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Candidate Preparation - Interview Questions to Anticipate

We have compiled a set of questions designed to help take your thought process to an interviewing state of mind. It is not possible to anticipate the wide range of questions you may encounter during an interview. Nevertheless, you do not want to leave the interview and then think of the perfect answer to a question.

What is the question behind the question?

During the interview process you will encounter questions that will prompt some self-examination. Some very simple questions may illuminate extremely important issues, for yourself and the hospital.

Realize that some questions may be asked in a certain way to see how you handle stress. Take a breath and think before you answer.

Are there issues behind the question?

Think about why the question is being asked. In addition to the more obvious goal of illuminating information about you, some questions may also reveal issues at the hospital that need to be addressed. They want to know if you have dealt with the problem before and if you succeeded. Focus on examples of your past successes in resolving these types of challenges. Describe your professional accomplishments.

Here are examples of those questions and the "question behind the question." How you answer these and similar questions will have a major bearing on the success of the interview.

Take some time to thoughtfully review these questions and think about how they apply to you, your career and the opportunity at hand. Some of your accomplishments may have been years earlier but highly relevant to this organization.

"Tell me about yourself. What is not shown on your resume?"

Just talk for 2 minutes. Be logical. The interviewer is looking for communication skills, linear thinking. Provide insight into your management philosophy or personal mission statement.

"Why are you leaving your current position?"

It is prudent to be open to an opportunity that enhances your career. This is a very critical question. Don't "bad mouth" your previous employer. If you are coming out of an organization known to have major problems, or in midst of a buy-out, down-sizing or re-engineering, this may be an easy question to answer. It is also good to state that after long, careful consideration you believe that your chance to make a contribution is very low due to changes in the company.

If you were not looking for a change when contacted by the recruiter about this opportunity, say so. Then offer the reason(s) you were motivated to learn more about their organization. If it's only about money, decline the interview.

"What do you consider your most significant accomplishments?"

Answers to this question can get you the job . . . prepare extensively. We suggest you frame your answer into a two minute story, with specific relevant details and discuss your personal involvement. Describe how things were when you arrived, what you did to make the change and then describe the measurable results or outcomes.

Discuss accomplishments that were worth achieving. Discuss hard work, long hours, pressure and any important issues at stake. Remember to briefly describe the thought process used as you assessed the changes you implemented.

"Why do you believe that you are qualified for this position?"

Be certain you know the specifics of the question - do they need a person to maintain the status quo or make major changes? Do they want staff development, a hands-on manager, an administrator to facilitate policies with upper administration or someone to develop strategies for growth?

Pick two or three main factors about the job and about you that are most relevant. Provide specific details. Select a clinical or technical skill or a specific management skill (organizing, staffing, planning), and combine it with a personal success story.

"Have you ever accomplished something you didn't think you could?"

The interviewer is trying to determine your goal orientation, work ethic, personal commitment, integrity and your ability to be introspective. Provide a good example where you overcame numerous difficulties to succeed. Prove you're not a quitter, and that you'll "get going when the going gets tough."

"What do you like/dislike most about your current position? What will you miss most about your current position?"

The interviewer is trying to determine compatibility with the open position. If you have an interest in the position, be careful. Stating that you dislike overtime or detail work can cost you the position. By being open and flexible you may learn they need extensive overtime for a short period on an essential project.

There is nothing wrong with liking challenges, pressure situations, opportunities to grow, or a dislike for bureaucracy or frustrating situations. Again, be positive about your current position. Always find a way to say something good that you gained experience and grew.

"How do you handle pressure?"

High achievers tend to perform well in high pressure situations. These questions also could imply that the position is pressure packed. If you do perform well under stress, provide an example with details, giving an overview of the stressful situation. Let the interviewer "feel" the stress by your description.

"Describe the difference between being a manager and a leader. ...a leader and a follower."

Your answer will tell the interviewer about your understanding of hiring, motivating and retaining staff. Following directions, thinking outside of the box, empowering people or just doing what needs to be done; all of these management approaches have their time and place. It's OK to be a manager; some situations require a "just do it" in managing those unable to comply.

Being a leader implies motivating, inspiring and providing strategic vision for the success of the department and the organization. This is the next level of managerial development, so convey what is appropriate for you.

