

Chapter 1

What do you know about Interviewing?

What does it take to pick the right person for the right job? What prompts you to make that all-important selection? The psychology of the interview process has mystified managers for generations. They've spent countless hours searching for clear-cut guidelines to help guide them through the murky waters.

To understand the complexity of interviewing, we must start at the beginning and look at a bit of history. Some managers see interviewing as an intuitive process that cannot be learned. "The biggest blind spot hiring managers have in our recruiting experience is that they believe that their 'intuition' will guide them to the correct hire. They look at a strict process as being 'cold,' time consuming, or just not worth the effort,"¹ wrote Dan Erling in *Match*. That kind of thinking has led to costly hiring mistakes and endless confusion about the interview. It's that kind of thinking that led many managers to skip training and toss their new managers out there, saying, "Here's a candidate. Talk to him and if you like him, start him to work on Monday."

Indeed, most of us have had no training in interviewing, which, by the way, is one of the most important jobs you'll have as a manager. Lou Adler tells us in *Hire with Your Head* that when he landed his first job in a Fortune 100 company with no interview training, he was sent on a corporate recruiting trip. In other words he was a newly hired employee with no training in recruiting sent out to find people to hire for the entire company! The head of human resources gave him three minutes of interviewing advice.² You might think this example unusual, unfortunately it represents the norm.

Your success in hiring can make or break your career. Instead of beginning with the assumption that you know how to interview and what an interview is, let's assume you know nothing and start at the beginning.

Defining the Interview

Richard Olson defined interviewing as:

“A set of verbal and nonverbal interactions between two or more people focused on gathering information to decide a course of action.”³

This definition tells you that your decision--to hire or not hire, is based on **“a set of verbal and nonverbal interactions.”** If you're a manager, you are probably thinking, what does that mean? Indeed, sets of verbal and nonverbal interactions are not clear; they are vague. Imagine telling your boss you want to hire someone because you liked her set of verbal and nonverbal interactions. What response might that evoke? Clearly then the decision to hire someone is not based on sheer fact--whether he went to Harvard or has experience flying super jets. The decision to hire someone is based on much more and that much more is not something you can put your finger on. ***This is our first clue that interviewing is not a straightforward process lending itself to a spreadsheet and numbers. Instead, it's a challenge that must be faced with a healthy dose of respect.***

The second thing you notice in the definition is the term, *interaction*. What does interaction say to you? As a manager you know that one of your biggest challenges is dealing with people. You may have lots of knowledge about the particular fields you're in whether its medicine, law or academics, but when you add people to the mix,

everything turns topsy-turvy. A fantastic surgeon, who demands that people respond to his every need, disregarding what is best for the patient, leaves staff frustrated, angry, and polishing up their résumés. These kinds of problems--interactions among and between people--cause more trouble than anything else you face. **Interviewing is all about interaction**--interaction between the interviewer and the candidate and vice versa as well as interaction among fellow interviewing colleagues.

The third important component of Olson's definition of interviewing is the insistence that you make a decision. With most other decisions in management, you can postpone your decision by spending time gathering more information or by asking others to look into the matter for you. But once you exit an interview, you must make a decision--time is of the essence. Thumbs up or thumbs down. Hire or not? This puts tremendous pressure on the interviewer. Adler advises waiting before making a decision. He says time will help improve the selection success. Unfortunately as most managers know, candidates don't wait. If you are not quick to decide, the good candidates disappear. Waiting alone will not guarantee success

The final and most important aspect of Olson's definition is the concept of verbal and nonverbal interactions. Nonverbal interactions are things you sense, not particular things you hear or see. **Putting nonverbal cues in the mix means the interview decision is not based on fact but on feeling.** How can a manager make a professional, clear-headed decision when the basis for that decision is feeling?

