The Quintessential Guide to Behavioral Interviewing

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Introduction

You may not be familiar with the concept of behavioral interviewing, but odds are high that you'll undergo several interviews in your career that are behavior-based. Every job-seeker needs to know how to navigate the tricky world of behavioral interviewing. The six chapters of this book will prepare you.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by defining and explaining the rationale for behavioral interview.

The middle three chapters, Chapters 2, 3, and 4, take you step-by-step through the guidelines and frameworks you need for preparing responses to behavior-based questions. You'll see the skills that employers commonly seek when they conduct behavioral interviews and find out how to identify the skills that will be targeted for a specific job. You'll learn some parameters for your responses and see how to structure your answers to these tough questions.

Chapter 5 is the meat of the book – a hefty collection of sample behavioral interview questions with sample excellent responses to each.

It never hurts to be reminded of strategies that apply to any kind of interview, including behavioral, so Chapter 6 provides a refresher checklist.
Chapter 1: The Premise Behind Behavioral Interviewing

Although behavioral interviewing is still sometimes considered to be an unfamiliar and relatively new mode of job interviewing, employers such as AT&T and Accenture (the former Andersen Consulting) have been using behavioral interviewing for at least 20 years, and because increasing numbers of employers are using behavior-based methods to screen job candidates, understanding how to excel in this interview environment is becoming a crucial job-hunting skill. Even interviews that are not entirely behavior-based usually feature at least some behavioral questions.

The premise behind behavioral interviewing is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Behavioral interviewing, in fact, is said to be 55 percent predictive of future-on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10 percent predictive. In their book Results-Oriented Interviewing: Principles, Practices, and Procedures, Schmidt and Conaway assert that behavioral interviewing is up to seven times more accurate than traditional interviewing in predicting future behavior.

Behavioral-based interviewing is touted as providing a more objective set of facts to make employment decisions than other interviewing methods. Traditional interview questions ask you general questions such as “Why should we hire you?” The process of behavioral interviewing is much more probing and works very differently.

In a traditional job-interview, you can usually get away with telling the interviewer what he or she wants to hear, even if you are fudging a bit on the truth. And even if you are asked situational questions that start out “How would you handle XYZ situation?” you have minimal accountability. How does the interviewer know, after all, if you would really react in a given situation the way you say you would? In a behavioral interview, however, it’s much more difficult to give responses that are untrue to your character. When you start to tell a behavioral story, the behavioral interviewer typically will pick it apart to try to get at the specific behavior(s). The interviewer will probe further for more depth or detail such as “What were you thinking at that point?” or “Tell me more about your meeting with that person,” or “Lead me through your decision process.” If you’ve told a story that’s anything but totally honest, your response will not hold up through the barrage of probing questions.

The behavioral job interview is based on the theory that past performance is the best indicator of future behavior, and uses questions that probe specific past behaviors, such as: “Tell me about a time where you confronted an unexpected problem,” “Tell me about an experience when you failed to achieve a goal,” and “Give me a specific example of a time when you managed several projects at once.” Job-seekers need to prepare for these interviews by recalling scenarios that fit the various types of behavioral interviewing questions. Expect interviewers to have several follow-up questions and probe for details that explore all aspects of a given situation or experience. Employers use the behavioral interview technique to evaluate a candidate’s experiences and behaviors so they can determine the applicant’s potential for success.

The employer analyzes what makes individuals successful in its organization and identifies job-related experiences, behaviors, knowledge, skills and abilities that are desirable in a particular position. Once the employer has identified the skills and behaviors needed for the position, the employer then structures very pointed questions to elicit detailed responses aimed at determining if the candidate possesses the desired characteristics. For example, an employer looking to hire sales representatives sought candidates with “ego drive,” which is reflected in a person’s desire to be highly successful and his or her need to be a significant person according to his or her own goals. A sample question designed to identify ego drive was, “Describe a past event that gave you a great sense of personal accomplishment.” The interviewer would look for responses that indicate the candidate’s drive, need for recognition, and need for success.

Questions (often not even framed as a question) typically start out: “Tell about a time...” or “Describe a situation...” Many employers use a rating system to evaluate selected criteria during the interview. As a candidate, you should be equipped to answer the questions thoroughly. Chapter 2 tells you more about the skills and behaviors employers seek in these interviews and how to identify the specific
skills an employer may be targeting in a given job.

The specific preparation required for behavioral interviews will help you with any kind of interview. As career expert Andrea Dine notes, "the real beauty of learning how to respond behaviorally is that even if the question is not a behavior-based question, it can still be answered with a real-life example. This approach helps give the candidates credibility and allows them to separate themselves from everyone else, leaving an imprint of them on the interviewer’s mind."

How do you know whether an interview you have scheduled will be behavior-based or not? Sometimes the employer will tell you when setting up the appointment. If not, there is nothing wrong with asking what type of interview to expect.
Chapter 2: Skills Employers Target in Behavioral Interviews

Obviously, you can prepare better for this type of interview if you know which skills that the employer has predetermined to be necessary for the job you seek. Using the guidelines in the next two chapters, you’ll want to compose stories/examples that demonstrate the skills, abilities, values, and knowledge that employers seek in the type of job and industry you’re targeting. So, how do you find out what skills, abilities, values, and knowledge are being sought? Your best indicator will be the ads and job postings for the type of position you seek, which likely will list the skills and behaviors the employer will be looking for in candidates who interview for those positions. These steps will help you narrow down the skills:

- Identify a dozen or so help-wanted ads or Internet job postings that typify the kind of job you seek.
- List keywords that describe the skills and characteristics required for these jobs. See the end of this chapter for a list of skills and characteristics that employers typically seek.
- Now, highlight all the skills and characteristics keywords the ads or job postings have in common and make a list of these frequently appearing skills/characteristics.
- For each skill/characteristic listed, compose an example/story (see more about the importance of storytelling in behavioral interviews in Chapters 3 and 4) that illustrates how you have successfully demonstrated that skill or characteristic in your career – or even in your personal life.

Now you’ll be prepared for behavioral interviews for positions within your industry. As you are invited on interviews for specific positions, go through the process again with each individual ad/job posting to ensure that you have examples/stories ready for each skills and behavior listed.

If the ad does not specify detailed skills and behaviors, or if you’ve landed an interview without responding to an ad (perhaps through networking), ask if the employer can provide you with a written job description before the interview.

Researching the company and talking to people who work there will also give you clues to zero in on the kinds of behaviors the company wants.

For example, some of the characteristics that Accenture looks for include:
- Critical thinking
- Being a self-starter
- Willingness to learn
- Willingness to travel
- Self-confidence
- Teamwork
- Professionalism

Some other typical behaviors that employers might be trying to get at in a behavior-based interview include:
- Adaptability
- Administrative support
- Analytical thinking
- Attention to Detail
- Communication-Oral
- Communication-Written
- Computer, technological proficiency
- Consulting
- Control
- Cost savings
- Creativity
- Customer/client service
- Decisiveness
- Delegation
- Development of Subordinates
- Energy
- Entrepreneurial/startup skills
- Equipment Operation
- Fact Finding-Oral
- Financial Analytical
- Flexibility
- Impact
- Independence
- Indicators of success/good performance/quality
- Initiative
- Innovation
- Insight
- Integrity
- Interpersonal
- Judgment
- Leadership/Influence
- Listening
- Management/leadership/supervision
- Motivation
- Multi-cultural/cross-cultural/international
- Multi-tasking
- Negotiation
• Organizational
• Participative
• Planning
• Practical Learning
• Presentation Skills
• Problem-solving and troubleshooting
• Process improvement
• Process Operation
• Quantitative skills
• Rapport Building
• Research, strategy, and planning
• Resilience
• Risk Taking
• Safety Awareness
• Sales Ability/Persuasiveness
• Sales/marketing
• Sensitivity
• Strategic Analysis
• Teaching/training
• Team player who can also work independently
• Team player/team-builder
• Teamwork
• Technical/Professional Proficiency
• Tenacity
• Time management/ability to perform under deadline pressure
• Training
• Willingness to learn/ability to learn quickly
• Willingness to travel, relocate
• Work ethic/professionalism
• Work Standards

In this preliminary stage, you are developing stories/examples of skills and behaviors relevant to the types of position you seek. In subsequent chapters, you’ll see how to structure these stories for specific behavioral-interview questions.

Why stories?

The integration of stories with employment interviewing has been a well-known and highly touted technique for some time. Career author Frank Traditi, who titles his article on the subject, Using Career Success Stories in Interviews and Networking (http://www.quintcareers.com/career_success_stories.html), recommends success stories about overcoming significant challenges.

In focus-group research that I conducted for my PhD dissertation, participants were asked to evaluate a set of story-based interview responses compared with responses that did not contain stories. Of participants preferring the storied responses, comments included:

• The story responses presented more information.
• The story responses incorporated the job-seeker’s personal style into handling business.
• The job-seeker who gave the story responses communicated/sold herself in a very positive light.

• The storytelling respondent was the more memorable candidate since “I would have had more time to get to know her through her answers and the time I spent with her.”
• The story responses were quite the opposite of those without stories in that the storytelling job-seeker expressed herself in a “colorful” manner. She incorporated into her stories terms that employers like to hear during an interview – reliable, trustworthy, loyal, team player, creative.
• The storytelling responses allowed the interviewer to see how the job-seeker took on a task and handled it.
• The non-story responses, although concise, did not impress upon the interviewer how the job-seeker could benefit the organization, nor did they provide a sense of his personal style and ways of handling the day-to-day situations that may arise.

The one caution these participants had about the storied responses was to make them as concise as possible and not too wordy. Participants wanted details – but not too many. “Although one does not want to go overboard when talking about [oneself],” one participant said, “it is important to incorporate the needs of the employer with the qualities of person being interviewed.”

Typically, career experts advise candidates to respond to behavioral-interview questions with stories. “Your examples are best told through a story format,” writes Carole Martin in Boost Your Interview I.Q. “The more interesting and relevant the story is, the more the interviewer will want to hear further examples.”

“Evidence shows that behavioral description questions require respondents to tell stories and that storytelling is now critical to applicants’ success in employment interviews,” write scholars Ralston, Kirkwood, and Burant, whose research in Business Communication Quarterly (2003) of other academic studies of storytelling in behavioral interviewing suggests that stories told in interviews garner attention, serve as a way to make the applicant memorable, and describe past behavior in an appealing way.

Not Just Stories, but Stories Well Told

With storytelling well established as a way of responding to behavior-based questions, the scholarly study by Ralston, Kirkwood, and Burant focuses on how to measure and improve the quality of stories told in the interview. The authors present a set of criteria for an effective story to be used in a job interview:
• **Internal consistency**: Is the story cohesive? Does it avoid confusion and disjunction? Is the narrative consistent with the skills, abilities, and values the job-seeker wants to portray?

• **Consistency with facts the listener knows to be true**: Does the story conform to what the interviewer is likely to have experienced or knows about the environment the job-seeker is describing? Is it familiar and believable?

• **Relevance to question asked and claim being made**: In essence, does the story answer the question being asked? Does it provide appropriate evidence to support the skill, ability, knowledge, or characteristic the job-seeker is claiming?

• **Univocality**: Is the story unambiguous? Does it lead to just a single conclusion or interpretation?

• **Detail that supports the claim being made**: Is the story revealing? Does it, in the words of Ralston, Kirkwood, and Burant, “provide telling details of plot, characterization, and action that enable listeners to see for themselves what the point is?”

• **Reflection of the job-seeker’s values, beliefs, sense of self/others, or emotional outlook**: Does the job-seeker tell the story with sufficient passion so that it conveys a real sense of the applicant and how he or she might fit in with the employer’s organization?

Keeping in mind that a successful example/story must be true and told in context, consider these ideas for story-framing so your collection of stories comes from various perspectives (the first four come from Annette Simmons’ 2006 book, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through Storytelling*, Cambridge, MA, Basic Books, while the next five come from Quintessential Careers contributor Joe Turner):

- A time in your life when this skill/characteristic was tested.
- A person/event in your life that taught you the importance of this skill/characteristic.
- A time when you failed to live up to this skill/characteristic and decided never to let it happen again.
- A movie/story/book/event that exemplifies this skill/characteristic for you.

