Managing the Interview with Process Skills

Have you ever:

- Interviewed someone who took a long time getting to the point or who simply talked too much? How did this affect the interview?
- Run out of time in an interview before you were able to get all the information you needed? Why did that happen?
- Looked over your notes after an interview and discovered that some important details were still unclear? Why did this happen?

If every candidate provided clear and concise answers, all you’d have to do is ask your questions and take notes. But how often does that happen? Most interviews require some degree of management to keep the candidate on topic and to encourage him or her to provide the type and amount of information you’re looking for.

The Process Skills

A well-managed interview benefits you and the candidate: You’re able to cover all your assigned targets in depth in the time allotted, while the candidate is able to share his or her skills and experiences fully. Good interview management skills will enable you to:

- Control the pace of the interview by managing the amount of detail a candidate provides.
- Direct the discussion into and through areas you want to cover.
- Prevent confusion, misunderstandings, and the need to clarify details.
- Manage time so you can cover each section of the interview completely.

You can accomplish all this by using two process skills:

- Make procedural suggestions.
- Check for understanding.
Make Procedural Suggestions

Procedural suggestions specify how you’d like to conduct the interview, how you’d like the candidate to respond, or what areas you’d like to cover.

Sometimes procedural suggestions are planned to be delivered at specific points in the interview, usually in the opening and at the beginning of major sections, such as the Planned Behavioral Questions section. Following are examples of this type of planned procedural suggestion:

Explaining the Interview Plan in the Opening

“I’d like to spend the first five minutes or so getting some information on your education and work experience. Then I’ll ask some questions to get specific examples of things you’ve done in your jobs and how you went about doing them. How does that sound?”

Setting Up the Planned Behavioral Questions Section

“Now I’d like to shift gears and ask you about specific situations in your jobs. When you describe these situations, I’d like you to tell me specifically what your actions were and also the results. OK?”

Many procedural suggestions also are made in response to the candidate’s answers and as you decide what to cover in the interview. Following are examples of this type of procedural suggestion:

After the Candidate Provides a Concise Response

“Thanks. That’s just the kind of information I’m looking for. If you can keep giving succinct examples like that, we’ll be able to cover a lot of ground.”

After the Candidate Provides Too Much Detail

“Jane, so that we can discuss all your important areas, could you try to make your answers more concise?”

Redirecting the Discussion to a Specific Area

“Excuse me for interrupting, Jim, but you mentioned writing project plans. I’d like to spend some time talking about that, if that’s OK?”

Don’t be afraid to suggest a procedure, even if you have to interrupt the candidate to do so. Most people will understand that you need to manage the interview to collect information and to give them an opportunity to discuss their most important experiences.
Many new interviewers feel uncomfortable taking such an active role in managing the interview. To become more comfortable making procedural suggestions, combine them with a Key Principle. Showing empathy or complimenting the candidate takes the edge off the suggestion. For example:

“I hate to interrupt—you’ve accomplished so much in this area. But if we don’t move on, I’m afraid we’ll run out of time. OK?”

“Sounds like you made the best of a bad situation. How about if we move on to a new area?”

Finally, procedural suggestions are more effective when stated as suggestions rather than commands. The preceding examples were all worded as questions, suggestions, or proposals to illustrate this.

**Check for Understanding**

Checking for understanding is a simple way to confirm or clarify your understanding of what is being said in the interview. Checks are helpful any time you’re unclear about something the candidate has said or when the candidate has provided a good deal of information and you want to make sure you understand all of it.

To check your understanding, restate or summarize the information you want to check, then ask for confirmation of what you’re checking. For example:

“So, you’re saying that you double-checked with Engineering before you made the recommendation. Is that right?”

“Let me see if I’m following you. They both agreed with you at first, but then both of them changed their minds—correct?”

The candidate will let you know if you’ve understood correctly. If not, the candidate can clarify as needed.
This technique often is used with a suggestion to move to the next topic. The check summarizes the candidate’s response and provides a smooth transition. Combining these techniques is helpful, especially when you need to interrupt a candidate whose answers are too long or detailed. The check interrupts and concludes the candidate’s response and sets up the procedural suggestion to move to a new topic. For example:

“So you were responsible for all account activity in the region, correct? I’d like to talk about that in depth later. Now I’d like to get an overview of your major responsibilities.”

“Except for that one case, the feedback was very positive, right? Good example, thanks. If we could, I’d like to go back to something you mentioned earlier.”

Checks also are useful for confirming the candidate’s understanding of important information about the job, organization, and location in the interview close. Before telling the candidate your assigned information, check to find out what he or she already knows, then offer the missing information or correct the wrong assumptions. This kind of check does two things: It confirms that the candidate understands this important information, and it prevents you from giving the same information that another interviewer already has given. For example:

“I know you have a lot of information about the job. Could you summarize your understanding of the job? I’ll just fill in any details if necessary.”

**Tips for Managing the Interview**

- To make it easier and more comfortable to interrupt and redirect the candidate during the interview, mention in the opening that you might need to interrupt and explain why. For example:

  “From time to time, I might have to interrupt and suggest that we move on to something else. When I do that, it’s just to be sure we can talk about the full range of the things you’ve done. OK?”

- Remember to phrase procedural suggestions as questions, suggestions, or proposals.

- When you check for understanding, be sure to restate only what the candidate said. Adding your assumptions or interpretation can cause you to ask a leading question.
Additional Techniques for Managing the Interview

In addition to the process skills, three other techniques will help you manage the interview so you get the most complete information possible in the allotted time.

Nonverbal Cues

You can use nonverbal cues to send a variety of messages about what you want in an interview. A nod or smile can say to a candidate, “Tell me more”; holding up your hand can tell a candidate, “Thanks—I have what I need”; furrowing your brow can tell a candidate, “I don’t understand.”

Nonverbal cues are useful in encouraging quiet candidates to give more information and encouraging overly talkative candidates to do the opposite.

Silence

Targeted Selection questions are challenging and can be difficult to answer. Sometimes, waiting quietly for a few seconds prompts the candidate to answer. Candidates often supply the most revealing answers when they’ve had some time to recall an incident.

Many interviewers find that keeping silent is very difficult—they want to fill the void with another question or a restatement of the first question. If there’s a lull after asking a question, wait a few seconds for an answer.

Silence should be used deliberately, but it should never be used to put a candidate under stress. When it’s clear the candidate can’t answer, move on to another question. Note that the candidate couldn’t or didn’t answer, but wait a minute or two before writing that note; the candidate might see his or her inability to answer as a negative.

Note Taking

You can use note taking—which is a form of nonverbal communication—to manage an interview. Taking notes says to the candidate, “Keep talking. What you’re saying is important.” Not taking notes sends the opposite message. Note taking is a good way to tell candidates when you want them to continue or to stop providing information.