Guide to the Executive Interview

No matter what level your experience, to be an expert at anything takes practice, 10,000 hours they say! When it comes to interviews, the fact is most people simply don’t interview enough to master the art, regardless of your extensive working experience and job-related skills. Clearly, performing well at the interview is probably the most critical element to securing key executive positions. Often executives with exceptional skills and experience are unfortunately overlooked in the interview process because they haven’t been able to aptly display their skills using strong interview techniques.

At u&u, we don’t want that to occur for our executive candidates, so to add value in your process we have outlined some key tips that might assist you in gaining greater insight to performing at your best in the interview process.

1. **Know how to answer behavioural interviews**

Most trained interviewers will be utilising a behavioural interview technique to ask the key questions. As part of this training they will be looking for key elements in your answer. With this in mind, utilise the STAR approach to answering all your questions in an interview. This is the model interviewers will be using to assess your answers and if you understand and follow this structure you will be more effective in receiving positive outcomes from your interview answers.

The model of STAR is that each candidate needs to answer questions in the following structure. Give firstly the **Situation** (e.g. what was the problem, organisational context etc.), **Task/Action** (what is the specific action you took to solve that problem etc.) and **Result** (what was the result of that task and action). By following this method, it gives more focus to your answers, keeps your answers concise and ensures you give the interviewer what they are looking for in the timeframe allocated. If you don’t answer any of the three areas the interviewer will class it as an ‘incomplete STAR’ answer which elicits a lesser score for the answer.

In addition to this structure, the interviewer will be looking for the following:

- **Recency** - The more recent, the more relevant. Avoid examples that are too long ago as it may be perceived that you haven’t operated in that space in recent times and therefore will be less current and effective in that skill set / competency. If you do give an example from a while back, make sure you also give another example that is recent as well.

- **Similarity** - The best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour in a similar situation. The more similar the situation / context, the better. Make sure the example you select is the closest you possibly have in terms of situation / context / challenge / organisation etc. for the role in question.

- **Longstanding behaviour** - The more longstanding the behaviour, the greater prediction that has on future performance. Give a few examples if you have time to and be prepared to be asked for another example of the same competence.

2. **Use the ‘traffic light rule’ for your answers / conversation**

One of the biggest mistakes executives make in the interview process is over-speaking. Long winded answers can prevent you from getting across all your experience as invariably the interviewer will only have a set amount of time allocated for the interview. If you use the time up on one or two answers you will be unsuccessful in displaying all the necessary skills and experience you wish to get across.

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Additionally, it may also give the interviewer the impression you are long-winded and will bore them, which does not increase your chances of a successful outcome.

When you talk to someone, their brain normally goes through a few simple stages in the listening process. They might be interested in listening at first, but their attention will quickly dissolve into complete disinterest. Mark Goulston at the Harvard Business Review explains the "traffic light rule".

"During the first 30 seconds of talking, your light is green: your listener is probably paying attention and liking you as long as your statement is relevant to the conversation. During the second 30 seconds, your light is yellow—your listener may be starting to wish you’d finish. After the one-minute mark, your light is red. But unless you are an extremely gifted conversationalist, people who talk for more than roughly a minute at a time are perceived as boring and often perceived as too chatty, which are not strong traits for executives.

A good rule of thumb is to pay attention to your audience. If the person you’re talking to begins fidgeting, consistently interrupting you or literally tuning out, you’ve gone too far so try your hardest to check in on your audience after 30 seconds and especially after a minute. You can do this by including the other person in the conversation. Ask them a question, try to build on what they say and look for other ways to include them in the discussion so it is a genuine dialogue instead of a ramble.

For example, if you are speaking about an organisational context that is averse to change when you are setting the scene (Situation section of STAR technique) after you have described it ask your audience a question "is that something you have experienced in your organisation as well?" Don’t expect a long answer, but you have reset your traffic light for the next part of your answer: your action.

Sometimes, you have to run that red light to get your point across, but most of the time you’re better off stopping yourself. Remember, a good conversation is like a tennis match with a lot of back and forth. So, when you start talking about something — especially yourself — notice how long you take to get your thoughts out. Could you be getting the same point across with fewer words?

The STAR interview answer format we spoke of above will also help give your answers a focus and therefore keep your answers succinct.

Well, we think our 40 seconds is up for this section, so we’ll stop here!

3. **Start with the big picture context**

Companies are looking for executives that are strategic and think globally before jumping in to the detail. The STAR interview answer technique will guide you to do this more regularly, but just remember if asked a question, first set the big picture context and what the organisation was looking to achieve, before giving your actions and experience, finally finish with how your actions got that result. If it didn’t, speak of your learnings. On the flipside, make sure you give significant details in the actions. If you are too high level in your responses on actions, then the interviewer may get the impression you do not have that expertise.

