



Tips for Successful On-site Interviews

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- Communicate with the CEO
 - Choose whom you want to talk to, CEO, CFO, etc.
 - Meet with at least one underling in each of the functions whose metric(s) you want to know more about
- The interviewing sequence matters
 - Talk to a subordinate before you talk to her/his boss
 - Talk to the CEO last
- Be considerate about particular time slots – it should be at their convenience, not yours
 - Each interview should run 45-90 minutes
- Dress the way the rank and file dresses – jeans, if necessary
 - You don't want to be perceived as “one of the suits”
- Sit on the same side of the table (or desk) as they do
- If you're a guy interviewing a woman, leave the door open; if you can have a female colleague join you for these interviews, so much the better
- Give each person your business card; ask 'em for theirs
- Begin by asking the person to tell you what they understand to be the purpose of their conversation with you; if they don't have it right, gently rephrase what they say so that it reflects what the CEO's e-mail said, and then ask if they understand – keep rephrasing until they do
- Prepare two sets of questions for each interview
 - #1 will be a generic set of questions, preferably with scaled responses (1-7), that you will ask each person – this allows you to compare their replies
 - #2 is a set of questions dealing with the metric(s) in question for a specific function – these are generally not queries with scaled responses
 - #2 set should be the same for the two or three people within a function whom you interview – that way you can compare responses

- Use LOTS of adverbs
- Don't ask blunt, hit-'em-in-the-snoot questions, esp. of subordinates (this is where the adverbs come in handy – they are bad in writing, but great in interviews because they take the edge off of difficult questions)
- Act DUMB (remember *Columbo*)
- Make sure you understand exactly what the person means – this requires “active listening” – periodically sum up and play back to the person what you think you heard them say (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_listening)
- You're not looking for dirt or for criticism of any person – you are simply trying to gather facts, understand processes, and uncover cause-and-effect relationships
- Don't tape these interviews – it's off-putting
- If you're going to take notes in their presence, ask if they mind
- Assure them of 100% confidentiality
- Ask easy questions first – this helps them (and you) relax
- Look them in the eye, but don't stare
- Listen attentively
- Don't interrupt
- Speak softly
- Introduce a difficult question with a self-deprecating comment: “You know, you're probably going to think this is a really dumb question, but I need to ask it because I'm trying to understand this particular area,” and then ask it, again with ‘weasel words’ (adverbs, lots of “uhhs,” plenty of “umms”) and ‘weasel facial expressions’ (e.g., scratch head if confused; scratch head even if not confused if you're going to repeat the question because the answer you just got was, well, jarring, and you want to make sure that you heard it right); and so on (again, think *Columbo*)
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- The last person you will talk to (as well as the first, but only briefly at the beginning) is the CEO
- In my experience, s/he wants to know what you think of their people
- Be candid, but not mean-spirited in your assessments
- If, for instance, you believe that the lead person in Purchasing doesn't have much of a clue, approach the subject delicately. . .
 - First, say nice things about the people you can say nice things about
 - Then: "Umm, I'm concerned about Joe Doaks in Purchasing. Maybe I'm not reading him right, though. I'd like your help and insights, if you don't mind."
 - The CEO will want to help.
 - You: "Well, I infer from my conversation with him that either he doesn't know some of the crucial mechanics of purchasing or I read him wrong. For instance, he didn't seem to understand the concept of EOQs – Economic Order Quantities. That's a big deal in purchasing, Jill. A really big deal."
- Still with the CEO and talking about Joe Doaks)
 - Let the CEO respond. She might not know, either, and that's OK. You can explain what an EOQ is
 - Then suggest that she think about suggesting to Mr. Doaks that he become, at company expense, of course, a member of the Institute for Supply Management (www.ism.ws – formerly, the Nat'l Association of Purchasing Managers)
 - "ISM sponsors professional credentials – the CPSM (Certified Professional in Supply Management) is a respected professional designation that will make Joe a much more valuable member of your team. The ROI to your company should—should, Jill—knock your socks off"

- This is also the time to discuss 'problem areas' – you don't want any surprises in your deliverables
- Worst case: you may be the person who gets surprised. 😊
- By discussing these now, you can also explore possible solutions to the issues in those areas. Again, no surprises