

HOW TO HIT IT OFF WITH JOB INTERVIEWERS

BY DOUGLAS B. RICHARDSON

“Please, oh, please, let them like me.”

Every candidate has a nervous internal voice whispering this incantation before interviews. Whether seasoned or recently graduated, male or female, confident or terrified, we all hope potential employers will like us, even to the point of wanting a secret formula for developing rapport and achieving the elusive “fit.”

Why should an interviewer like you more than similarly credentialed competitors? Establishing that you’re fit for a job is subjective, indefinable and unpredictable, so what do interviewers want anyway? What traits and qualities will push their hot buttons, triggering subliminal applause and inciting an urge to sign you up?



Every potential job opportunity and interview has a unique shape and content, so there’s no sure-fire recipe for hitting it off with all interviewers in all situations. But you can understand and influence factors that will make you more likable to interviewers. Rapport isn’t a hit-or-miss proposition. The tips that follow can help you to understand and address core issues that control whether you make a positive impact — at the outset of the meeting and later, when both parties have swapped enough information to develop a fuller, richer picture of each other.

OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT

What your parents told you is true: You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Stumble out of the gate and your race is over. The interviewer’s blinds come down, the lights go off and you’re history. Why are first impressions so important? Why do people make snap judgments? And why is damage control so difficult once you blow the prologue?

We make snap judgments simply because we don’t have enough information to make better ones. At first meetings, there aren’t enough data for a full, studied judgment of the other party’s personal characteristics. Yet evolution has taught us that not making any judgment is potentially dangerous; in any new interaction, you must distinguish warm, safe things (and people) from



cold, threatening ones. Over millennia, this crude fight-or-flight reflex has been refined into a subtle or subconscious sense of whether someone makes us comfortable.

So rather than suspending judgment, an interviewer will make an almost spontaneous assessment of you in the first few minutes. This impression isn't based on rational inquiry and conscious evaluation, but on a variety of intangible factors: your appearance, body language, speech patterns, inflection and personal style. This "frame of reference" may not be accurate, but it's better than nothing for interviewers since it provides filters, assumptions and defenses that can be used to evaluate a candidate's subsequent information.

As the interview progresses, this additional data, whether verbal, nonverbal or subliminal, either

- reinforces and supplements the interviewer's initial impression, or
- forces him or her to revise the initial judgment.

But the psyche is more predisposed to confirming an initial impression than altering it. In short, your hunch mechanism is reluctant to change its first diagnosis, preferring to interpret later information in a way that reinforces the initial thinking. This explains the maxim, "To a person with only a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

THE ARENAS OF IMAGE

An interviewer's frame of reference doesn't have a simple on-off switch. (On: Makes me comfortable. I like her. Off: Makes me uncomfortable. I dislike him.) The interviewer has a more elaborate agenda: to determine how you stack up in terms of authority, credibility, compatibility and context awareness. Each of these categories builds on other subtle interpersonal issues.

AUTHORITY

For example, an interviewer will judge the authority you display during a meeting against such factors as:

- how much authority the interviewer thinks you should project.
- how much control the interviewer wants to have in this transaction.
- whether your authority presents itself as self-confidence and dignity or as competitiveness, dominance and arrogance.

How you perform, in other words, is relative to what the interviewer wants. For this reason, it's best to avoid articles with such titles as "How to Take Control of the Interview." They're based on the dangerous premise that an interview is a competition and you'll be more attractive to employers if you can dominate the meeting. On the contrary, fit comes from showing your ability to collaborate, not dominate.



The authority issue is complicated further by gender. Men tend to experience interpersonal interactions in terms of who's the "alpha," or more dominant person, and who's more submissive. On the other hand, women naturally incline toward collaboration and alliance out of a need for self-preservation.

If it's true that men want to dominate women, many men will feel a greater need to be dominant over strong women. For example, a male interviewer who encounters a self-assured, confident woman who isn't afraid to show authority may perceive her negatively or experience a subliminal need to "show her who's boss." This issue also leads to male interviewees who behave authoritatively being praised as "assertive" while female candidates who act similarly might be branded as "aggressive."