- A turning point in your development of this skill/characteristic.
- A crisis in your life or job and how you responded or recovered from it.
- A time where you functioned as part of a team and what your contribution was.
- A time in your career or job where you had to overcome stress.
- A time in your job where you provided successful leadership or a sense of direction.
- A failure that occurred in your job and how did you overcome it.
- A story about tasks and job functions related to this skill/characteristic.
- A timeline of how you developed and sharpened this skill/characteristic.
- An example from your personal life (as opposed to career) of deploying this skill/characteristic.
- Patterns that have emerged in your development of this skill/characteristic.
- Results you’ve achieved through using this skill/characteristic.
- Lessons you’ve learned while developing and using this skill/characteristic.
- Ways you’ve applied this skill/characteristic in diverse situations.

Following are examples of stories that use some of these frameworks:

I have learned that my role is to do work that makes a difference in people’s lives. For the first 20 years, I worked in television news, believing in the people’s right to know. For the past six years, I’ve been in education, helping teachers and their students. My ultimate goal is to be head of a department. *(Recognizes a characteristic that has become a career pattern).*

I realized I had solid problem-solving skills during my freshmen year after I went to the soup kitchen in Parkersburg to serve food to the less fortunate. I felt that I needed to do something more, so I had an idea that when everybody moved out of the dorms at the end of a semester, instead of throwing nonperishable food away, students could put it in a box, and I would take it to the...
local food bank so it could feed the poor. I ended up gathering about six carloads of canned and dry food that would have been thrown away. (Describes a skill honed in personal life rather than career).

My leadership skills were called into question by my first evaluation as a district manager. I was rated much lower than I had ever been rated. I realized that, after having been promoted into a new position, I needed to learn a lot more. Determined to never again get a low rating, I learned as much as I possibly could, and this quest for knowledge became the driving force behind my attaining the high rating I achieved for this year. (Describes failure to live up to skill/characteristic and determination never to let it happen again).

I solve problems every day in my job, but one recent example I had that truly tested my problem-solving skills involved a woman who called me to question why we refunded part of her premium to her. She’s a new policy-holder who was quoted $2,900 for an annual premium and paid that amount, but in the computer, her annual premium was about $2,500, so we refunded her the difference. My first hunch was she received a discount for paying in full, but when I calculated the discount percent, it was not adding up. After about two or three iterations of trying various combinations of discounts, I still was unable to figure out why the quote and actual premium were different and figured I was not looking for the right root cause. I decided to manually price her policy from the ground up, and during the process I happened to notice her birthday on her application was written ambiguously and could have been interpreted as 1925 or 1928. I calculated quotes for both ages and realized the reason for the difference. I honored the lower rate since the payment transactions were fully completed. (Describes a time when skill was tested).

As an undergrad, I took a course on argument and advocacy and learned a very important concept called Tooling Modeling, which is a logical way of thinking with three parts: claim, grounds, and warrant. The claim is your point; the grounds consists of your proof, evidence, or backing; and your warrant is your logical leap that connects the two. The theory is naturally a little more complicated than that, but this way of thinking has been my bible for rational thought and was the single most valuable lesson I learned in college. I use this way of thinking when I am presented with problems that require decisions. I structure a rational, logical argument for each likely outcome. I can therefore see where weaknesses exist, either in the grounds or the warrant. I conduct a bump-and- compare between arguments to see which are the strongest, and I go with the most durable argument. I also take a practical approach to decision-making in that I try to find out best outcome for the least price or cost. (Describes a turning point/event event that taught the importance of skill/characteristic).

I have always had a fascination for how machines work, and whenever my family and I went on holiday, I would always try and get the window-seat on the plane, if only to watch the flaps and air-brakes in action during takeoff and landing. As I continued my education, I felt a compulsion to use my degree in a people-oriented profession. So, while I love machines, I’d like to contribute my engineering skills in a company that affects people’s lives positively. I just like helping people. (Identifies a strength from the past that led to developing this skill/characteristic.)

More examples of stories that illustrate skills and characteristics:

TEAM LEADERSHIP
I found myself applying to my university because my cross-country coach told me not to. He advised me to take the free-ride cross-country scholarship to another school. I reasoned that academics and cross-country would be too much for me to handle there. So I applied to my current university because I felt I could compete comfortably while also excelling in my academics. My high-school coach was not too thrilled. He said, “You are making the biggest mistake of your life.” He went on to tell me that the other college had a better cross-country department, and I would be running with a nationally ranked team. I challenged my coach and told him that with leadership and devotion, any team can be nationally ranked. Of course he laughed at my statement and restated that I was making a mistake.

Once I enrolled at my chosen school, I saw that my coach had been correct about the facilities and the character of the people on the team. The team members were not motivated, not athletic, and needless to say, lost every race they entered. Three other freshman that had walked onto the team joined me in deciding to change the team members’ attitudes. However, animosity was abundant between the upperclassman and the freshman. While we won races, the upperclassman felt inferior, causing internal conflict in the team. Regardless, I was determined to persuade the team to mesh well to create unity.
Consequently, the upperclassmen quit the team. Still, after winning our state title, we advanced to the national level, where we were expected to compete against the college my coach had wanted me to attend. We won the meet against that school, beating them out of a third-place medal. The moral of this story is that when I was challenged to do the impossible, my devotion, character, team leadership, and tenacity persevered, while also helping the team.

GOAL-SETTING
I grew up in a poor, broken home, yet decided that golf was my great passion in life. I creatively used my meager resources to buy golf clubs and later a junior membership for $180 at a local club. Every day for two years, I walked through the woods to the golf course where I would play, practice, and compete throughout high school. I eventually got a job at the club so I could buy myself a few necessities. I wanted to play in college but was nowhere near the player I needed to compete or even get on the team. So over the summer before college, I worked on my golf game to the point where I won almost every tournament I entered. I spent every hour I had during the day to make myself a better all-around player. I eventually walked on my freshman year and was exempted from qualifying because I played so well in my first outing. Through the years my decision to play golf has influenced every part of my life 100 percent. I didn’t give up on a dream, and although I am not competing with Tiger, I realized all of the good decisions I made were based on the fact that I loved the game, but better yet, didn’t give up on a goal.

WORK ETHIC
My stepfather was a role model and a strong influence in my life. He taught me about character; he taught me the tough lessons in life that some people learn too late or not at all. In one instance, he taught me the value of standing up for yourself. When the kids in his family (the "stepfamily") failed to accept me, he advised me that I would have to take the initiative to learn how to handle situations in which people passively exclude me – that I would have to do something that could get their attention. I soon learned to gather a couple of people and start up a card game or another fun activity to direct the focus on the activity instead of clashing personalities. I later realized that through this process, I had learned creative techniques to influence group dynamics. In another situation, he taught me the value of hard work. After volunteering to do yard work one day, I got tired of the project after mowing the lawn. Hot, sweaty, and tired, I started to leave before the project was done, and he told me I couldn’t leave. After several hours of pulling weeds, watering, weed-whacking, fertilizing, trimming, and prepping flower beds while my father supervised from his comfortable lawn chair in the shade, I had learned that completing only a portion of a project is not acceptable when completion is expected; that there usually is a lot more work that goes on in the background of a finished product; that there will always be someone in that comfortable lawn chair watching others work – and that I wanted to be a supervisor in life.

DECISION-MAKING
When I was a receptionist at a photography company, a man came in claiming to be the father of a student who was there to pick up the student’s pictures. I asked him for identification, and he said that he had forgotten it. Normally, if the student is present with the parent and verifies that it is the correct parent, then we give the pictures to them. That wasn’t the case here. There was no student. I refused to give him the pictures, and he became angry and left. Later that day, a different man came in to pick up those same pictures. This man had photo identification with him, and I told him about what had occurred earlier that day. He told me that his child was being stalked, and that the family had a restraining order against that man. I took the stalkers image from our security cameras and posted a picture behind the counter that indicated that he was not to have any contact with the pictures of that student. My decision-making skills helped prevent a dangerous situation because he has continued repeatedly to come into the store posing to other employees as the parent of that student.

CUSTOMER SERVICE
As a Customer Service Rep for a video-rental company, I once had an irate rental company, I once had an irate
customer who left three messages on my voicemail in about 10 minutes demanding a call back. I contacted the customer, who was now even angrier because I had been in a meeting when her call came in. I listened to the customer explain that she was upset because she had purchased a loyalty program membership from us, and then several days later, we were giving away the same memberships at no cost. I apologized to the customer and asked her how I could help. She stated that she wanted her money back and she would no longer be a member. I agreed to refund her money. I then bought her a thank you card and enclosed her refund and a free membership to our loyalty program. I also noticed that several times during the phone conversation, she had stopped to yell at her children, so I also enclosed two coupons for free kids’ rentals. I thanked her for her business, apologized for not meeting her expectations, and invited her to bring her children in for a free video rental. I also enclosed my business card and asked her to call me directly if she was ever disappointed in any way while visiting one of our locations. She telephoned me when she received the card and told me that was the nicest thing any person had ever done for her when she was upset with a business. I again thanked her for her business and told her that she was my bread and butter. If she wasn’t happy, then I couldn’t be either!
Chapter 3: Guidelines for Preparing for Behavioral Interviews

Behavioral interviews are said to be difficult to prepare for because the variety of questions that could be asked is immense – and there is some truth to that – but some simple guidelines can help you get up to speed. Career expert Doris Flaherty notes, “while it is true that you can never know for certain what questions you may be asked in an interview, that is no reason to not prepare! The more you have considered relevant examples of work-related skills and behaviors from your past experiences, the more likely you are to present yourself in a confident, professional manner, and the less likely you are to slip up and share something you wish you hadn’t!”

“When explaining how to prepare for the behavioral interview,” Flaherty continues, “I tell people to consider some of the main competency areas that employers are likely to ask about and come up with specific examples of themselves demonstrating these in the past. Work, activities, volunteer experiences . . . it is all fair game in locating these real-life examples. I encourage them to recall both successes and failures, as they may be asked to share either.”

Following are some guidelines for developing examples/stories:

• **Your response needs to be specific and detailed.** Candidates who tell the interviewer about particular situations that relate to each question will be far more effective and successful than those who respond in general terms. For example, take the following question and response:

  **Question:** “Describe a situation that required a number of things to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?”

  **Response:** “In my current job, I have to handle multiple responsibilities in developing new projects, maintaining existing ones, and maintaining good client relations. I allocate a certain amount of time for each area daily. That way clients can see very clearly that projects are progressing, and I have more satisfaction in accomplishing multiple tasks under pressure.” It’s not a bad response in that it has good details and targets the multi-tasking skill the employer wants to know about. But it does not relate to a specific incident, so the interviewee could compose a better response.

• **Think of your responses as stories.** Your response should provide an example in story form of the behavior the interviewer is asking about. As you can probably guess from the nature of the questions asked, you must provide specific examples.

• **Become a great storyteller in your interviews, but be careful not to ramble.** Briefly describe the situation, what specific action you took to have an effect on the situation, and the positive result or outcome. Frame it in a multi-step process using one of several acronym-based formulas that experts have established structuring responses as examples/stories. These formulas are covered in greater detail later in this chapter, but the most basic of them are referred to as S-A-R, P-A-R, C-A-R, or S-T-A-R: 1. situation (or situation + task, challenge, problem), 2. action, 3. result/outcome.

• **Your examples/stories should be relatively recent.** Ideally, they will be from your current or most recent job. Employers want to know what you’ve done lately that could benefit their organization. If you are a college student, they will be from a job, internship, class project, extracurricular activity, sport, or other aspect of your life in college – not from your high-school days. The interviewer may even specify a recent example – say, from the last year.

