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How to Separate the Winners from the Spinners

by Chris Smith and Chris Stephenson | 12:00 PM May 31, 2013

Every employer can tell stories about an applicant who sounded like an A-player at the interview but ended up a dud once at work. Good candidates prepare, of course, but rehearsed interview answers can make it hard to separate the winners from the spinners.

Gauging an applicant's true colors and skill level in an hour is certainly tricky. But there are ways to take interviewees out of their comfort zones, snap them off their prepared script, and encourage the kind of candor that will enable you to find the best fits.

Over the six years our firm has been in business, we've grown from two to 60 employees, and have invested ourselves personally in the hiring process. Interviewing hundreds of candidates ourselves, and developing our company protocols for other interviewers, we've found that certain questions and techniques yield better results than others.

For starters, here are some variations on the standard interview questions, and the reasons they work better:

Rather than ask, "Where do you want to be in five years?" ask "What don't you want to be doing five years from now?" Applicants will be ready to speak in positive terms about their careers and where they see them going. Asking them where they *don't* want to go can reveal far more, because they're rarely prepared with an answer. Being unprepared forces them to think on their feet, and that can go a long way toward showing you how they think.

To get people to open up, ask, "What would you say is the biggest misperception people have of you?" This question — which Barbara Walters famously used to get guarded celebrities to discuss subjects they wanted to avoid — is a great way to snap people out of the hypothetical. It can provoke some thoughtful pauses, as people consider the negative opinions others may have of them, and whether they think those views are accurate. More times than not, this question taps into weaknesses that candidates aren't even explicitly aware of, as well as those they know exist but don't intend to address. Top candidates have a high level of self-awareness. They will know what the biggest misperception is about them, understand that perception is reality in many cases, and already have a plan in place to address it.

Rather than ask, "What will your previous manager say about you?" turn it into a two-part question. Ask "How would you rate your performance on your last job on a scale from 1 to 10, and why?" After they reply, hit them with

the follow-up: "How will your last manager rate you on that scale when we call them, and why?" The first question might sound formulaic, but when you use the second to inform someone that you'll be following up on this self-assessment with the former manager, things often start to get interesting. Responses can vary from a silent, blank stare to a drawn-out confession of a weakness or description of a situation that, with a little follow-up and curiosity on your part, may reveal a lot. If the applicant can correctly anticipate her manager's ratings, or hers and her manager's ratings jive, then you likely have an honest and self-aware candidate on your hands.

Rather than ask, "What are your top two or three weaknesses?" ask "Quickly name some reasons why I should not hire you." While this question is still probing for weaknesses, practically no one is prepared for the question in that form, so it makes people pause and think. If a candidate spends too long fishing for an answer without sounding bad, remind him that you wanted the quick answer. Many times this will elicit the first few things that come to mind, which are often the most unfiltered and truthful. If he tries to offer a soft weakness like "I work too hard," ask for a better reason. We recently had a great candidate answer that "If you need someone who leads by being vocal, I'm probably not that person." Perfect. Businesses need both quiet and vocal leaders, and this candidate gave an honest assessment of the sort of employee he is.

While carefully crafted questions can go a long way toward revealing the person behind the mask, so to speak, questions don't tell the whole tale. The interview process itself can be just as important. It may sound cruel, but we suggest that interviewers shake up what candidates expect out of the interview, and employ techniques to alternately bore, energize, confuse, comfort, and confront applicants.

Tell a joke to loosen things up at one minute, then ask a highly probing question the next. Let a candidate speak at length for some questions, and interrupt at other times with follow-ups like "What do you mean by that exactly?" "How so?" "Could you give us an example of that?"

Taking this approach lets applicants know that their run-of-the-mill interview prep isn't going to work. It breaks them out of their scripts, and allows you to see who will step up or fold under pressure. The exact process can differ depending on the job and company, but it's important that it be methodical and consistently applied to each candidate. Only then can apples be compared to apples.

When fielding job candidates, you have only a limited window of time to learn a great deal. Probing, out of the ordinary interview techniques can draw out a candidate's true qualities, and help you find the staff you need for long-term success.