidate the same core questions and score answers against a clear standard, predict performance far better than free-flowing conversations.

But interviews aren't going away. Managers will always want to size up the person across the table or on the video call. But too often they walk in without a plan, and the conversation becomes little more than a social call.

The eight essential questions, and the bank-shot questions that bring them to life, can help. Hiring will never be an exact science, but these questions can make the crystal ball a little less cloudy.

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About the author



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Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the "Corner Office" series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including "The Leap to Leader" and "The CEO Test," both published by Harvard Business Review Press.

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