• **Compose stories that come from a variety of aspects of your life and career; don’t focus on just one job or activity, for example.** If you are a college student, don’t limit your examples to, for instance, only those that come out of your experience as an officer in your fraternity. Use examples from jobs, volunteer work, sports, schoolwork, team participation, community service, hobbies, and other aspects of your life as well. In addition, you may use examples of special accomplishments, whether personal or professional, such as scoring the winning touchdown, being elected president of your Greek organization, winning a prize for your artwork, surfing a big wave, or raising money for
charity. Established candidates can take most of their examples from their jobs but add occasional stories from other areas of their lives.

- **Be sure to make clear what your role was in the success or accomplishment you describe.** You will often be asked about your experiences working as part of a team. Other times, you will use team projects as examples even when the question isn’t directly about teamwork. In both cases, you’ll be tempted to credit the team for the accomplishment. After all, if you were in the presence of the other team members, you wouldn’t want to hog all the credit for yourself. But your team members won’t be with you in the interview, so you need to toot your own horn and spotlight the contribution you made to the team’s success. For example, this story tells of a team accomplishment, but make’s the teller’s leadership role clear:

My company was struggling with scheduling employees, monitoring their time and attendance, as well as tying these elements into payroll. We needed a system, preferably online, that would make these tasks more efficient, save time, and reduce errors. When management decided to go with an outside vendor for the new system, they chose me to head up the project team. We were on a tight, two-month deadline, but I led the team to surpass not only the deadline, but the expected results. Under my guidance, we got the vendor’s system online so successfully that we reduced payroll discrepancies by 25 percent. Since we’ve operationalized it, the company has saved time in scheduling employees and resolving timesheet-related issues; in fact, these processes take half the time they used to. By customizing reports to track labor and benefits allocation, we also cut time spent on reports by a quarter. We did such a great job and made the functions so much more efficient that the vendor recognized us with its Certificate for Management’s Commitment for Successful Implementation and Design Contribution to Improve Efficiencies.

- **Wherever possible, quantify your accomplishments and successes.** Numbers and percentages always impress employers.

- **Many behavioral questions try to get at how you responded to negative situations;** you’ll need to have examples of negative experiences ready, but try to choose negative experiences that you made the best of or – better yet, those that had positive outcomes.
Chapter 4: Strategies for Formulating Behavioral Interview Response Stories

Story Formulas

Career experts have developed myriad formulas and clever acronyms for how to structure stories in the job search. These formulas have in common the idea of setting the scene for your story by describing the situation, problem, or challenge you faced, explaining what action you took to address the situation, solving the problem or meeting the challenge, and explaining the result of your actions. Results expressed quantitatively, in numbers and percents, for example, are especially effective. An optional inclusion is the learning you gained from this experience. Some of the common formulas and acronyms (with their originators in parentheses) follow:

- SAR: Situation, Action, Result
- CAR: Challenge, Action, Result
- CCAR: Context, Challenge, Action, Result (Kathryn Troutman)
- PAR: Problem, Action Result
- PARLA: Problem, Action, Result, Learning, Application (Donald Asher)
- SCARQ: Situation, Challenge, Action, Results-Quantified (Steve Gallison)
- SHARE: Situation, Hindrance, Action, Results, Evaluation (Fred Coon)
- SIA: Situation, Impact, Analysis
- SMART: Situation with Metrics (or Situation and More), Actions, Results, Tie-in (Susan Britton Whitcomb)
- SOAR: Situation, Obstacle, Action, Result
- STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result

Let’s first look at one of the most commonly cited and basic formulas, STAR:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation or Task</th>
<th>Action you took</th>
<th>Results you achieved</th>
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<td>Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, from a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.</td>
<td>Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did – not the efforts of the team. Don’t tell what you might do, tell what you did.</td>
<td>What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?</td>
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Example STAR story

**Situation:** Our company had just won a major outsourcing contract, resulting in spinning off 2,600 employees into a subsidiary within the parent organization.

**Task:** The company needed to develop an entire set of HR processes for this new subsidiary.

**Action:** I identified and developed all the processes, and then I created a resource intranet site containing powerful text and visuals illustrating the final version of all processes. I used the intranet site as the basis of a comprehensive training program for the spin-off company’s HR team.

**Result:** The site became an ongoing reference tool to use long after the training. Having a documented process has been a valuable tool for the HR team. Corporate auditors can clearly see that we have defined and followed our processes.

Here are examples of each of the other formulas:

**CAR: Challenge, Action, Result**

**Challenge:** In my last leadership role, we had a challenge with our receiving process. It would take five shipping-and-receiving associates about two days to process an average-sized shipment. I quickly recognized that with the holidays approaching, the size of our shipments would double; and our process had to change.

**Action:** First, I addressed the overall stockroom organization and completely overhauled it. I collaborated with my stockroom manager to organize and label all products in every row. I directed rows to be organized by type of product. We were then able to sort boxes of product as they came off the trucks according to which row they went into. We had stockroom associates in each row and a runner who could carry boxes of product to their designated row.

**Result:** Receiving time was cut from two to three days to less than six hours from the time the truck hit the dock.

**CCAR: Context, Challenge, Action, Result**

**Context:** After Hurricane Katrina, our company was down for weeks.

**Challenge:** My subordinates are commissioned employees who still needed to collect a paycheck. Our print shop was up and running; however, the post office was not equipped to handle bulk mail, which is how our newspaper is distributed on Wednesdays. On weekends, our paper is distributed to stores. At this time we were doing neither.

**Action:** I suggested to the publisher that we distribute the paper to stores on Wednesdays. We all collaborated to come up with selling points for advertisers; for example, offering special discount to roofers, carpenters, and lawn-maintenance businesses in our services-offered advertising section.

**Result:** Revenue started flowing again, and my team members got paid.

**PAR: Problem, Action Result**

**Problem:** My marketing plan for the admissions office of my college included placing some advertising in national print media, but we didn’t have the financial resources to make that happen.

**Action:** I knew that one of our corporate partners wanted to promote its diversity initiatives. I proposed we develop a print advertising campaign co-branding the recruiting message.

**Result:** The final pieces delivered dual messages of recruitment for prospective students and recruitment/placement of potential diverse employees. Through this campaign, both messages were successfully received with increased admission interest and placement at the company. The project also launched more advertising initiatives at the school.

**PARLA: Problem, Action, Result, Learning, Application**

**Problem:** During my Peace Corps experience as a volunteer in Guatemala, absolutely nothing ever went right. From no water and electricity for three weeks to getting to the health center on time by foot, donkey ride, and a canoe – to weighing a baby on a fish scale, hanging the scale from a thatched roof, and the roof coming down on me. Or putting on a conference in rural Guatemala and only one nurse shows up, and only briefly, too!

**Action:** I adjusted my attitude. I learned to adapt to conditions unlike anything I was accustomed to. I made up my mind to embrace the reality of life in Guatemala and the needs of those I served.

**Result:** Despite the frustrations, I began to make a difference in people’s lives. For example, along with my team, I helped to ensure that more native children received inoculations against disease. The next time I put on a conference, I had learned enough about communicating with the local population to assure better attendance.

**Learning:** I learned that expectations sometimes lead to disappointment and that I need to keep my expectations realistic. I bring that philosophy to all aspects of my life, especially blind dates, and live by the divine principle that everything happens for a reason, and 99 percent of the time, it is to learn a life lesson from it.
Application: Now, when I facilitate a meeting of professionals, and certain individuals show up and some do not, I don’t get upset as much because the energy of those who attend enhances my facilitation and helps me learn.

SAR: Situation, Action, Result

Situation: Recently my firm was facing a huge turnover problem, especially in our technical staff because of lack of growth within the organization. No defined path was shared with the employees. To address the situation, I not only had a huge task of defining grades and identifying and compartmentalizing our employees’ growth needs but also a race against time.

Action: I knew the tasks would be time consuming, but I set a deadline for each piece. I aggressively collected information on the employee growth needs by sending questionnaires via emails and reaching out to the workforce. I compiled the data and determined short-term and long-term achievable goals. I developed a small-projects subset of the bigger project. I designed a system so that we could track each other’s project and meet every day. The most prominent finding was lack of challenge at work. I decided to implement a leadership program, effectively identifying the top 10 to 25 percent of workers suitable for the program based on the performance reviews, peer-reviews, and qualifications. I set an aggressive target of 15 days each for each zone to complete this part of the survey.

Result: I met the deadlines, and by the end of a second month, we were ready with the budget for the training program, targeted pilot training group, location, and a trainer selected. We rolled out our first training on effective leadership, and by the end of the quarter, data showed that employees were now engaged and challenged. As a result, turnover was cut in half.

And another sample S-A-R story:

Situation: Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, the Stetson Reporter, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

Action: I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of Reporter circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set-up a special training session for the account executives with a School of Business Administration professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

Result: We signed contracts with 15 former advertisers for daily ads and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20 percent over the same period last year.

SCARQ: Situation, Challenge, Action, Result, Quantified

Situation: I had recently changed stores and become the new store’s manager.

Challenge: The store had never had engaged in community involvement or support and therefore had a rather tarnished image at the corporate level because the company is very committed to giving back to the community. Action: I met with my staff and challenged them to come up with a relatively high-profile idea that would help the community. Under my leadership, the staff and I decided to raise money to buy high-tech fire helmets that would allow fire fighters to see through the smoke.

Result: We met our fund-raising goal and earned a lot of positive press in the local community.

Quantified: The $10,000 we raised was more money than had ever been raised by any store in the chain.

SHARE: Situation, Hindrance, Action, Results, Evaluation

Situation: A major bicycle corporation had been trying to collaborate with the state bicycling organization to create and establish a 25-unit bike path signage program.

Hindrance: Because no one really knew how to get the program off the ground, it had been stalled for three years with no action.

Action: I joined the committee overseeing the project and immediately brought a fresh perspective to the group. I researched signs I saw in another community and talked with manufacturers in the field. I ensured competitive pricing for the signs and suggested solutions for weather protection and anti-graffiti measures.

Results: The sign program was implemented just six months after I joined the committee.
Evaluation: I see these signs everywhere I go, and it gives me joy to see them. They bear testimony to my ability to execute a vision and get things done.

SIA: Situation, Impact, Analysis

Situation: Before I started in my most recent position, the city was paying a block premium rate to keep insurance companies in the black. When I came on board, I sought and demanded a full eligibility audit on enrollment figures.

Impact: This sole action generated immediate cost savings in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. I received public recognition for this action by the mayor and before the city council. I also discovered that other standard cost-containment strategies were never incorporated into benefit plans, which always made the city the primary carrier. I introduced a policy that eliminated this practice, which also positively impacted the city’s benefit cost outlays.

Analysis: Having gotten these costs under control, I could focus on optimizing benefits packages for city employees.

SMART: Situation and More, Action, Results, Tie-in

Situation and More: When I worked as a data-entry examiner in health-insurance claims, I was measured on two metrics, production and quality. My production was excellent; I keyed as much as 180 percent above expectations. However, my quality, as measured by keystroke error was always dipping below the 98.5 percent level of acceptance, and I was not satisfied with that performance.

Action: I started to look for ways to work smarter. I learned to develop the habit of copying and pasting quickly. I developed macros and hot keys for repetitive keystrokes, and I trained myself to slow down when I started keying complicated information such as letter and number combinations.

Result: As a result of these improvements, my manager and I both observed a steady increase in my quality; I began to hit 100 percent every month.

Tie-in (which SMART originator Susan Britton Whitcomb describes as a theme or pattern that can link to key components the employer seeks, as well as communicate enthusiasm or job knowledge): This result set a pattern for my career in which I never had to settle for less than exceptional performance because I knew I could always find ways to improve.

SOAR: Situation, Obstacle, Action, Result

Situation: I once received a call from a patient who had a brain tumor for which he needed a very expensive and hard-to-get medication. In addition, he was having all sorts of insurance billing problems. He was literally driving from pharmacy to pharmacy looking to see which one had the medication in stock, but he had no luck.

Obstacle: I called a couple of pharmacies for him and was able to locate one; however, its satellite link went down, and the pharmacy refused to dispense the medication without successfully billing the patient’s insurance company electronically. Normally we have nurses on call 24/7 for emergencies like this; however, I knew a company nurse would have told the patient to pay the several thousand dollars at the initial pharmacy I had found and seek reimbursement. There is no contingency for patients who don’t have the money.