Clearly, the relative authority issue is a double bind for women. One effective strategy is to search early and often in the interview for cues about how much relative authority a male interviewer expects or demands. One female job hunter likens this process to "interview ju jitsu." By deflecting another person's display of power instead of trying to confront or overpower it, you turn it into a source of power for yourself, she says.

CAN I BELIEVE MY EYES?

Interviewers want to know, "Is what I'm seeing what I'll get?" Your credibility depends on your ability to convey that how you behave in an interview is how you'll be on the job. Thus, your lyrics should be consistent with your music. First and foremost, the interviewer will focus on the content, directness and candor of your answers, and whether they're canned or rehearsed. Your accompanying body language will be studied for truthfulness, deception, confidence and apprehension. Signs might include your eye contact, muscular tension, perspiration, breathing and speech rate, voice timbre, posture and gestures.

This doesn't mean you must control or manipulate these variables. You can't, because many are beyond conscious or consistent control. Unless your personal presentation is distinctly weird, your natural style is best and most credible. But if you have a limp-fish handshake or make poor eye contact, make improvements before interviewing.

If you realize that your vocals and music aren't in harmony, your best tactic is to call attention to it, not hide it. "You know, Ms. Jackson, I have really been keyed up about this interview, and I guess maybe it shows." One interviewee who realized he'd begun to babble saved the situation by remarking, "Boy, I don't even understand what I just said. Let me try that again in English."

SHARE VALUES

Compatibility depends on the interviewer's belief that you share and support the same values, priorities and goals. This is complicated territory, shaped by such factors as social, economic, religious and vocational backgrounds, and by the roles and style of both parties. An engineer talking to an engineer or an entrepreneur to another entrepreneur might experience instant



rapport, while a human-resources generalist interviewing a biological researcher might encounter barriers.

Compatibility also is shaped by the general culture of the interviewer's organization — the norms and values shaping "the way we do things around here." In preparing for an interview, learn about the formal face of the organization (as represented by its annual report, press releases or Dun & Bradstreet report) and its informal protocols. Networking with present or past employees is often the best way to dig out this "soft" information before interviews.

Finally, compatibility is affected by the messages you send about how easy it will be to affiliate with you. Sadly, for the 30% of the general population who test as introverts, "likability" often is closely related to an outgoing, extroverted interpersonal style. Social initiative is valued in the work world, and many highly qualified candidates are rejected because the interviewer concludes, "Nice enough person, but there's something going on there that I can't see or understand. Seems standoffish or aloof."

The good news is that introverted interviewers recognize and empathize with introverted interviewees. Still, shy and retiring types must cultivate the ability to "come across" well to interviewers, rather than passively awaiting questions. While you don't have to launch into a song-and-dance as soon as the meeting starts, you should take pains to relate actively to interviewers.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Context awareness can be conveyed by how well you read and respond to the dynamics and structure of a situation — in this case, the first few minutes of the interview. Often called "social intelligence," this trait reflects your ability to: * understand where the interviewer is coming from, * individualize and personalize this interaction and * adjust quickly and comfortably to changing signals or mixed messages.

Context awareness goes beyond mere politeness and tact; it's having real sensitivity to what a situation calls for. "I like people who are self-aware," says a corporate human resources manager, who describes such people as being "aware of my needs and priorities."

"I like people who listen hard, who reality-test often to make sure they're getting the right message and who can go with the flow of a situation without trying to over-control it or fit their preconceptions," he says.

STRIKING THE BALANCE

Being likable has another dimension: Understanding when and how much of each trait to convey. Not all interviewers will value these qualities in equal measures. In one situation, nice guys may finish last, while in another, the person who projects too much authority will get shown the door.