Looking at these four important pieces of the interview leads you to the next critical question. **Is there a way to conduct an interview that will help the manager hire smart and keep 'em and avoid the pitfalls of a subjective, intuitive decision?**

The answer to that question is yes. When managers interview strategically using the POINT process, they increase the odds of hiring successfully

The Evolution of the Strategic Interview

Again, given that most of us know little to nothing about interviewing even though we've been at it for years, let's begin with a little history. Back in the day when businesses were small mom and pop operations, interviews were very informal. Someone who knew someone came to talk to you and if you liked that person, you hired him or her. Hiring mistakes cost little. If you erred, you started over. New employees walked right in and did the job with little or no training. The process of interviewing did not exist. This kind of interview became known as the laissez-faire interview. Imagine the interviewer leaning back in her chair and talking to the candidate about herself and her experiences. In the laissez-faire interview the interviewer talked over seventy-percent of the interview time. This interviewer's goal was to get to know the candidate informally. Jobs were not complex. A candidate's ability to do the job mattered little. Much of the interview decision was based on personality, emotions, biases, chemistry and stereotypes, not on clear-cut competencies.

Laissez-faire interviewing dominated for a long time, well into the early part of the 20th Century and some may argue still exists today. The Industrial Age brought with it large businesses with bureaucracies where laissez-faire interviewing no longer worked. Bigger businesses recognized that they could not trust these informal interviews to produce quality hiring decisions. In response, the companies swung the pendulum in the opposite direction. What emerged was the structured interview.

When I began training interviewers over fifteen years ago, structured interviewing was what companies wanted their managers to learn. Companies demanded consistency in interviewing. In other words, they wanted a structured set of questions that managers asked every candidate, regardless. The other factor that came into play with the Industrial Age was litigation. When people began suing big business for the so-called biases characterizing the laissez-faire interview, companies looked for something entirely different. Furthermore, as interviewing penetrated deeper into the organization, i.e., not just the owner interviewed, owners (and CEO's) sought to maintain control. The more people interviewing, the greater the risk for law suits or costly hiring mistakes. The solution was a structured interview.

Both laissez-faire and structured interviewing have problems in today's world. These types of interviews represent polar opposites. The laissez-faire interview characterized by too much freedom tells you nothing about the candidate and exposes managers to criticism or law suits. The structured interview, on the other hand, characterized by too much formality shuts out listening and tells you nothing about the candidate. Both result in frustrating hiring mistakes leading managers to scratch their heads in frustration. How can we create an interview process that allows for informality and structure but reveals important information about the candidate?

The Birth of Strategic Interviewing

There are some good things about the laissez-faire interview. For one, the interview is conversational. For another, the interview feels informal and informality enables the candidate to relax. Those are good things. Unfortunately the focus of the

laissez-faire interview is not on the candidate but on the employer and the job. The interviewer eats up seventy or more percent of the interview time. **Strategic interviewing shifts the focus from the employer to the candidate but keeps the informality and conversational feel.** One important component of a strategic interview is openness. Hence, the O in the POINT process. As an interviewer, you look for ways to enable the candidate to open up and share information she probably didn't intend to share when she walked in the door. Candidates do that when they feel as if they are having a relaxed conversation with someone they trust. Not when they feel interrogated. As we'll see further into this book, **trust is one of the key ingredients of the strategic interview and one of the most difficult to accomplish.**

The structured interview, too, has some good aspects. It isn't haphazard; it has a purpose and a direction--parameters. Unfortunately, again the focus of the structured interview is not the candidate but the job. Regardless of the candidate and what she tells you, structural interviewers ask the same questions. Strategic interviewers, on the other hand, shift the focus to the candidate but keep the parameters. In a strategic interview every question has a purpose. Strategic interviewers resemble detectives sifting through a mass of clues for just the right one. They must filter through everything with dogged determination until that one significant piece of evidence surfaces.

Strategic interviewing takes the best of laissez-faire and structural interviewing and combines them into a new process that focuses on the candidate.

Strategic interviewing therefore is an interviewing process that focuses on a candidate's past behavior to strip away the superficial in order to discover what lies underneath.

Let's analyze an example of a short interview and determine what kind of interview it represents:

Interviewer: *I see you went to Rutgers University.*

Candidate: *Yes, I got my bachelors there last year.*

Interviewer: *How did you like Rutgers?*

Candidate: *Oh, it's a fine school. It prepared me for my graduate work.*

Interviewer: *Yes, I see here you went to Columbia University. That was while you were working for Jordan & Company. Did you go to school in the evenings?*

Candidate: *Yes, I went in the evenings*

Was this interview laissez-faire, structured or strategic? The first question tells you that the interviewer did not prepare for this interview. When you launch into your interview with a question that you already know the answer to because it's clearly on the résumé, you say to the candidate, I'm not prepared.