Action: After a very exhaustive search, I located a specialty drug supplier that agreed to have the medication delivered by private carrier overnight. I gave the patient my personal cell number and asked him to call me if he did not receive his medication within 24 hours.

Result: A day later, I received a call from the patient’s mother, thanking me for helping her son get the medication he needed for his brain tumor.

Another possible formula for telling stories in an interview is what scholars Sandra Morgan and Robert Dennehy describe as “the traditional framework of universal steps displayed in myths, hero stories, classic fairy tales, ethnic stories, and many of your own family stories.” The authors cite these “five sequential components” in a good story: (a) setting, (b) build-up (“trouble’s coming”), (c) crisis or climax, (d) learning, and (e) new behavior or awareness; in other words, “What did you learn?” and “How did you change?”

Setting: One of my customers wanted to get involved with digital printing, and since I knew our company had the technology and the capabilities, I set up a meeting to discuss this new technology.

Build-up: I pulled all the sales sheets from the intranet, gathered up samples, and prepared for my big opportunity. As I prepared, I made an initial call to the VP of Sales for that particular business unit and let him know I had set this meeting to discuss the digital products.

Crisis or climax: What I did not know was that the customer was eager to proceed with this technology. The morning of the meeting, the customer had called in its own clients to lay out the project and launch date. As I walked into the meeting and the questions started, I knew I needed some help.

Learning: I explained to the group that I wanted to get the correct answers to these
technical questions and would they mind if I brought in the VP of that division. After a few minutes, I was able to track down the VP, and we succeeded in pulling together the resources and staff to immediately start working on this project.

The reps from the client company were very impressed with the fact that I admitted I did not have all the answers and that I wanted to make sure they received the right information. I learned that it’s best to be forthcoming and not try to fake my way through an important meeting or presentation. New behavior or awareness: We are now producing monthly programs for this client using the digital print technology, and revenue for 2005 was $100,000 and projected at $200,000 for 2006. I’ve subsequently made it a point to anticipate contingencies better than I did in that situation – but also to know that I can bring in other resources when I have gaps in my knowledge.

For Easy Retrieval from Your Brain’s Database, Give Your Stories a Title

To flush out key accomplishments from her clients, resume writer and job-search Coach Norine Dagliano encourages them to tell her specific stories, guiding them through the SOAR or STAR process. Among the questions she asks to trigger these stories are these:
• What was challenging about that job?
• How have things changed from the time you took the position (or joined the company) to the present?

Dagliano teaches clients how to create an “interview cheat sheet.” She asks them to draw a big “T” on a sheet of paper. On the left side of the “T,” clients write the word “Skill” and on the right side, the word “Story.” Dagliano then guides them through the job posting or job description they are targeting to pick out key skills mentioned. She also instructs them to go through their resume to pick out the key skills that they want to talk about in the interview. They then list all these skills on the left side of the “T.”

Dagliano next coaches clients through the process of thinking through a story to illustrate how they used each skill they have listed – again using the SOAR process. Once they have developed the details of their stories, Dagliano advises them to give their story a title (using as few words as possible) and write that title on the right side of the “T” on their cheat sheet.

“Once they have the stories worked out,” Dagliano says, “they will be ready to answer almost any interview question that comes their way. To prove it, I ask a few typical – and some not so typical – interview questions and coach them on how to use elements of the story in answering. I encourage them to take the cheat sheet to the interview with them and have it with the notepad where they take notes during the interview.”

Dagliano notes that our brains have a remarkable ability to locate things in a pinch as long as we have “told” the brain where we have filed them. Dagliano says that if clients draw a blank on how to answer a question, by merely glancing down at their cheat sheet and seeing the story title, their brains will quickly retrieve the details of the story and the best answer.

So, how many of these stories do you need? Well, certainly at least many as the number of skills you’ve identified. A minimum is around six to eight examples from your past experience that demonstrated top behaviors and skills that employers typically seek (think in terms of examples that will exploit your top selling points). Twenty stories would be even better.

I advise that half your examples should be totally positive, such as accomplishments or meeting goals. The other half should be situations that started out negatively but either ended positively or you made the best of the outcome.

To cram for a behavioral interview right before you’re interviewed, in addition to reviewing your story collection, review your resume. Seeing your achievements in print will jog your memory.

In the interview, listen carefully to each question, and pull an example out of your bag of tricks that provides an appropriate description of how you demonstrated the desired behavior. With practice, you can learn to tailor a relatively small set of examples to respond to a number of different behavioral questions.

Once you’ve snagged the job, keep a record of achievements and accomplishments so you’ll be ready with more great examples the next time you go on a behavior interview.
I had a long-term goal to become an excellent program manager. I applied myself in developmental positions and learned the ins and outs of the organization from the bottom up. I got to know the staff and managers well. I volunteered for projects and to enhance and streamline the existing workflow. In doing so, I had an opportunity to apply for a temporary management position and obtained it. Through four years in this acting position, I strived to continuously learn and improve processes and policies. I have brought forward many success stories that have been recognized by the corporation and have earned several awards for these achievements.

My first few years in banking had me on the fast track to branch management. I realized at some point along the way that my true passion was in offering financial advice not limited to checking accounts and loans. It was at that point that I made arrangements to go back to school full-time to pursue my goal, which I am just about to achieve.

Attending my college has been a dream of mine since I was 7 years old. Twenty years later, after a few detours, I completed my Associate of Arts degree and applied to my university as a transfer student. I will never forget the call I received from Ginger in the admissions office telling me that I had been accepted! I was elated! But there was one problem. My husband is an active-duty soldier, and I had to somehow convince the US Army to move us from our current duty station to somewhere closer to my school, not an easy task. My husband requested to be placed on special duty as a recruiter and subsequently was, but we still had to get placed near my school. First, I spoke with a sergeant who was a recruiter near the school who said he could assist us in getting stationed in the area, but I soon learned he had no control over where people were placed. But I didn’t let that roadblock stop me. I then wrote a letter to the sergeant in charge of regional recruiting to request his assistance. After a week of no response, I sent a letter to the general in charge of ALL recruiting. I then contacted my congressman to request that he write a letter to the army on my behalf. The congressman was happy to help. About a week later, the congressman called to tell me that my letters had made their way to the Pentagon and to call Ginger and let her know I would be attending school in the fall! I was elated!

The summer before my senior year of college, I moved to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.
Coast to live with my aunt and uncle. I wanted to get away from my annual routine, experience a new place, and make some money. My uncle is a general contractor and builds high-end custom homes for various people in the Gulf area. That summer I was employed as a general laborer, and it was the hardest physical work I have ever endured for the lowest amount of pay I have ever earned. I met some rough men and had to deal with a daily barrage of insults and derogatory language. However, I worked through the 104-degree days in 90 percent humidity. It was a learning experience. Although the work was hard, and the company was unpleasant, I learned a lot. I learned to work hard, but to look at the bigger picture. I never thought about quitting and going home, although it was always an option. I stuck it out, made some friends, and made some money. I had made a goal and made it happen. My summer in Mississippi made me better.

Give me an example of how you’ve demonstrated persistence.

I volunteer for Big Brothers/Big Sisters. I was very eager to meet first my “little sister,” but nothing prepared me for what I would be up against. Libby was a 10-year-old second grader whom I had to teach to read. When I met her, she seemed very nice, but she turned out to be one tough customer. Libby really didn’t like to read and would try any way possible to avoid it. During our first couple of meetings, I let her pick out the books that we would read. I didn’t notice that Libby was fooling me. It took until the third week of our meetings for me to finally notice that she had memorized the books that we were “reading.” I was shocked but quickly decided that I would pick out the books during our meetings. Week after week, I would visit her, and she would think up a way to get out of reading. During our hour-long meetings, we would read and play a game. I was determined to help her learn how to read, no matter what this crafty second grader could think up. It took weeks of long games, finding deeply buried toys in the playground sand, and searches for her “missing” book bag, before she gave up. Finally, we picked up the books again, just as we had all those weeks before. This time when she scanned the pages, she was amazed to find that she could read.

Learning how to become a better rider and trainer. At 16, I had been working at the ranch for two summers and was given my first horse to personally train. Training a horse can be extremely difficult and potentially a very dangerous process. This big, beautiful two-year-old quarter horse was all my responsibility. Every day I worked with her, starting by teaching her to walk, stop, go, and turn on a lead line. This process was grueling because it takes time and a lot of patience. After a few weeks of ground training, she seemed ready for a saddle and rider, but she would buck, spin, and jump to try and throw me off. Day in and day out, I worked with her, and every time I would get bucked off, I would pick myself up, no matter how hard it hurt, and get back on her. She taught me persistence and patience, and I learned a lot more about myself through this experience. It took three months for her to become a perfectly behaved, wonderful riding horse. I had bruises, scars, and near-death experiences, but this experience has changed my life forever. What I learned in training this horse has carried on into every aspect of my life.

Tell me about a time you came up with an innovative solution to a problem.

During the Y2K project I led in 1999, our area had a power outage at approximately 10:40 p.m. New Year’s Eve that threatened to shut down our systems at the midnight hour – which was abjectly critical for Y2K. I instructed our lead technician to pull the battery backups from the cafeteria refrigerators for use in our server room, which at the time did not have an individual backup power system. The power outage lasted until nearly 3 a.m., but our use of the battery backups saved 100 percent of our rolled data. Although using the backups caused all dairy products in the refrigerators to spoil, the cost of restocking the dairy products was later determined to be less than 2 percent of the projected customer data loss to the business had we not used my solution.

The trucks at the retail store at which I worked as an assistant manager came loaded by personnel at a distribution center, box-by-box. After receiving a few trucks, I noticed that my employees were unloading broken merchandise that took a lot of time to clean up before the rest of the truck could be finished. The broken glass, paint, or whatever material it was prevented the employees from proceeding farther into the truck, causing more person-hours than normal. I noticed that the merchandise was broken because heavier boxes were on top of lighter boxes. After a couple of days of this situation, with productivity decreasing,
I learned that the rest of the stores in my district faced the same problem. As a result, I asked each store to take pictures of the mess so the distribution centers could see exactly what was happening. I also asked each one to write down how many additional person-hours it took to clean up the mess. We gathered this information for a four-week period, we had a pretty good estimate of how much the company was losing — approximately $9.50 per person-hour, an average of $125 per store times 15 stores times 30 nights a month, amounting to a substantial sum. I took the information to my district manager. Once he realized how much money his district was losing each month because of broken merchandise in the trucks, he contacted his regional manager, and the trucks after that were loaded more carefully. The district made our Profit and Loss the next month by a 9 percent increase.

My older brother is deaf. Growing up, his deafness made our relationship very challenging and complicated. It goes without saying that siblings should be able to communicate on a certain level. During my childhood I had to overcome obstacles that other kids didn’t. In addition to emotional struggles of coping with having a deaf brother, I had to find a new form of communication to break this language barrier. While the rest of my family used a new form of deaf communication called cued speech, my brother and I solely communicated by reading each other’s lips and talking with no voice. While I was given obvious options for how to solve the communication problem, I decided to choose something completely different and unique, something that my brother to this day still appreciates and finds exciting. Not only has this approach brought my brother and me closer, the experience and the way my brother and I now interact has shown how I overcame this adversity and broke the social norms of the deaf community. My brother is a very independent and driven person; however, to this day I have been able to sustain good communication with him.

When I hosted a radio talk show, I prepared material for an interview with a state senate candidate only to find out when he arrived that he would not discuss any issues in my prepared material. I literally had to conduct an hour-long one-on-one interview using only the knowledge I had off the top of my head. Knowing I couldn’t carry an entire show with little material to work from, I broke format 10 minutes into the broadcast and turned the show into a live call-in and built upon questions from those posed by listeners. The subject, who went on to become a state senator, thoroughly enjoyed the hour, gave me special considerations for coverage later in the campaign and granted me primary access for his first in-seat interview.