"Describe your gaps in employment, frequent job changes or your being asked to leave your last position."

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Addressing mistakes in choices you made in the past will demonstrate maturity. Being unable to do so will cost you the job. From commuting issues to re-engineering there are people who never expected job loss or job changes to be a problem. Be able to address each issue clearly with solid information. This is an opportunity to grow with new challenges. Convey why you can and are ready to settle down now and your ability to make a contribution to a new organization.

If you have taken time off between positions, let them know that you were not looking for another job. Let the interviewer know with increased responsibility and your broadened experience, you will be an asset to their team. If you had offers and did not accept them, let them know you are looking for the perfect organization - theirs! Be positive, introspective and honest, but do not dwell on the question.

"Describe your best boss."

This is the essence of who you are as an employee. Different aspects of your next manager may include autonomy, someone to brain-storm with, fairness, interest in your continued professional development, creativity and supportive of your decisions. Or, maybe its someone who holds you accountable and keeps you focused.

Being aware of which of these characteristics have worked best (or worst) for you is important in being true to who you are as a manager and an individual. You may want or require structure while not wanting to be micro-managed. Be aware that your answer will also reveal a great deal about who you are. We tend to mirror the person we want for a manager.

"Why do you want to work here?"

If you have done your homework about this organization, now is the time to use that knowledge. Remember, even as a recruited candidate, organizations will want to understand why you would select them. If you

are a recruited candidate, remind them that you were not looking when you were contacted, but that the challenge sounded intriguing and that a solid opportunity for career advancement is important to you.

Think about what inspires you: a collegial environment, Magnet status (or on the journey to), advancement, cutting edge technology, a leadership team with vision, peers and leaders that provide stimulation and growth. All are exciting . . . let them know what intrigues and inspires you.

Sometimes the reason may be more personal, like a need to return to aging parents or a more desirable lifestyle. Whatever your motivation, they need to know you want them.

"Describe your involvement in re-engineering, down-sizing or cost containment processes?"

Healthcare continues to go through major changes. Describe in a positive way, what changes you led, facilitated, or were involved in as a participant. Use examples where you specifically made changes and describe the outcome.

"Where have you saved money, handled more with less, or found other ways to cut cost or increase productivity?"

Describe your actions with a positive can-do attitude. Most organizations face these same issues and your proven success will make a good impression. Be specific and describe your successes in quantifiable terms. For example: reduced overtime by 13% within 6 months, or improved employee and patient satisfaction from 81% to 93% within 12 months.

Share those achievements where you increased revenue, reduced costs, improved quality of care or otherwise improved the bottom line. Know the positive impact you have made for your current and past organizations.

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It is in the outcomes that they will understand your potential contribution to their organization. Well articulated, these answers can land your next opportunity.

"How do you mentor your managers and retain your staff?"

Provide some thoughtful insight into your management style. Any success involving a departmental turn-around should be shared. Be specific in your successes and short falls, and reflect on what you learned in the process. Having a unit with little turnover sometimes is luck but more often is an art.

Be able to describe the secrets of your success or the process you took to achieve them. Have you done any of the following: established shared governance to allow more flexibility or improve morale, implemented six-sigma or leadership development training? Always take credit for your success and demonstrate the creativity in your leadership style. But give credit to those who helped you and your organization.

"How do you go about securing buy-in from administration? . . .physicians? . . .other department heads? . . .your own staff?"

This is clearly an opportunity to discuss your facilitation skills and ability to develop relationships at all levels within the organization. This is a critical question and lets the interviewer know you understand what it takes to be successful in an organization. Be ready to discuss complex situations in a linear manner and in detail.

"Describe your typical day."

The interviewer is looking for your organizational skills and the functions you handle to determine if you can address their problems. Before the interview, review what you do daily, weekly and monthly. Being energetic, organized, and able to set goals and willing to be flexible are all important aspects

of successfully managing your new responsibilities. Extensive discussion about putting out fires may signal a problem with your ability to plan or anticipate problems.

"What's the worst or most embarrassing aspect of your business career? Now having 20/20 hindsight, how would you have done things differently?"