The second question is an open question. Can you identify a strategic purpose for that question? Perhaps the interviewer simply wanted to get the candidate talking. That is a legitimate purpose and could lead you to believe this might either be a structural or strategic interview.

After the candidate opened up a little in her response to the second question, the interviewer once again asked a question he already knew the answer to, and he then actually answered the question for the candidate.

This interview appears to be laissez-faire because it has no purpose, no direction and seems informal. It is clearly not structured--where's the structure? Or strategic--where's the strategy?

I've seen many interviews conducted in this manner. When managers get no interview training, they depend on the résumé to guide them through the interview. If this interview continues in this fashion, the manager will learn next to nothing about the candidate.

Let's re-write the above interview as a strategic interview:

Interviewer: *I see you went to Rutgers, so did I. Tell me what you enjoyed about that school.* (Open question that shares a bit of information about the interviewer. It has a clear purpose: to develop rapport with the candidate and to get the candidate talking)

Candidate: *I enjoyed the freedom to study with top of the line professors. I also enjoyed the opportunity to intern one summer for Jordan & Company.*

Interviewer: *When you say you enjoyed the freedom to study what do you mean?* (Open question to dig deeper into what the candidate enjoyed.)

Candidate: *I mean I liked not having too much structure. Many of my classes were open seminars. That enabled me to pursue areas of study I enjoyed and that led me to my graduate work in international business.*

Interviewer: *So you prefer to work in an environment without too much structure?* (Paraphrase designed to clarify the kind of work environment the candidate enjoys)

Candidate: *I like direction, but I also like to contribute and be part of the team.*

This interview was focused on the candidate. The interviewer heard what the candidate said and responded to her, but the interviewer kept control of the interview. The candidate wanted to share her experiences in graduate school, but the interviewer was interested in the candidate's work history. The interviewer did not read off the

résumé. Even in this short interview, we can predict this interviewer's strategy: to find out what kind of work environment this candidate preferred. If the company has a tightly supervised work team, this candidate might not be a good fit.

This example illustrates how carefully the interviewer must listen to the candidate's responses. Interviewing, therefore, is an advanced form of communication and listening.

How to Communicate as an Interviewer

Because we must exercise skillful communication to interview effectively, let's examine what communication is and how good listening affects the interview process.

In my book, *Managing Sticky Situations at Work: Communication Secrets for Success in the Workplace*, I defined communication as ***behavior that transmits meaning from one person to another.***⁴

Interviewers must address two important pieces of this definition, namely behavior and meaning. ***Behavior*** indicates what you see a person say or do that communicates something to you. That information communicated may or may not be accurate. For example if a person crosses her arms, you might think the person is cold but in reality she might be offended by something you said. This is where feedback comes into play. You must check out what you see and hear to determine if the ***meaning*** transmitted is accurate.

In a strategic interview, you cannot check out *everything* you see and hear. You must pick and chose what to address and what to ignore--remember the detective looking for clues. He cannot pour all his resources into every clue.

One major problem with the way all of us communicate is that we do not pay attention to what is going on around us. We are bombarded with so many stimuli that we ignore the most important things we see and hear. Those important pieces of the communication get overrun by the mundane and irrelevant. An attentive strategic interviewer understands this problem and sets his antenna on high alert for those important targets competencies. Let's look at an example.

Interviewer Jane is looking for a candidate whose a team player who can produce results in a highly active environment.

Candidate Mark is talking about the work he did for a design company.

"I was responsible for picking the fabrics and for finding the best vendor that would satisfy customers. Whenever we had new customers, I went to see them and discussed their needs. Because I love art and color, I enjoyed the opportunity to explore options with the customers."

"How did you come up with the appropriate vendor?" Jane asked

"We have a list of vendors that we use. After I visit with the client, I go back to my office and select the vendors."

"And you do this alone?"

"It was a small company, just me and the owner. For the most part I worked on my own with little interference and I liked that."