**Give me an example of a time you had to rise to the occasion and take on new responsibilities.**

Two summers ago my father, who was the backbone of my family, had a massive stroke and was left partially paralyzed. This happened just a few short months before I was supposed to start attending college, and at the time I didn’t know if I ever would go to school. My dad put me in charge of his online business, which I had known very little about. I turned into the sole provider for my family overnight. I spent my days on the computer by my father’s hospital bed, very thankful that I could work and still stay by his side. My father kept getting better and better and eventually went back to work for himself. In a very short time, I realized that taking care of your family is the most important thing you can do, and to do so, you need to work hard and succeed so that you can provide them with everything they need. **Tell me about a time you made the best of a negative situation.**

During my first spring break as a college student, I was helping one of my friends from high school move to a new place. While I was there for the weekend, I did something that was extremely irresponsible. I received a ticket for racing. I had never before gotten into any major trouble. My drive home to tell my parents what I had done was the longest drive I have ever had to make. After explaining to them what happened and being ordered to perform 250 hours of community service by the court, I felt like burying myself. I did not want to see the light of day. However, instead of feeling down and out, I was determined to repay my debt to the
community and rebuild my reputation. For the entire summer, I worked outside in the heat throwing away furniture and odds and ends at a thrift store for six to seven hours a day, six days a week. I not only repaid my debt, but I also lost 45 pounds while working in the heat and working out at the YMCA every day during the summer. Thanks to this experience, I improved myself mentally and physically.

When I was in the third grade my mother decided to start up her own restaurant and bar. The business took up a lot of her time. She would go into work at 8 a.m. and then come home around 2 a.m. the next morning. When my father was transferred to another city, my mother decided to stay behind and take care of the business. The only way my brother and I got to see my mother was when I began getting into a lot of trouble at home and at school. I was in my 10th grade year in high school, I was expelled from school. I was sent to an “alternative school,” which did not provide any classes to actually further my education, so I stopped going. My parents began to home-school me, and during the summer of my 10th-grade year, I began taking college classes. I realized that high school was not for me, and at the beginning of the next year, I enrolled full-time in community college. I learned at this point that it takes hard work, dedication, and determination to succeed. Over the next year and a half, I earned my associate’s degree at just 17. From there I transferred to a four-year university, where the same values paid off.

Tell me about a time you had to sell or persuade someone on an idea of yours.

The business team had a very tight deadline for getting FDA approval for a line extension of a newly marketed pharmaceutical product. The team wanted to do something very quickly, focusing only on efficacy and safety and not including any outcomes. I convinced the team to include some outcomes related to convenience, satisfaction, and sleep quality. I had to convince them that this information was critical for us to gain market access, especially related to managed-care formularies. The FDA approved the line extension.

Annually, a year-end tournament capped off lessons at my tennis club. However, students had started losing interest in the tournament. Three years ago, I figured out a way to motivate the kids to play in the tournament by making it much more age-friendly. I suggested to the head coach that we all pitch in to buy prizes for the students and trophies for the winners and have other games and exercises going on while the tournament took place. The result was a 40 percent increase in participants and a significant increase in the crowds of family and friends that came out to watch. In one of my marketing classes, we had to read case studies of problematic business scenarios, evaluate them, and tell what changes we would make in the way the company was managed. The cases were very confusing, and students had a hard time separating issues. I went to my professor to suggest role-playing the characters in the cases and proceed as if it were real life – to give students a better understanding. At first she snubbed my idea and thought that students would not take it seriously. However, I was very persistent. I told her that since I am a very visual learner and knew that it would help me, I therefore felt the approach could make a difference in the class. She still refused. I then asked her to give me just one case to try my idea. I said that I would take one of the roles, and a volunteer could take
another. I said that if the idea failed, I would never mention it again. She gave me my chance, and it worked! My idea grabbed the attention of the class. Instead of reading the boring cases and going around the room sharing our thoughts, I got the class involved and excited about the material that we were learning.

As an account executive, I persuade potential advertisers all the time. But I specifically remember persuading the owner of a tanning salon to advertise in the middle of the winter after he had already declined at the beginning. I used my personal experience as a sorority member to explain to him that winter is the best time to advertise tanning salons because sororities have formals, and members want to look tan in their dresses. He knew sororities were a huge part of his business and agreed to advertise for the rest of the school year as long as I kept him up to date on good times to run specials for sororities.

I was the leader of my macroeconomics group in college. As leader, I had to delegate parts of the assignment to other group members. Not only did I do a written section for each paper, but I also gathered all of the props we needed for our oral presentation, and I typed all of the five papers assigned. I was also taking four other classes at the time. By the fourth paper, I decided to persuade some of the other group members to edit and finalize it. I learned a lot about delegation and leadership when I discovered that they were happy to help out.

Tell me about a time you went above and beyond to get a job done.

We had to lay people off a couple years ago, and the vice president asked me for my recommendations while I was on vacation. Because I had been meeting regularly with the directors and had been leading a workforce planning effort, I had very clear data from them regarding those areas where reductions could be made with the least disruptions to key services. I took the time during my vacation to share that data with the VP. The result was that the decisions were made in a timely way and the impact on services was minimal.

Although I had already punched out, I stayed behind to help a colleague solve a problem. A customer was very angry, as he had waited a long time for his coffee. My colleague was new, and she was quite slow. I came out and explained things to the customer. Although he was very angry at first, I just listened to him and told him that we try to bring our best out to each customer who walks in to our store. After a one-hour discussion, he left with a happy face and was satisfied.

While working at a large retailer, I was one of three people to work in the electronics department. One day upon arriving at work, I was told the district manager was coming the next day to do a store inspection. The two other people who worked in electronics were both over 55. Neither could lift heavy objects, and one refused to work at all. As a result, the electronics department was usually left to me to keep in order and stocked with product. I had about five hours of work time to get the entire department in order. After the five hours passed, there was still a substantial amount of work to be done. I asked the store manager if I could stay and work after hours while the overnight stockers were there. He said that because of the employment budget, he could not let me. So I was faced with bringing the entire store’s rating down or not getting paid. I worked without pay, and three hours later, the department was in tip-top shape. The electronics department got a score of 95 out of 100.

I don’t believe in trying to get by with the least possible effort, and I am always willing to go beyond the call of duty to perform an assignment successfully. My anthropology class was given a group project in which each group had to teach a topic to the class for 50 minutes. I was a freshman and everyone in my group was either juniors or seniors, so I was very nervous and felt that I needed to prove myself. My topic was Botswana. I went online for hours, as well as to the library trying to find as much info as possible, but there just wasn’t enough to fill a 50-minute presentation. Instead of working with the little material that I had, I continued to search in other libraries. I ended up writing a very good paper. In addition, I taught myself how to use PowerPoint, and came up
with a substantial slide show. I met with my group, and they were amazed at the work I had done. My team earned an A for the project.

**Describe a time when you stood your ground for a principle you believed in.**

When I was a bureau chief and reporter, my editor wanted an in-depth interview with the family of a young girl who’d fallen through the ice at a nearby lake and was in a coma with brain damage. We clashed on the morality and sensitivity of doing such a story for the sake of headlines, and I ultimately convinced the editor that shining a spotlight on a family so obviously grief-stricken was not a good course of action. We held the stories until after the girl recovered and was no longer in critical condition.

**Tell me about a situation that tested your coping skills.**

Two years ago, my brother committed suicide. I am a call-center representative, and people call with all sorts of problems that seemed very trivial to me in the state of mind I was in after my brother’s death. It was very hard to separate my pain and sadness from my professional life. I would mentally prep myself each day knowing that the people I was talking to did not know what happened. I had to detach myself so I could provide excellent customer service. I sought out special projects to complete for my manager until I was ready to return to the high pressures of my demanding job.

Arriving at the language school I was attending in Costa Rica in the middle of the night with very minimal Spanish-language skills, I found my way to a very small town with no street addresses or names and found my temporary residence. I was scared, but I handled the situation very well, very calmly. In very stressful situations, I am always the one in the group to stay calm and focused. My friends, family, and professors have always said that I am an oasis of calm in a storm. How have you used communication skills to manage employees?

I inherited a long-term poor performing sales rep who would not follow through on the plan of action we discussed during our field ride-along. He was also a poor listener who would always try to turn situations around and blame others for his failures. I found that communicating with him in writing left the ball in his court, and he could refer back to my written communications when needed. Putting things in writing also left a paper trail to show the rep’s progress. The experience taught me that you have to treat each rep individually and find out the best way to communicate with each.

I had a very difficult employee who constantly challenged my authority. I took the time to understand this employee in meetings, as well as by gathering information from clients and coworkers. I conducted regular meetings with her and brought to her attention some of her greatest strengths and my expectations. I opened the lines of communication with this employee and found that her greatest strength was to help people. I accepted her for her uniqueness and constantly praised her for her great accomplishments. I brought to her attention areas she needed to improve. In the end, it’s a great success story. She has earned my trust, and I trust her ability to represent the organization in a very professional manner. She now takes the lead in team meetings and helps others see their full potential. She is now one of our best team players.

**Can you give me an example of your team-leadership skills?**

Designing the staffing plan for my company is an excellent example of my team-leadership skills. I needed the input of corporate leadership and front-line employees to design a model aligned with the company goals and culture. I’m very proud of this project because I brought front-line workers into the brainstorming process when the initial discussion with department heads suggested this would never happen. I met initially with the executive committee for input and to learn their key priorities, then met several times individually with each department head to discuss the process and what would best serve their departments. I routed preliminary and final drafts through the executive committee and led consultation through several other committees. Before the deadline, I submitted an excellent plan that is consistent with the company’s needs and culture. The plan contributed to an inclusive environment, as demonstrated by the fact that front-line employees have become more involved in decision-making, and morale is at an all-time high.

As a store manager, I had to convince 150 associates during a meeting that to get a bonus, they would have to improve their safety record. Over the next six weeks, we talked about this issue daily, and I communicated my expectation with my management team. After the six-week period, our accident reduction was more than 100 percent, which solidified the associates’ bonuses of several hundred dollars each.
Describe the most complex project you’ve been involved with.

When I was working as a data-entry examiner in claims, I was asked to participate on a team to help create a manual to document the process for data entry of claims. At the time, documents and training material were scattered across several resource files, but nothing straightforward, simple, and comprehensive had been designed for the insurance company’s largest client, the state of Nevada. From the start, I knew this would be a complex project because when we began mapping the decision trees and process, the map grew exponentially, and we found ourselves overwhelmed by the amount of research needed. To handle the project, I broke it down into four main categories and assigned them to individuals to research. I also selected one person to be the master editor and to keep us motivated and on track. I set deadlines so we could pace ourselves over the next few weeks to produce a value-added deliverable. We also rotated the work assignments when completed so we could check each other’s work for consistency and hammer out any policy differences and interpretations as they came up. In the end, we finished the 200+ page manual in about three months. All of us were extremely proud of the document we created. If I could do one thing over again, I would have probably made the manual a Web-based document so it could be searched and browsed.

I had to give a marketing presentation while attending community college. The project was about Anheuser-Busch. We were assigned to report on key management personnel (CEO, Chairman of the Board, President, key VPs), divisions and subsidiaries, major products/brands/services, key financials for the most recent year (sales revenue, expenses, total income, net income, sales growth or loss for the last year), market share, key competitors, mission statement, product positioning, and number of employees. The steps I took included visiting the company’s Miami branch to interview employees and gather visual aids for the project. I spent considerable time organizing and writing the presentation. Then I spent time reviewing my speech over a period of several days. As a result I was calm while giving the presentation and earned an A for the project. The one additional step I perhaps wish I’d taken would have been to talk to some consumers and storeowners about the product.

My senior research was my most complex assignment. It took two semesters to complete and was made up of many components including gathering significant amounts of primary and secondary research. I had to make many critical decisions along the way that would affect the outcome of my research. I made these decisions independently with minimal influence from my professor. I was very successful and happy with my final product, an 80-page comprehensive report. Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way. Recently my company asked for bids on a phone system for our new training center. Two companies came in very close with their bids, and most of my department wanted to go with a vendor that we have used in the past. After I looked over the proposals, it was clear that this was the wrong decision. So, I talked individually with each member of our staff and changed their minds. We got the best product, saved money, and provided the highest quality.

Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.

When I was a resident assistant at my college, a student I did not know asked me if he could use my phone to call another room. Although I did not know the student, I allowed him into my room. He used the phone and in the course of his conversation, he stated that he had just come from a fraternity party and was high from taking some drugs. After this conversation, I had to enforce the student conduct code by writing him up. He became very hostile toward me and would not give me any identification or information. I stood in the doorway to prevent him from leaving. I noted the serial numbers on his keys, so when the situation got to the point where I felt unsafe, I allowed him to leave. I still performed my job without jeopardizing my or his physical welfare.
Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.

I had a client come into the bank where I worked and request a $5,000 personal loan to “pay off some bills.” In the customary review process, I determined that what was really needed was a $25,000 debt-consolidation loan. Rather than giving the customer a “quick-fix” to the problem, I logically solved the problem in a way that was in the best interest of both the bank and the client.

Give an example of a time in which you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.

This situation happens often in the IT industry, but one recent example was when we had a core backbone switch die. It died at the worst possible time - during a crunch production period - as they always seem to do, and I needed to get it back up and running quickly. I analyzed the logs and system status, and using my previous experience, I made some quick decisions that rectified the problem and got the equipment back up only minutes later.

Describe a time when you had to use your written communication skills to get an important point across.

As an Administrative Coordinator at a resort’s convention center, I had a staff of 27. Having such a large staff all working different shifts and having varying schedules meant that meetings could not be held with everyone at one time. I needed to communicate with everyone about important policies and information often, so I came up with the idea of designing a Web page for my staff with written announcements. Each Desk Assistant was required to check the Web page daily at the beginning of his or her shift. I also sent email communications via a distribution list that kept each Desk Assistant informed. The one situation that stands out in my mind is a last-minute group that decided to come in a day early with only one day’s notice. I had no staff scheduled to check in the group or to organize the keys. I posted an update to the Web page and sent an email. Within four hours, I had the following day completely staffed and desk assistants there to organize room keys for the group members that night.

Give me a specific occasion in which you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.

When I worked at Home Depot as an assistant manager, I was always looking for way to boost my employees’ morale.

Unloading trucks is a very routine and physical job and can become very boring and exhausting, so to improve the unloaders’ attitude toward their duties and make the best of the situation, I put a radio in the receiving dock. It worked; however, the district manager did not approve of the radio in the workplace even though it did not interfere with any set policy or company objectives. The radio was also out of any areas where customers would hear the music. I did not agree with my DM’s decision to remove the radio; however, I understood his point of view once he explained it to me and promptly complied with his request. The employees were not happy that their radio was gone, so I found an alternative method of reward and morale boosting by implementing a program in which we provided lunch for the unloaders from any restaurant of their choice if they unloaded the trucks faster than normal. This program succeeded by increasing their unloading time from 2 1/2 hours to only 1 1/2, a savings in payroll of 8 percent of sales for that shift.

Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).

During my time in the theater, I had one director with whom I absolutely did not work well. However, because of my track record, she would assign me as stage director or assistant director. I was usually involved in the day-to-day operations of the play and the details of how the play would be performed. I handled the operation for the play by directing scenes the best way I could and then showing them to her for approval. If she did not like the way a scene worked, I gave her my opinion as to why it should be my way. If we still could not compromise, I would follow her directions to the best of my ability. Understanding that people don’t usually have malicious intentions is key, and understanding that you will never be able to convince some people that your way is right is the best way to avoid conflict and still get the job done.

When I first began working at the credit union, I was the youngest member of the staff. An older woman really knew the ropes of the place. When I first got there she barely acknowledged my presence, and through word of mouth I discovered that she thought that I was too young to successfully fulfill my duties because I was so inexperienced. She assumed I was immature. I did my job and took every opportunity to make a good impression. I was a very diligent worker and behaved in a highly professional manner at all times,
learning quickly the best way to do things. After about two weeks of the silent
treatment from her, she came up to me and
told me how impressed she was with me.
She told me that I had done an excellent
job and was the fastest learner that she had
ever seen. She apologized to me for
ignoring me and took me under her wing
and shared what she knew with me.

Sometimes it’s easy to get in over your
head. Describe a situation where you had to
request help or assistance on a project or
assignment.

It’s impossible to know everything in the IT
field because of rapidly changing
technology, so recently when we were
having troubles with our circuit emulation
over our ATM network, I had to call in some
engineers from North Carolina to come help
me out. The nice thing about asking for
help is that when you get the assistance,
you can learn from what you are told and
apply it to future situations.

Tell of a time when you worked with a
colleague who was not completing his or
her share of the work. What did you do?

During a group project in college, we had
one member who would do no work
whatevsoever. The project was to compare
and contrast four companies in a single
industry, so his work was vital. We first
discussed the situation and asked for the
bare-bones minimum of what we needed
from him. We got just below that. As a
result we as a group went to the professor
and told her our situation, not expecting or
requesting action, just informing her of the
situation we were dealing with. Then the
group split up the non-contributor’s work
and completed our work collectively on his
share. In phase two in which we analyzed
the information and reported how each of
our companies fared compared to the
others, we did not get a paper from the
group member. As a result, we told the
teacher that we had our work done and
were willing to do the extra paper but that
we would rather spend time polishing our
own work and not picking up slack. She
agreed and said to focus on the three
companies we had compiled the most info
on while not entirely neglecting the fourth.
The papers came out very well, but were
understandably weak when comparing the
fourth company. The professor understood,
and we received the grades we deserved. I
was pleased with our teamwork and the
way we handled the situation.

Describe a situation in which you had to
arrive at a compromise or guide others to a
compromise.

My first semester in college, I was a
political-science major. My introductory
government professor had a differing
political view from mine. We disagreed on
everything, and many classes were filled
with criticizing each other’s view. However,
on one test I answered a question with the
view I believe in, and she marked it wrong.
So I asked her how an opinion can be
wrong, and she said because her opinion is
the way she taught it in class. I pointed out
that my answer showed I understood the
concepts of the question. She agreed, and I
also agreed not be so combative in answers
on tests. Compromise is the key to problem
resolution.

What steps do you follow to study a
problem before making a decision?

Following standard models for problem-
solving and decision-making can be very
helpful. Here are the steps and how they
helped me solve a problem with a group
project:

1. Define the problem to be solved and
decision to be made. For a project
in an introductory management
class the assignment was to report
on the corporate structure and
financial situation of a couple of
companies. The decision to be made
was what companies to profile and
how to present the information.

2. Gather the necessary information.
Some group members wanted to
report on automakers, while others
wanted to do electronics firms. We
gathered information on both types
of company.

3. List all possible choices. We made
lists of companies in both
categories.

4. Consider possible outcomes for
each choice. We decided that a
report about car companies could
have a positive outcome, but one
about electronics firms might be
more futuristic with high-tech
products such as HDTV, video game
consoles, and DVD players.
5. Check out how you feel about each of the choices. Given that this was a group project, we had to consider the feelings of all group members.

6. Relate the choices to your values and priorities. Again, all group members weighed in on their values and priorities.

7. From the possible alternatives, choose one. We decided that we’d do electronics companies because we could bring in products from each company and show what lies ahead.

8. Commit yourself to your chosen decision and disregard the others. Concentrate your energies in one direction. Once we made our decision, we focused all our work on electronics forms.

9. Take steps to turn your decision into positive action. All group members got interested in how the companies were doing.

10. Evaluate your progress from time to time. Change your decision if necessary. We were pleased with our progress and didn’t feel a need to change our decision. We got an A on the project.

We can sometimes identify a small problem and fix it before it becomes a major problem. Give an example of how you have done this.

When I worked in a large retail store, the standard procedure was to leave a product on the shelf until the supply ran out, then place more items out. This practice obviously wasted a lot of person-hours. Of interest particularly to me were the air conditioners. Not only did I have to put the heavy things on the shelves, but also they were selling at a very high rate. So if somehow AC units ran out on a day in which I could not restock them, they would not be available to customers. As a result I started making a list of products, including the AC units, that the overnight stock people could put on the shelves. As a result, the people on duty always had a job to do, so labor hours were not wasted, and the shelves were always stocked full of product.

In a supervisory or group leader role, have you ever had to discipline or counsel an employee or group member?

As president of a community-service organization, I was faced with a board member not carrying out his duties as management development vice president. I consulted with him as to what we could do together to fix the problem. We agreed that he really couldn’t devote the time that it took to carry out certain projects, and he ended up resigning his position, but he also stated he would help his replacement in whatever capacity he could. It made me feel as though we had come to the conclusion together rather than the VP’s thinking I was criticizing his performance, which was not the case. I had a plan of action and carried it out successfully.

Recall a time from your work experience when your manager or supervisor was unavailable and a problem arose.

My supervisor was absent once when I was in charge of a soccer game. An actual assault took place at the game. A player hit the referee. With no supervisor to turn to, I immediately called the police, who quickly restored order to the situation. I felt I made an effective decision.

Describe a time when you were not very satisfied or pleased with your performance. What did you do about it?

I failed my first business calculus test, which made me very unhappy. I wasn’t going to let this incident set the trend for the rest of the semester. I went to my counselor and arranged to meet with a tutor once a week. My tutor helped me out incredibly. My grades soon improved, and I went on to redeem myself from my one slip-up on the first test.

By providing examples, convince me that you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations, and environments.

I’ve shown my ability to adapt by successfully working in several very different jobs. For example, I lived with a native family in Costa Rica. I worked as a nanny for a famous writer in Cape Cod. I was responsible for dealing with Drug Court participants. And I catered to elite country-club clientele. I did it all well and had no trouble adapting.

Describe the most significant or creative presentation that you have had to complete.

The most significant presentation I have ever had to deliver was at a national research symposium. I was presenting research I had completed on digital analysis of mammograms and had to present to a panel of more than 100 judges who were at the top of their field. I focused on the research, which could sell itself, and just let the information flow. It went over very well, and I received many more invitations to present the research, including on national television.

I have grown to be a confident presenter. My most successful presentation took place
in my current job when I was asked present a leadership-development program for a class of management trainees. The point of my program was to teach each trainee his or her leadership style, so he/she knew how to interact on his or her floor as a student leader. The most significant aspect of this program is that it taught them about their leadership styles without their knowing it. Each trainee filled out a general questionnaire that asked about preferences. Each person, according to his or her responses, was assigned to a group. I then gave each group a book to read. Each group had to read a portion aloud, after which I explained how each group tackled the task. They all had handled the task differently. Each trainee successfully understood how he or she approached their job as managers. Not only did I engage the audience in what was being presented, I have since seen the program adapted in other presentations by trainees in that class. Not only did they enjoy it, they learned something about themselves that would help them help their subordinates.

What has been your most successful experience in presenting to a group? (question and response contributed by Doris Flaherty)

Last year, I presented to 50 potential students and their parents on Campus Visit Day. The topic was “Choosing a Major.” I had given this presentation before, and it was okay, but I wanted something better. I did some research and found a really great icebreaker. After tailoring it to fit the college where I worked, I used it with this group. That little icebreaker helped me begin with a big laugh. From there, I provided the kind of information they could really use. I explained not only how to go about selecting a major but also how to choose classes in the meantime. The Admissions Office, which gathered evaluations, said that my presentation received the highest marks of the day and that many people took the time to write comments about how worthwhile the information was to them.

Give an example of how you applied knowledge from previous coursework to a project in another class.

Last semester I was taking a microeconomics and a statistics course. One of the microeconomics projects dealt with showing the relationship between the probability that customers would stop buying a product if the price was raised a certain amount. Through what I learned in statistics, I could find the median where the price was the highest and still kept most of the customers happy.

Describe a situation where others you were working on a project disagreed with your ideas. What did you do?

