

## **How to Survive A Team Interview**

By **MARLENE CAROSELLI**

If you're preparing to interview for a job, you must expect the unexpected. Long gone are the days when a single interviewer asked questions that simply expanded on your resume. Today, you might find yourself in an assessment center or interview with employees you'd work with if hired. An interviewer may hand you a sheet of paper and ask you to write down the reasons you should be offered the available job, or you could find yourself, along with other applicants, being asked to solve a problem collectively. Or you may be asked a brainteaser such as "How many barbers are there in Chicago?"

Team interviews are another variation on the traditional interview theme. Not all team interviews are alike. Del Laboratories, a pharmaceutical and cosmetics firm in Uniondale, N.Y., defines team interviews as taking a candidate through a series of one-on-one interviews, says Pat Lloyd, vice president for human resources. After the meetings, the interviewers gather to discuss the candidate's performance. Using common criteria and position descriptions, members assess the information from the individual sessions and their reactions.

Another tactic is for several interviewers to meet with an applicant at the same time. At Del Laboratories, this method is used when a future hire will be working directly for several managers. "We save considerable time this way," says Mr. Lloyd. "Naturally, we're careful to structure the interview so the applicant doesn't feel overwhelmed."

Beth Schachtman, employment manager at Paychex, a national payroll and human-resources outsourcing firm in Rochester, N.Y., notes that team interviews benefit companies and candidates. "We use 'tag-team interviews' on occasion, where we team a more experienced interviewer with a person who has limited experience. The interview situation becomes a kind of 'on-the-job' training scenario to develop the skills of the less experienced person."

Having a candidate meet with several people at once saves time. For out-of-town candidates, meeting several interviewers in a single setting eliminates the need to fly back two or three times.

### **Put Your Best Foot Forward**

Regardless of the format, expect team interviews to be challenging. The initial exchanges with the interview team are the most difficult. At this point, you and your interviewers are evaluating each other. Those first few minutes could be the most critical, since strong impressions can be formed in the first few seconds. For this reason, realize the importance of external items and mannerisms. How you enter the room, your clothes and accessories, the way you shake hands and your voice tone all create an impression. If it's unfavorable, you'll spend the rest of the interview trying to improve it. If you make a good first impression, strive to make it better during the meeting.

As a candidate, your goal is to find out if the company's environment parallels your interests and values. Your prospective employer is trying to decide if your personality and background fit its culture. If a hiring committee is almost certain you're the right candidate, the group interview will be used to ensure a good fit.

At Del Laboratories, "we might introduce the candidate to the human-resources department and the individuals with whom he or she'll be working," says Mr. Lloyd. "Or, we might invite the person to lunch, so that the introductory aspects of a new employee beginning a new job can be facilitated."

### **Assessment Centers**

An assessment center is another variation on the team interview because you're being evaluated by a group of hiring experts. If asked to visit such a center, be prepared to do hands-on tasks that replicate your responsibilities if hired. You might also be asked to take psychological tests, role-play or solve problems associated with the available position.

Other ways your performance might be evaluated include being assigned to work on a group project with several other applicants. In this case, "Let your strengths come out naturally," says Christine Lucy, area manager in Rochester, N.Y., for OfficeTeams, a temporary staffing firm. "Don't force yourself to say or do things that make you uncomfortable just because you're being observed by members of the team."

### **Essential Tactics**

Team interviews are more challenging than traditional encounters. But when handled well, you can show several people at once that you have the right stuff. Since you may not be told in advance that you'll be interviewed by a team, be prepared for this possibility. Welcome the visibility you'll gain when an "audience" watches you think on your feet in response to fast-paced questions. Remember, your interviewers understand how formidable non-traditional interviews can be and want you to succeed. The following tips can improve your encounters with teams.

**1. Vary your answers.** If you're called back to interview with different managers, find ways to make the same information sound different. Don't describe the same project you managed to all five interviewers. Instead, describe a different project in each of the successive interviews.

**2. Activate your interpersonal antennae.** As quickly as possible, try to "read" the various personality types and adjust to them. Ms. Schachtman advises applicants to "find a way to connect with each interviewer, to make some sort of contact. If you regard the team interview as an opportunity to put your group management and group presentation skills on display, you should do fine."

**3. Expect to feel additional stress.** You'll have less time to frame your answers than during traditional interviews, when the interviewer might take notes before asking another question. But with several people doing the questioning, you don't have this luxury, because while one person is taking notes, another will jump in with the next question.

"When you have three different people asking you questions in one sitting, you're bound to be more tense than in the traditional one-on-one interview," says Ms. Lucy. "Make the best of the situation by trying to interpret what kind of response they're looking for."

**4. Recognize that interviewers are human.** Most understand that you're nervous and will try to make the experience as comfortable as possible. They're not interested in seeing you squirm. Their job is to determine if your talents will mesh with the opening.

**5. Practice in advance.** Assemble three or four friends or relatives with different personalities and have them ask a series of questions without pausing in between. This should replicate an actual team-

interview situation. Ask for feedback on which of your answers impressed the mock interviewers and why.

**6. Know what characteristics to emphasize.** List the 10 traits associated with the position you're seeking and prepare to demonstrate them during the session. Would creativity, presentation or facilitation skills be important? Ask people who are familiar with the kind of job you're seeking to create short tests that might allow you to illustrate your skills.

Ms. Lucy advises candidates to be prepared to explain why they meet the advertised requirements for the job. "With this information, you can shape your responses to reflect how well your experience matches the company's needs," she says.

**7. Visualize yourself in the interview.** Imagine you're a peak performer and see yourself standing out from other candidates. Make a recording of yourself answering the questions you think you'll be asked. As you play it back, assess your presentation. Are your comments interesting? Do you start your responses the same way? Do you include the word "we" in your comments, suggesting that you're part of the team? Does your sense of humor come across?

**8. Ask good questions.** If you've done your homework, you'll know the organization's culture and how you'll fit in. Ask questions that reflect your knowledge of that culture. For instance, you might say, "I've read that ABC Company believes in training its technicians on various aspects of the marketing process. How much time does that involve each year?" While asking the question, you've revealed your research about the company.

**9. Learn to listen "between the lines."** With several people asking questions consecutively, you won't have much time to prepare a response. However, if you read people well, you'll be able to respond to the concern underlying the interviewers' questions. Picking up on and responding to these issues is certain to impress an interview team.

For instance, if an interviewer says, "Here at ABC we have a long tradition of teamwork," what he or she wants to know is, "How good are your teamwork skills?" But if a team member says, "Teamwork isn't the answer to every question," you should provide a more balanced response.

"No, it's not," you might concur. "Some people do their best work in isolation. Einstein's contribution to quantum physics, for example, might have been hampered if he had had to work on a team. But on projects that require diverse backgrounds and experiences, teams produce better results than employees who don't communicate or collaborate."

**10. Use the acronym, F-A-S-T, to structure your answers.** Quickly remind yourself of the Focus or end result expected. Take a general approach by Amplifying on that focus. Provide some Specifics that show your firm grasp of the details surrounding the task. End by Tying up or summarizing what you've done and showing its relevance to the job's requirements.