"What did you like about working independently?"

Mark smiles. "I have worked for big operations where people barely know who you are. In my current job we work closely when needed and separate when needed. If, for example, I was working on a big project, and Sandi comes in with a question, I only

have to motion to her for her to realize this isn't a good time to interrupt me. Later, we'd confer in her office."

Jane asked questions related to what the candidate told her but in pursuit of her target: the ability to produce in a team environment. She could have looked at other issues: leadership, conflict management, customer relations, but instead she focused on her target. ***Strategic communication means not just listening for meaning but listening for just the right meaning.***

As you examine behavior and meaning in communication, you must look at the kinds of behavior that communicate messages.

The Power of Nonverbal Behavior in Communication

According to landmark research done by Albert Mehrabian at UCLA in the 1960's⁵, communication comprises three distinct parts: Visual, Vocal, and Verbal. Mehrabian and his colleagues studied thousands of people over a number of years to uncover these three distinct parts of communication. We must note here that Mehrabian did not include one additional part of communication in his research: touch. Touch is an important component of communication in an interview. What is the first thing you do when you meet someone for the first time? You shake hands, right? The handshake is full of nonverbal communication: is the handshake strong, weak, sweaty? As a strategic interviewer, you want to capture that information as well as the visual, vocal and verbal.

When Merharabian examined visual, vocal, and verbal communication, he found that visual communication gave the message more power than vocal communication, and vocal gave the message more power than verbal. He discovered that we transmit

meaning via each of these three portals at differing levels of intensity. In other words if you tell me, for example, “I’m very glad to meet you,” but your eyes wander as if searching for someone else, I don’t believe you are glad to meet me.

. When we talk about visual communication, we mean *all the messages you get through the eyes*: gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, personal appearance. Dr. Mehrabian found that 55 percent of communication came through visual messages.

Since Mehrabian’s research there have been interesting studies that take his results a step further. The BBC Science and Nature project, for instance, conducted a widespread study to identify fake smiles.⁶

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/>) This study gave us more information to help us sharpen our ability to read visual communication. Take a look at the site. See how many fake smiles you can pinpoint and what lead you to believe a smile was real or fake.

Malcolm Gladwell’s book, *Blink*, is full of information about the power of the visual message. His premise was that we size people up--sometimes pretty accurately--with a blink. He cited studies by John Gottman. In these studies Gottman claimed to predict marital success. Gladwell wrote that Gottman looked for indirect traces of emotion, e.g., “that flit across one person’s face; the hint of stress picked up by the sweat glands of the palm; a sudden surge of heart rate.”⁷ Gottman examined these unconscious physical phenomena to help people determine their compatibility. He was looking for visual messages to measure the predictability of whether a marriage would succeed or fail and he did so with amazing accuracy.

By vocal communication Mehrabian meant all the sounds we make that are not actual words, (including silence): um's, sighs, laughs, chuckles, grunts, groans. Vocal also included articulation, modulation, and pacing. Dr. Mehrabian found that 38 percent of communication came through the ears. In Chapter 2 we will examine how to conduct effective interviews by telephone. Vocal communication plays a significant role when you cannot grasp the visual message. Awareness of your vocal messages and the vocal messages others transmit to you will help you uncover the "hidden" messages inherent in all communication, i.e., what people are not saying. ***The essence of the strategic interview is to uncover those hidden messages and pursue them doggedly.***

By verbal communication Mehrabian meant the actual words or the content of the message, e.g., the grammar, the word choice. Mehrabian found that only seven percent of communication came through the content. Even though Mehrabian showed us that a small percentage of the power of communication comes through the words, strategic interviewers must stay aware of the words in order to stay tuned to their key targets.

Confident communicators hear the words, and they heed the nonverbal cues. From those cues they discover the feelings behind the words. You must become a confident communicator to determine what lies beneath the surface. If you interview on the surface level, you are not conducting a strategic interview. ***The only way to get under the message--uncover the truth--is to explore what the candidate isn't saying with her words but is saying with her action.*** Ninety-three percent of the power of the message comes through nonverbal communication (the combination of the visual and vocal).