I was on a project team in a business class in my freshman year in college. The group brainstormed ideas for the video we were assigned to produce, and everyone but me was leaning toward an idea that would be easy. I suggested instead an idea that would be more difficult but would be something different that no other group would be doing. I used my communications skills to persuade the rest of the group to use my idea. During the project, we really learned what teamwork was all about, became a close team, and ended up putting a lot of hard work into the project. All the team members ended up feeling very proud of the video, and they thanked me for the idea for which we earned an A.

Describe a situation in which you found that your results were not up to your supervisor’s expectations.

Recently, I was asked to put together a proposal for a migration of network systems. Misunderstanding my boss, I thought it was just an informal paper. When I presented it to him days later, he was upset with the quality since it had to be presented to our VP. I explained my misunderstanding, apologized, reworked the paper, and had it back to him with enough time for him to review it before he presented it successfully at the meeting.

How was your transition from high school to college? Did you face any particular problems?

The transition was somewhat challenging for me because I traveled a great distance to attend college. To help myself adapt, I got involved with as many organizations as I could. I also made it a point to get to know my professors. I used my
interpersonal communication skills to the best of my ability to make a lot of friends, and college became one of the best experiences of my life despite a beginning that seemed a bit overwhelming.

**Compare and contrast the times when you did work that was above the standard with times your work was below the standard.**

I was involved in two group projects in a psychology class. In the first, we had to decide on a research experiment to conduct and garner results from it. The group I was in was not very motivated, and the members wanted to do a simplistic comparison on color preferences of men and women. I felt that project was below the standard I was capable of. For the second project, I proposed a study in which we compared how people of different age ranges valued money. I knew the project would go over well with the teacher and would not be difficult to conduct. I proposed the idea in a way that sounded fun. Instead of collecting data in someplace boring, I suggested we could go to the mall. The group agreed and worked relatively well on the project. Discussion is the key to mediation and was the key to my achieving a second project that I felt was above the standard.

**How have you differed from your professors in evaluating your performance? How did you handle the situation?**

After I wrote a paper for an English class, my professor told me that I was not doing the paper in the proper format or with the proper content. I went to him and asked if he would help me learn the correct way so that I could succeed with the paper. He did help me, and I ended up doing well in the course.

**Describe a project or idea that was implemented or carried out successfully primarily because of your efforts.**

I had been recently selected as the head swim team coach for the YMCA I was employed with. A swim meet was just around the corner, but only five swimmers had enrolled for the program, none of whom had ever been a part of an organized team. Funding would be cut for the team if more interest could not be generated. So I decided that I would take action and actively recruit people to join. Not only did I have to run the practices and correct any technical mistakes the swimmers were making, but I also had to contact other local swim teams to invite them to join the meet. I had to meet with the parents and the children separately and organize a way to help pay for t-shirts, swimsuits, goggles, and swim caps. By the third week of the program, I had gained 15 more swimmers, and every single one had beat his or her own time in practice. When the meet came, I organized the events, ordered ribbons, and recruited volunteers. At the end of the meet, my team had come in first place among four other teams. The parents were delighted, and the profits from the swim team had skyrocketed, to the approval of the board of directors.

**Tell of a time when your active listening skills really paid off for you – maybe a time when other people missed the key idea being expressed.**

When I presented my senior research in college, the members of my major department as a panel questioned me. My grade was determined largely on my ability to answer the questions effectively and smoothly, which depended very much on my ability to listen carefully to what was being asked. I had seen other students slip up when they misunderstood what the panel was asking because they didn’t listen well enough. I succeeded in listening well and did well on my presentation.

**Give an example of when you had to work with someone who was difficult to get along with.**

As a Resident Advisor, I had another RA who often sought me as a person to confide her complaints to and shared quite a bit of information about activities she’d engaged in that violated the rules. Although I did not mind being a resource for this person, I knew that I could not compromise my integrity or her residents’ safety. Although she became very outraged and angry with me, I talked to her about the situation and told her that I would have to tell my supervisor. She eventually understood my responsibility and why I had to come forward with information. She knew that what she had done was against the rules but never realized before I talked to her that she had jeopardized her residents’ safety.

**Give me a specific example of something you did that helped build enthusiasm in others.**

I really enjoy drumming up enthusiasm and assisting others in achieving their goals, whether it’s getting involved in an organization as a volunteer which has frequently provided me with employment or whether it’s through specific event-planning and fundraising to meet budgetary needs. I also excel at working within a team either as an integral key player or as a leader. I generated enthusiasm for a public-TV auction, where it was becoming harder and harder to get volunteers to make the
When I was working as a receptionist at an apartment complex, a tenant argued that he had turned in his rent payment the day it was due. He stated that he had slipped it under the door because our office was closed for the day. I decided to consult my manager because I realized that maybe the office needed a sign that stated that we did not accept rent money that is slipped under the door. My boss agreed, and we posted the sign. We never again had a problem with tenants who claimed they’d paid their rent that way.

Describe a time when you got co-workers who dislike each other to work together. How did you accomplish this? What was the outcome?

When I worked for a law firm, my co-workers and I had a huge mailing to complete. We had the choice of working more efficiently as a team or working individually in a much more time-consuming manner. My two co-workers did not care for each other, and they wanted to complete the mail-out on an individual level. When I presented them with the evidence that we would finish at least an hour earlier by working together, they decided that working together was the right path to take. As a result, we finished the mail-out in a short period of time and could work on other tasks that day.

Describe a time when you put your needs aside to help a classmate understand a task. How did you assist him or her? What was the result?

I was studying right before a major finance test. As the class came into the classroom, a couple of students indicated that did not understand a concept that I did. Although there was a small section of material that I had not completely mastered, I realized that I knew enough about that section that I could perform well enough to earn a good grade. I knew that the section the other students did not understand was a major portion of the exam since the professor had an interest in this particular subject. I stopped what I was doing to explain to the small group about the Multiplier Effect of Bank Reserves on the overall supply of money. Those students learned enough from what I taught them that they did well on the exam. I missed a few points on the section of material that I had not mastered,
but I did well enough to get an A, and the satisfaction I got from teaching others the concept made me feel proud.

Have you ever had difficulty with a supervisor or instructor? How did you resolve the conflict?

Yes, I had an incident with my Spanish professor. I turned in an essay that she said was too good to be mine. I was honest with her; I told her that I had a native speaker review the essay, but he made very few corrections. However, I had broken the Golden Rule of Spanish Composition: the essay must not even touch the hands of a native speaker. To prove to her that I was capable of producing an essay that exceeded her expectations of a non-native speaker, I offered to rewrite another essay in her office. I earned an A-minus.

What are your standards of success in school? What have you done to meet these standards?

In my human-resources management class we were assigned a paper on "Why corporate culture is a practical way to increase income and productivity." All of the literature on the subject was written in the language of Ph.D.s. I asked some other students what they were doing, and they said just writing their opinions and not doing any research to back up the claims. I felt I could do better. I am always willing to ask questions to learn how to perform an assignment successfully. So I worked closely with my professor, who "translated" the academic literature for me, and over time I understood what was being written. Working with the professor’s guidance, I turned in a very good paper. Asking questions is one thing I am not afraid to do and realize that without them I will be turning in work that is not as beneficial as it could be.

Give an example of your experience at school or in a job that was satisfying. Give an example of your experience that was dissatisfying.

I turned a dissatisfying experience into a satisfying one when I was on the cross-country team in college and had never run the whole race in under 30 minutes. With only a month left in the season, I decided that I would run the race in 25 minutes. I ran every day to build up my stamina, and in that last race I achieved my goal time of 25 minutes, which was a very satisfying experience.

Have you found any ways to make your job easier or more rewarding or to make yourself more effective?

I find that taking a proactive mindset to recognizing and solving problems before they happen make any job more rewarding. It not only saves time and effort, but also gives me a sense of accomplishment and ownership in my job. I demonstrated my proactive approach when I worked at a major supermarket chain. As a bookkeeper, I oversaw the offices. The safe was kept outside of the office in front of the cash registers, where anyone could get inside it if I, or another office associate, had it open to drop a deposit or get money in and out. I realized that the situation was a security hazard. Although we could not move the safe to the inside of the office where it was more secure, I ordered a timelock compartment and had it installed so the safe could be opened only at a specific time when the store closed each day. Money could be dropped through a slot in the compartment door, and we kept large sums of money in that compartment. We kept operating cash on hand since we needed some excess money to perform daily functions. One month after I left that store, I learned that it was robbed. Because of my efforts and foresight, the robbers only got a small amount of cash. My previous supervisor thanked me for my efforts, which gave me a great feeling, and I carried this proactive mindset to my other jobs thereafter.

Tell me about a time when you had to make a decision, but didn’t have all the information you needed.

I had to make a decision recently between two configurations on one of our routers. Time was quickly moving away from me, and I had to have all the equipment back up in a matter of minutes. I chose the configuration that I had the most data on because I knew at least that I could better troubleshoot it if there was a problem. My decision was the right one.

Give me a specific example of a time when a co-worker or classmate criticized your work in front of others.

Another manager became upset with me since some projects were not being completed. Without discussing the situation with me first, she criticized me in front of one of the employees I directly supervised. I was upset that she made me look bad in front of my worker, but I remained calm and asked her to step into the office so that we could talk about it in more detail. We discussed the problem, and she learned that the non-completion of the tasks was not my fault. Another manager did not receive his instructions telling him the tasks he needed to complete. After that I learned not to jump to conclusions when dealing with others and that sometimes a
miscommunication can lead to a much larger problem. I've learned to get the complete facts.

_Give me a specific example of a time when you sold your supervisor or professor on an idea or concept._

_Last summer, I wanted to help organize a summer camp for local low-income children. My supervisor knew the demand would be there but feared we would not have enough staff. I convinced her that since I went to the facility daily, I could network with acquaintances and convince them of the importance of this camp. My supervisor trusted me. We had hundreds of children sign up for the program, and I had reached so many people that we were able fully staff the camp as well as have a backup supply of people who were willing to volunteer their time and services to the organization._

_How has your college experience prepared you for a business career?_

_I have prepared myself to transition into the work force through real-world experience involving travel abroad, internship, and entrepreneurial opportunities. While interning with a private organization in Ecuador, I developed a 15-page marketing plan composed in Spanish that recommended more effective ways the company could promote its services. I also traveled abroad on two other occasions in which I researched the indigenous culture of the Mayan Indians in Todos Santos, Guatemala, and participated in a total language immersion program in Costa Rica. As you can see from my academic, extracurricular, and experiential background, I have unconditionally committed myself to success as a marketing professional._

_What kind of supervisor do you work best for?_

_I like to work for a supervisor who allows me the autonomy to perform my job to the best of my abilities. I also like constructive criticism and feedback so I can improve myself and the organization. One example was my boss at a hospital. He hired me as an administrative manager because of my administrative and organizational skills. He knew that I had many new ideas and allowed me the opportunity to implement many new programs. Of course, I kept him constantly informed and sought advice when needed. I improved communications in the department by implementing a departamental Web page. I also streamlined the check-in process by preparing the amount of work that could be done the day before. I improved staff morale by implementing an administrative-staffer-of-the-month, which led to lower turnover. These are just a few examples. I earned the Outstanding Employee Award for my efforts and unique ideas. I gained not only my boss's confidence and support but his respect as well._

_Tell of the most difficult customer service experience that you have ever had to handle – perhaps an angry or irate customer. Be specific and tell what you did and what was the outcome._

_I was making business phone calls behind the membership office at the YMCA when an angry man came up to the counter demanding a refund. He began yelling at the membership workers and complaining about the swimming program, saying that it was a rip-off. The other workers were flustered, and even though membership services were not my department, I calmly asked the man what was wrong. He that his son had been in swimming lessons for four weeks and was still afraid of the water. Instead of instantly giving him the refund, I offered to personally give his son private swim lessons for a week, explaining to him that sometimes children react differently to each instructor's teaching techniques. He finally agreed to accept without the refund. After a week of private lessons, his son was no longer afraid of the water and he could swim nearly a lap of the pool. At the end of the lessons, not only did he sign his child up for another paid session of private lessons, but he bought a family membership and apologized to me for his behavior the week before._

_How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time?_

_I took a time-management course in which I learned to prioritize all tasks on A, B, or C lists. I always try to tackle the A list first. In every working situation, co-workers have always complimented me on how well I manage my time. I enjoy the social atmosphere of the office, but I make it a
point not to waste much time on chit chat with colleagues. I’ve also learned that the average office worker spends about an hour a day handling e-mail. I make it a point not to deal with my e-mail more than once or twice a day, and I filter my messages into folders so I can prioritize the way I deal with them.