Think of these four components of likability as burners on a gas stove; they can be turned up or down to fit different types of jobs and interviewers. In other words, “cookin’ with gas” doesn’t mean that all burners should be cranked up to maximum flame.

To be sure, you can’t overdo context awareness. In all situations, you must anticipate and understand what personal characteristics are required and read and respond to the interviewer’s and comfort zones. You also must be ready to “go with the flow” as the interview progresses and first impressions give way to less superficial judgments. “Sell me what I need, not just what you want to sell me” is as true in interviews as it is in consultative sales.

Similarly, have your “credibility burner” turned up high at all times. Credibility is conveyed in several ways, including making consistent eye contact. Shifty eyes suggest devious thoughts. If your eyes stray, practice maintaining contact prior to the interview. Another way to project credibility is through the consistency and integrity of your responses. In this case, integrity goes beyond honesty and denotes logical rationality to your answers and thinking. Repeatedly shifting your point of view can signal that you’ll say what you think an interviewer wants to hear.

Credibility is further supported by an appearance of candor and forthrightness. Candor, in turn, is suggested by succinct sentences delivered in normal conversational tones. Using \$5 words and elaborate sentences points up a lack of spontaneity, as though you rehearsed in advance. If you say, “The erosion of the longitudinal exchange rate had a concomitant deleterious effect on the viability of our new product development initiatives,” the interviewer will wonder what you’re hiding, why you prepared this answer and whether you’re just trying to win a job, not have an authentic dialogue.

How much you display the other characteristics can vary depending on the situation. Conservative companies that operate in structured or formal settings — for instance, banking, law and accounting — place a higher value on projecting authority and credibility than on compatibility. In situations where power matters more than warmth, you’ll project more authority if you wear a shirt, suit and tie in dramatically contrasting colors. Asked to judge others on their appearance, respondents say midnight-blue suits, white shirts and a dark (often red) tie are the ultimate “power threads” (black is considered too powerful for a generally upper-middle class business value system).

Of course, if you’re 6 feet 7 inches tall and weigh 300 pounds, this trio will blow interviewers away, so soften your authority by diminishing the contrast, perhaps wearing a gray suit or blue shirt, or both. (Men should never wear browns or earth tones when interviewing for high-stakes private-sector positions.) For women, the rules are more flexible and still evolving, but the high-contrast-equals-high-authority principle still applies.

Short answers to interview questions connote power and authority, while long answers signal a desire to elaborate and please others. Like or hate him, Ross Perot presents powerfully. Jimmy Carter, who tends to explain a lot, comes across as less authoritative but more compatible.



Compatibility can be suggested by showing respect for the interviewer's or employer's opinions and value system. "I understand the rules and conventions," your demeanor and answers must suggest. "You and I see things alike."

Whether the norms are short-sleeved shirts with pencil protectors in engineering environments or the unstated demand that you "be remarkable unremarkably" in the legal/financial world, you must show by your dress and demeanor that you understand and accept "how we do things around here." Prepare for interviews by going beyond reviewing the position description and researching the company. Also investigate, preferably through networking, the formal and informal values and canons of the industry, organization and interviewer.

In certain situations, you'll suggest compatibility most strongly by identifying with the interviewer. Take note of the trappings in the interviewer's office and what they mean. Are there personal photos or memorabilia that say, in effect, "I'm an individual! I want you to know who I am!" Or is the interviewer's space more impersonal, suggesting that unduly personalizing the interview will be a turnoff?

Listen hard for words, examples or opinions that indicate subtle likes and dislikes. You don't have to say whatever's agreeable, but you should be careful not to impugn or demean the interviewer's values. Staying tuned to subtle cues and covert signals is hard work. Interviewing isn't easy; it's just your job to make it look easy.

These factors provide plenty of material to think about before interviews, and that's what you should do to prepare. Don't make yourself into a talking dog or become obsessive about colors. Just sensitize yourself to these "arenas of image" and anticipate what the interviewer will like and why. If you can do that, you'll find that the interviewer will like you.