How does an interviewer explore nonverbal meaning? When the candidate crosses his arms during the interview, do you stop and ask, “Why did you cross your arms?” When a candidate’s eyes shift to the clock, do you ask, “What made you look at the clock just now?” You cannot directly ask about a nonverbal behavior. All of us respond nonverbally on a subconscious level. That means we do not wish for these things to come into our consciousness. Strategic interviewers must see these things and then address the feelings behind the action.

Let’s examine an example and how a strategic interviewer might uncover what’s behind the nonverbal cues.

You are recruiting a candidate for a Human Resources Manager in a large company.

Mr. Jones, dressed in a navy suit with a colorful tie, gray hair and carrying a briefcase walks into your office for an interview. The man shakes your hand firmly and greets you with a smile but no eye contact. His eyes take in the surroundings in one quick movement. He sits across from you, crosses one leg over the other and glances out the window behind your desk. He straightens the crease in his pants as you begin the interview. His fingers thump the top of his briefcase while you talk

List everything you take in about this man before he says one word.

- Dresses carefully. (Interview is important to him)
- Firm handshake. (confidence)
- No eye contact at handshake (nervous or closed personality or impatient)

- Glances out the window before talking, not looking at you (nervous, gathering himself). If you hear a vocal cue, e.g., a sigh, that helps confirm he's anxious to get this interview over. Perhaps he knows you're the first step in a series of interviews.
- Straightens the crease in his pants (Not looking at you. More concerned about the impression he's making. Attention to detail)
- Fingers thump the top of his briefcase while you talk (anxious, in a hurry, impatient)

How the Interviewer Might Interview Mr. Jones:

If you find yourself face to face with Mr. Jones, you can do several things to help you gain control of the interview:

- Begin the interview as an orientation. Let the candidate know what he'll be going through and with whom he will meet. Spend the first few minutes talking before you begin asking questions. Do not get defensive. Do not list your credentials or compete for the man's respect. You know from the nonverbal behaviors, that he's confident, nervous and perhaps in a hurry. You also know he's impatient. He wants to get on with the process and perhaps interview with the big wigs.
- The man seems tense; you should relax. Ask questions that get the candidate talking. Listen intently to what he says and respond without harsh probing.

- If he's still showing signs of impatience or nervousness after you've begun talking, address those signs gently: "I've noticed you seem a bit restless. Could I get you a cup of coffee or some bottled water?"
- Watch the candidate's visual cues for changes. When he relaxes, ask the more probing questions.
- Don't let the candidate's tension rub off on you. Your goal is to create a safe environment so your relaxed demeanor will rub off on him, not the reverse.

As this example illustrates, we can learn a lot from just a few nonverbal messages. How you respond to those messages will determine the success of the interview. If, for example, you responded defensively to Mr. Jones--his nonverbal cues suggested he didn't want to be talking with you--you would lose out.

The Power of Perception in the Interview

Perception plays an important and often obscure role in the interview. Strategic interviewers can do all the right things and still get sidetracked by perception. What is perception and how does it affect the interview?

I defined perception in my first book on strategic interviewing ***as an unidentified feeling that is not based on fact.***⁸

Imagine this familiar scenario: A candidate walks into your office for an interview. You've reviewed the résumé and carefully isolated the strategic issues you want to address. You've also studied the job and know what is needed. Indeed, you've done all your homework. As soon as the candidate walks in, you get a bad vibe. You shake the candidate's hand, and you still feel uncomfortable. As you go through the interview, a

voice in the back of your head screams, “No!” You try to listen to the candidate, but in the end, you know you cannot hire this person. The vibes are too strong. When the candidate leaves, you realize you didn’t hear most of what he said, and you have no idea why you didn’t like him, but you didn’t.

In this case you made the right decision not to hire. Strategic interviewers do all they can to counteract the power of perception, but ***if the perception persists, the best course of action is to go with your gut.*** What have you lost if you do so? You may have let a very good candidate slip by. But you don’t know that. What you do know is if you take a risk and hire, you may make a costly hiring mistake. It is less costly to reject this candidate and go on to the next one than to hire. Perception in this case has won.