**What do you think it takes to be successful in this career?**

It takes the ability to meet every customer with a smile, and a solution – whatever it takes. Though I’ve worked in a number of industries, I have always been a salesperson and a consistent top producer. Let me elaborate. Early in my career, I sold memberships at a family fitness center. An angry man once came to me demanding a refund. He began yelling at the membership workers and complaining about the swimming program, saying that it was a rip-off. Though the other workers were flustered, I calmly asked the man what was wrong. He that his son had been in swimming lessons for four weeks and was still afraid of the water. Instead of instantly giving him the refund, I offered to personally arrange for private swim lessons for his son for a week, explaining to him that sometimes children react differently to each instructor’s teaching techniques. He finally agreed to accept without the refund. After a week of private lessons, his son was no longer afraid of the water, and he could swim nearly a lap of the pool. At the end of the lessons, not only did the father sign his child up for another paid session of private lessons, but he also bought a family membership and apologized to me for his behavior the week before.

**What is the most significant contribution you made to the organization during a past job?**

My organization was undergoing an accreditation process. I developed two detailed accreditation self-evaluation reports that documented how the organization met accreditation standards. These self-evaluations served as basis for accreditation site visits and enabled all eligible programs to be accredited in record time.

**Tell of a situation in which you have had to adjust quickly to changes over which you had no control. What was the impact of the change on you?**

The bank in which I worked instituted a policy that centralized the lending process. An application was to be taken from the client and sent off to be approved/declined, processed, prepared, and returned to the branch to be signed by the client. While the process was streamlined, it also took away valuable face-to-face knowledge about the client and the loan. If the employee did not have any prior lending experience, he or she couldn’t answer simple loan questions from the client. While I appreciated the newly created time on my schedule, I felt that the clients were being slighted. I did adjust quickly to the new procedure and did my best to help those around me by sharing my knowledge.

**Give me a specific example of something you did that helped build enthusiasm in others.**

When I was coaching my swim team at their first swim meet, the swimmers on my team were intimidated by the other team because they were bigger and obviously more experienced. The other team members looked like pros in their matching swimsuits, unlike my swimmers’ mismatched suits. I encouraged them and told them that they had practiced for so long and so hard that they deserved just as much respect as those other teams. I told them that it didn’t matter whether we had matching swimsuits or not and that I would stand behind them 100 percent no matter what. They were so excited and pumped after my speech. They cheered each other on, and not only did every child break his or her own record, but my team won first place in the meet among four other teams that had been together for a much longer time.

**Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult person. How did you handle the situation?**

I have participated in several groups throughout my academic career. Recently, I had to work with a group in my statistics class and I had some personality clashes with one of the group members. However, I realized the importance of completing the assignment in a prompt and efficient manner. I made it a point to put my differences aside and complete my part, along with offering assistance to the other group members. As a result, we finished our assignment without any conflict. Tell me about a time you had to handle multiple responsibilities. How did you organize the work you needed to do? While attending college, I also worked at a law firm. I was successful because I practiced good time-management skills and I made a to-do list every day. As I completed each task, I checked it off the list. It is funny how something so simple can keep you so organized. As a result of my to-do lists, I was able to visualize my daily progress.

**What is the biggest mistake you’ve made?**
The biggest mistake in my life that I have made is taking for granted the sacrifices my parents endured for me. I look back and realize that everything they did for me was so that I could succeed in life. I am thankful now and do everything to my best ability to make them proud because I am so thankful that they have been there for me so that I can give back to society and to my job the opportunities that they never had.

Describe a situation in which you had to use reference materials to write a research paper. What was the topic? What journals did you read?

In my academic career I have had to write several research papers. The most recent one I wrote was on whether zero-tolerance policies about drugs and weapons in high schools are reasonable. To answer this question, I went to several high schools and interviewed their principal or top-level employees. I also interviewed students and parents. I visited the Health Department to gather data. Finally, I conducted the remainder of my research on the Internet. As a result, I was able to get perspective from every group this topic would effect.

Describe the system you use for keeping track of multiple projects. How do you track your progress so that you can meet deadlines? How do you stay focused?

I keep an electronic hand-held organizer that I synchronize with a schedule on my computer. I keep track of each task in order of priority and due date. I use an electronic organizer because it is very portable and has an alarm to remind me of about what is due so I don’t have to waste time by looking at my organizer every hour. I start with the projects with the closest due date and the highest priority. I take these tasks and then schedule times in my calendar for me to work on them to ensure I meet deadlines. I stay focused by going over my organizer each night before bed so I know immediately what I have accomplished and where I need to start the next day. Here let me show you...

Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn?

I recently failed to meet a deadline in my communications course with a project I had to do on the Internet. I did not meet the deadline because I underestimated the amount of time the assignment would take me to complete. Therefore, the assignment was incomplete when I turned it in. As a result I lost points on my final grade. I learned the importance of examining tasks more carefully so I can better estimate the amount of time required to complete them. I also learned to build some flex time into projects so that if my estimates are wrong, I’ll still have time to complete the tasks.

Print resources about behavioral interviewing:

For the latest and best collection of books about behavioral-based interviewing – and all job-interviewing techniques – go to this section of the Quintessential Careers Bookstore: Job Interviewing Books: http://www.quintcareers.com/interviewing_books.html
Chapter 6: Quick Refresher on Guidelines for All Types of Interviews

Use this checklist to be sure you remember all the important aspects, not just of behavioral interviews, but any kind of interview.

I have:
✓ Thoroughly researched the organization I’m interviewing with, the industry, my interviewer, and the job itself. (See our Guide to Researching Companies, Industries, and Countries http://www.quintcareers.com/researching_companies.html)
✓ Conducted research so I know all interview logistics, such as parking, office location, paperwork, attire, and the type of interview that will be conducted. I have called to confirm the interview time.
✓ Prepared and practiced for the interview without memorizing or over-rehearsing my answers. I’ve reviewed the questions I think I may be asked in the interview, as well as my planned responses to them. I have composed my responses in writing (see our article Promising Interview-Prep Technique: Composing Written Responses to Interview Questions (http://www.quintcareers.com/interview_prep_technique.html) and our practice interview questions database: http://www.quintcareers.com/interview_questions_database/).
✓ Enlisted a friend or family member to do a mock interview with me.
✓ Visualized myself going through the full interview experience and performing magnificently. I imagine myself confidently sailing through the interview.
✓ Asked for good directions and/or searched for a map/directions from an Internet map site, such as Mapquest (http://www.mapquest.com/), Google Maps (http://maps.google.com/), or Yahoo Maps (http://maps.yahoo.com/)
✓ Taken a practice run to the location where I’m having the interview — or otherwise made sure I know exactly where it is and how long it takes to get there.
✓ Gotten a good night’s sleep. Brushed my teeth and used mouthwash. Bathed or showered. Used deodorant soap and put on deodorant. For confidence, spritzed on a tiny bit of cologne without overdoing it.
✓ Planned interview attire that is appropriate for the job, the company, and the industry. I have prepared every element of the outfit, including shoes, jewelry, hose, tie, accessories. Inspect each element carefully. I have ensured that my outfit is clean and neatly pressed. I’ve checked for spots and removed them. I’ve checked for rips or tears and sewn them up or chosen another outfit. I’ve checked for runs in my hose. I’ve ensured that my shoes are clean and polished. I have a Plan B for attire if I come across any disasters. (Read our article, When Job-Hunting: Dress for Success: http://www.quintcareers.com/dress_for_success.html)
✓ Packed emergency-repair items I might need: small sewing kit, extra pair of pantyhose, spot-remover wipes, tissues, comb and brush, hairspray or gel, makeup for touchups, breath mints, an umbrella, extra copies of my resume in case I have more than one interviewer, and my career portfolio.

I will:
✓ Plan to arrive about 10 minutes early since late arrival for a job interview is never excusable. If I’m running late, I’ll phone the company.
✓ Greet the receptionist or assistant with courtesy and respect and make a good first impression.
✓ Not chew gum during the interview.
✓ If presented with a job application, fill it out neatly, completely, and accurately.
✓ Bring extra resumes to the interview. (Even better, if I have a job skills portfolio, bring that with me to the interview.)
✓ Not rely on my application or resume to do the selling for me; I know I need to sell myself to the interviewer.
✓ Greet the interviewer with a big smile and call him or her by his or her title (Ms., Mr., Dr.) and last name. I’ll confirm the pronunciation of the interviewer’s name (if questionable) with the receptionist before going into the interview.
✓ Shake hands firmly and avoid a limp or clammy handshake!
✓ Wait until I am offered a chair before sitting. I will be aware of my body...
language and posture at all times; I will sit upright and look alert and interested at all times. I will avoid fidgeting or slouching.

✓ Avoid telling jokes during the interview.
✓ Make good eye contact with the interviewer(s).
✓ Show enthusiasm about the position and the company.
✓ Avoid smoking, even if the interviewer does and offers me a cigarette. I'll avoid smoking beforehand so I don't smell like smoke. Whether or not I smoke, I will brush my teeth, use mouthwash, or have a breath mint before the interview.
✓ Avoid using poor language, slang, and pause words (such as "like," "uh," "you know," and "um").
✓ Speak with a strong, forceful voice to project confidence.
✓ Maintain a high confidence and energy level, but avoid being overly aggressive or cocky.
✓ Avoid acting as though I would take any job or am desperate for employment.
✓ Avoid controversial topics.
✓ Refrain from saying anything negative about former colleagues, supervisors, or employers.
✓ Ensure that my strong points come across to the interviewer in a factual, sincere manner.
✓ Never lie. I will answer questions truthfully, frankly and succinctly and not over-answer them.
✓ Stress my achievements and avoid offering any negative information about myself.
✓ Avoid answering questions with a simple "yes" or "no;" instead, I will explain and give examples whenever possible. I will describe those things about myself that showcase my talents, skills, and determination.
✓ Show off the research I have done on the company and industry when responding to questions. (See our Guide to Researching Companies, Industries, and Countries: http://www.quintcareers.com/researching_companies.html)
✓ Refrain from bringing up or discussing personal issues or family problems.
✓ Remember that the interview is also an important time to evaluate the interviewer and the company he or she represents.
✓ Realize that a short pause before responding to a question to collect my thoughts is OK, but avoid long pauses. Repeating the question aloud or asking for the question to be repeated to buy some time to think is OK.
✓ Conduct myself in a way that demonstrates my determination to land the job I am discussing. Avoid closing the door on an opportunity until I am sure about it.
✓ Refrain from answering cell-phone calls during the interview; in fact, turn my cell phone off (or set to silent ring).
✓ Show what I can do for the company rather than demand what the company can do for me.
✓ Postpone inquiring about salary, vacations, bonuses, retirement, or other benefits until after I've received an offer. I will be prepared for a question about salary requirements but will try to delay salary talk until I have an offer. (Visit our salary negotiation tutorial: http://www.quintcareers.com/salary_negotiation_tutorial.html for more tips and strategies.)
✓ Ask intelligent questions about the job, company, or industry, knowing that if I don't ask any questions, I'll be indicating a lack of interest.
✓ Close the interview by telling the interviewer(s) that I want the job and asking about the next step in the process. (Some experts even recommend closing the interview by asking for the job.)
✓ Request business cards from each person I interviewed with – or at least ask the correct spelling of their first and last names. I'll avoid making assumptions about simple names (was it Jon or John?); I'll get the spelling.
✓ Immediately write down notes after the interview concludes so I don't forget crucial details.
✓ Write thank you letters within 24 hours to each person who interviewed me. (See some sample thank-you letters http://www.quintcareers.com/sample_thank-you_letters.html) I will follow all the rules of following up after the interview.