For example: “Tell me about a transformation program you have led.”
Start with context (keep it succinct): I was working for XXX and we were looking to transform the organisation to achieve better service outcomes, efficiencies and cost savings. We believed this was to be achieved through increased culture and capability in the business.

Action (keep it on point): To achieve this we ran XXXX and delivered XXXX

Result (keep it succinct): The result of the program was that we drive significantly better outcomes with our service standards and customer feedback and …

4. Clarify the question if you are unsure

Sometimes executives will give long winded answers because they didn’t quite understand the question. Therefore, you give a range of answers hoping one of them will hit the mark of what the interviewer is looking for. It is worth just asking the interviewer to clarify what they are looking for from their question if you are unsure, this will ensure you answer on point and with relevance.

5. Listen for chances to hit that slam dunk

As we mentioned above, an interview is like a game of tennis. You ‘to and fro’ with questions and answers, but if you listen well, you can often find those low hanging ‘slam dunks’ that allow you to ‘wow’ the interviewer through showing how specific and relevant your experience is.

Many people I see in interview, don’t take cues from the interviewer to speak specifically about their experience. For example, in conversation if the interviewer says “we really struggle to lift our levels of customer satisfaction due to the long standing culture”, many people don’t respond and let the interviewer continue. Don’t let that comment hang if you have been in a similar circumstance, bounce back with confirmation that you know how they feel and how you have addressed that problem in a previous organisation.

Sometimes you miss the opportunities to grab that slam dunk because you are busy planning or thinking about what you might say next. My advice is to listen in the moment and really hit those slam dunks when they present but keep it succinct.

6. Plan your answers

Executives are notoriously busy so often underprepared for interviews. Before the interview give yourself a 30 minute down time to think about all the competencies/experience that might be relevant to the position you are about to interview for and just apply the STAR interview answer technique to each so that you have some pre-prepared ideas on what you will say.
A good exercise might be to write down the competencies / experience that is relevant and jot down the organisations where you had that experience, key projects and outcomes. It will jog your memory on projects you might have forgotten about and ensure you are more focused in your answers. If it rolls off the tongue easily in interview it will be perceived more positively.

Don't take that written information in to the interview, however, as if you are reading the information it can be perceived as not authentic.

7. **Know your numbers**

Clearly a key trait of senior executives is high levels of financial acumen. In the interview process you may be asked questions about size of projects, revenue of organisations you have worked in, your previous operational expenditure or capex budgets. If you can't speak to these with confidence, your financial savvy may come in to question.

Therefore, before the interview, refresh yourself on your key numbers, make sure you can speak to them with confidence and go back the past 5-10 years at least in this realm. If financial savvy is a key competency required in the role you are looking at (which for executives is largely always the case) make sure you speak to those numbers proactively even if you are not asked. Just find ways to slip them in to your context examples or result parts of the interview question answers.

8. **Develop a relationship; build rapport**

There are a range of unconscious biases in play in the interview process so understanding them will help you avoid any unfair negative perceptions from the interviewer which might mean they mark your interview answers more harshly than they should. Build rapport by using a range of simple things:

- Smile
- Give a firm (not too strong!) handshake on introduction
- Ask them a question about themselves first up
- Always maintain eye contact when answering questions
- If there is more than one interviewer in the room, share eye contact evenly
- Look for similarities between you both and bring them up if you can
- Note any common connections (use cautiously as you are not sure of their relationship)
- Thank them for seeing you, or for the interview at the end
- Complement them or the business on an achievement you read/know about (only if genuine and significant)
- Be courteous and friendly to the receptionist (they are often asked about you before or after the interview)
9. Ask great questions - you are being evaluated on them too

You will often be asked if you have any questions at the end of the interview. This is often a missed opportunity for executives as they will often ask bland, uninspiring questions that don't excite the interviewer and are not demonstrating you think at the right level. Have a few questions to ask that show you are thinking ahead and really analysing opportunities or challenges in the business. If they are answered during the interview, then ensure you are keeping an eye out for any other good questions that will arise through that interview process.

10. Do your research

We are in the age of information where we have never had more access to a vast array of information, especially online. In addition to this, organisations are looking for executives that are innovative and current and can move their organisation forward in the new age of business, so show you have done your research and can use these channels effectively. It also shows your planning, critical research and motivation along the way.

Some key areas to research before the interview include:

- The organisation’s website, particularly the leadership (including the board) team and any recent news (this can provide you with some great questions as well)
- The LinkedIn profiles of the people that will be interviewing you (can help you find any similarities you have with them or shared contacts, also shows you are interested in them which can build rapport)
- Their ASX information if they are a public company
- Do a general ‘google’ search on the organisation to see what public information is displayed

11. Be authentic and go in with a positive mindset

At the end of the day, people are attracted to people that present as authentic as it engenders trust in the relationship. Be yourself, be honest, be sincere and ultimately go in to the interview in a positive mind frame as it will set you up beautifully for a successful interview.

Good luck in your job search and we hope we have been able to add value for you in the interview process.