This is a general question to learn how introspective you are and to see if you can admit to your mistakes and learn from them. This is a critical attribute of high potential individuals.

Don't be afraid to talk about your failures; we've all been there. Use humor if appropriate. Nevertheless, this is a serious opportunity for them to see your professional growth.

"How have you grown or changed over the past few years?"

This requires thought. Maturation, increased clinical or technical skills, or increased self-confidence are important aspects of human development. To discuss this effectively is indicative of a well-balanced, intelligent individual. Overcoming personal obstacles or recognizing manageable weaknesses can brand you as an approachable and desirable employee.

"What do you consider your most significant strengths?"

Be prepared by knowing your four or five key strengths. Be able to discuss each with a specific example. Select those attributes that are most compatible with the job opening. Some people say "management" or "good inter-personal skills" in answer to this. Do not answer this way unless you can describe, with specific examples, the characteristics of management (planning, organizing, results, staffing, etc.) or how your relationship skills have proven critical to your success.

"What do you consider your most significant weaknesses?"

Discuss tolerable faults that you are working towards improving. Show by specific example how this has changed over time. Better yet, show how a weakness can be turned into a strength. For example, how a concentration on details results in higher quality work even though it requires extra effort for a period of time.

"Deadlines, frustrations, difficult people, and silly rules can make a job difficult. How do you handle these types of situations?"

Unfortunately most companies face these types of problems daily. If you can't deal with petty frustrations, you'll be seen as a problem. You certainly can state your displeasure at the petty side of these issues, but how you overcome them is important. Diplomacy, perseverance, humor, and common-sense often prevail even in difficult circumstances.

This is part of informing them you do not tolerate a negative workplace and you will strive to improve morale. Letting staff constructively vent frustrations is positive; allowing negative attitudes to fester is a sign of poor leadership.

"One of our biggest problems is _____. What has been your experience with this? How would you deal with it?"

How well do you think on your feet? The situational or behavioral question is the type most frequently asked. It is paramount to demonstrating that you understand the issues, are able to listen for the facts and provide your experiences and insight to solve their problems.

Don't be afraid to ask clarifying or exploratory questions to gain relevant information which helps you analyze the problem. Be specific in stating how you would go about solving the problem while acknowledging that not all

problems have a single solution. Problem situations often require review and tweaking as conditions change.

"How do you compare your clinical knowledge to your management skills?"

Most successful managers possess good clinical knowledge. Display your understanding of the clinical aspects of your area in order to create confidence and build credibility with your staff and physicians. The more administrative roles require less emphasis on clinical expertise but a greater demand on your ability to recognize, motivate and develop talent, to provide a vision and manage the bottom line.

"How would you handle a situation with tight deadlines, low employee morale, and inadequate resources?"

If you pull this off effectively, it indicates you have strong management skills. Be creative and use specific examples. Relate your toughest management situation. Be able to address your flexibility along with your team building, interpersonal and organizational skills. This is real-life situation in most facilities today.

"Are you satisfied with your career to date? What would you change if you could?"

Be honest. The interviewer wants to know if they can keep you happy. It's important to know if you're willing to make some sacrifices to get your career on the right track. Your degree of motivation is an important selection criteria for you and them.

"What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself five years from now? Ten years?"

Most importantly, be realistic! Blue sky stuff brands you as immature. One or two management jumps in three to five years is a reasonable goal. If your track indicates you're

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on line for senior management in ten years, it's okay to mention. However, if you've had a rocky road, it's better to be introspective.

"Why should we hire you for this position? What kind of contribution would you make?"

By now you should know the key challenges faced by this organization. This is the time to thoughtfully summarize what you have observed and to link your achievements to their key issues. Now is the time to ask for the position.

Here are some additional questions to contemplate:

"What problems have required you to be especially creative? Walk me through your thought process."

"What overwhelms you and why?"

"How would others describe you as a boss? . . . a peer? . . . an employee?"

"Give an example of your initiative in handling a challenging situation."

"How do you handle criticism?"

"How dysfunctional was your last organization? How about the one before that?"

"What is the main reason you last failed? . . . last succeeded?"

"Are you successful? How do you define success?"

"What is your relationship with your physicians? . . . the Board of Directors? . . . your staff?"

Good luck!



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