Let’s look at another scenario. This time the candidate walks in and from the moment she enters the room, there’s instant rapport. Again, you’ve done your homework, studied the résumé, isolated the key target areas, and planned your interview. But, this time, the little voice in the back of your head is saying, “Yes!” In whatever way the candidate responds, your mind says, “great answer.” Once again you try and go through your planned strategic interview, probing for key points, but you find yourself skipping parts because you know you’re going to offer this person the job. After all, she is perfect. Right?

Wrong! In this case you made the wrong decision. When you have a positive perception about someone, you are in dangerous territory. Your listening ability diminishes. Whatever the candidate says even if she says something outrageous, you give her the benefit of the doubt. The candidate wins you over with her ability to “snow”

you. There are many candidates out there who are extremely skilled at interviewing. Even seasoned interviewers fall prey to these perception traps. In this case, you've failed to answer the ultimate question: can this candidate do the job? The positive perception clouded your judgment. But, you say, wasn't your judgment clouded by the negative perception as well? Of course it was. The bottom line lies in the cost in making an incorrect decision. ***When the perception is negative and you decide not to hire, the cost is negligible but when the perception is positive and you decide to hire, the cost is enormous.***

How can a strategic interviewer manage perception? Awareness is half the battle. You must recognize when you've been zapped by a perception, either positive or negative. Now that you understand that the most dangerous perceptions are positive, you can be on high alert when you've been zapped by positive perceptions. In other words you cannot accept your own judgment when your perceptions are too strong. You must call for reinforcements. Ask a colleague to join the interview and conduct it as a team. We will discuss team interviews in Chapter 4. Be careful, however. Perceptions are contagious. If you tell your colleague, "I really like this person and it's clouding my judgment," you've immediately shared the perception virus. Instead, simply say to your colleague you need another opinion. You need not explain further.

In this chapter we've defined strategic interviews by looking at the history of interviewing and contrasting a strategic focus with laissez-faire and structured interviewing. We've also taken a long look at communication and the impact of nonverbal cues on the interview decision. Finally we examined the power of perception in order to prepare ourselves for perception landmines.

In chapter 2 we'll look at the way strategic interviewers recruit candidates. In other words how do you get the right people to interview in the first place? Hiring smart begins before the candidate actually walks through your door. It begins with the initial decision to open up the recruiting process.

Practice Exercise

Read the following interview and identify whether the interview is strategic, structured or laissez-faire:

Interviewer: "Thank you for coming in today. My name is Martha Lewis and I'm going to spend just a few minutes talking to you today before we continue with the interview process. Let's begin with getting to know one another a little. Tell me about yourself."

Candidate: "I grew up here in Kalamazoo and I love living here. Even though I went out of town to college, I'm anxious to get back here where my family lives and all."

Interviewer: "I grew up here too. I left to study in California for a few years but it didn't take me long to realize I needed to get back. My gosh people out there in California are different, if you know what I mean."

Candidates: (laughs) "I do know what you mean. My roommate at college was from San Francisco. I thought she was great, but I have to say, she was really different."

Interviewer: "Sort of like a modern day hippie?"

Candidate: "Yeah. She wore the strangest clothes and practiced yoga in the room every day. I did start drinking herbal tea but that's about as far as I got."

Interviewer: "What kind of herbal tea?"

Was this interview

_____strategic _____structured _____laissez-faire

(See Appendix 1 for answers)

¹ Dan Erling, *Match: A Systematic, Sane Process for Hiring the Right Person Every Time*, (Hoboken, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2011)14.

² Lou Adler, *Hire with Your Head: Using Performance-Based Hiring to Build Great Teams*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007) ix.

³ Richard F. Olson, *Managing the Interview* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1980) 8.

⁴ Joan C. Curtis, *Managing Sticky Situations at Work: Communication Secrets for Success in the Workplace*, (Praeger Press: Santa Barbara, CA) 1

⁵ Albert Mehrabian and Morton Weiner, *Language within Language* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968).

⁶ BBC Science and Nature, *Human Body Mind Surveys*
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/>

⁷ Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (Little, Brown and Company: New York, NY, 2005) 39.

⁸ Joan C. Curtis, *Strategic Interviewing: Skills and Tactics for Savvy Executives* (Quorum Books: Westport, Connecticut, 2000) 46