

How to ace YOUR executive interview

By the time you are selected for an executive-level interview, the hiring team *already* knows that you have the prerequisite knowledge and skills to lead the organization. You should still be prepared to discuss your leadership and management skills – particularly your leadership philosophy – and your experiences implementing change and motivating others. However, as compared to entry- and mid-level interviews, your executive-level interview will focus more on evaluating your cultural fit with the organization.

Preparing for your interview

Your first step is to thoroughly prepare for the interview. The below checklist will help you research the organization and begin to formulate thoughtful answers to common interview questions.

- If applicable, ask the recruiter for all the information they can provide regarding the position and organization
- Review the job description and pull out the competencies you anticipate are required for the target position
- Draft a list of your accomplishments
- Align each of the competencies derived from the job description with your knowledge, skills, abilities, and accomplishments
- Research your target organization via websites, social media, news outlets, etc. to learn about the organizational mission/vision/values and current trends
- If available, review the organizational chart so you can ask department-specific questions and respond to interview questions from a macro- to micro-level
- Research the people you will be speaking with during interviews and/or site visits to develop talking points
- Tap your network to see if anyone can provide insider information about your target position and/or organization
- Inform your professional references that you're interviewing and provide them with your application materials (e.g., resume) to ensure they are best prepared to provide meaningful recommendations
- Develop and articulate your professional brand
- Formulate answers to common interview questions that emphasize your professional brand
- Request a pre-interview prep call with the recruiter (if applicable)
- Schedule a mock interview with your mentor

Framing your answers to interview questions

As a prospective executive, the interview is a time for you to articulate how you will meet organizational needs and help the organization achieve its goals. When answering interview questions, consider the issue the organization is trying to solve by hiring you for this role, and highlight the overlap between what you have to offer and the organization's goals and priorities. To position yourself as an executive, frame answers starting at the macro-level and work your way down to the micro-level. Your goal should be to help interviewers envision what it would be like to have you as a leader. Thus, it's important to discuss how you will help the organization succeed by spending an equal amount of time talking about the future of the organization as you do about your past successes as a candidate. Whenever possible, interweave examples of you living your professional brand and practicing your leadership philosophy.

Types of interview questions

Be prepared to answer general interview questions (e.g., "Why are you interested in our organization?") as well as competency-based interview questions. Competency-based interviews center on evaluating candidates' knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully perform in the target role. Organizational literature (e.g., mission, vision, values) and the job description should provide you with a baseline understanding of the competencies under evaluation.

There are two types of competency-based interview questions:

- (1) Situational interview questions and
- (2) Behavioral interview questions

Situational interview questions

Situational interview questions are hypothetical, future-oriented questions that ask candidates to consider how they would respond to a set of circumstances. Such questions often begin with a phrase like, "What would you do if...?"

Examples situational interview question: *"What would you do if you encountered a problem you couldn't solve?"*

Exemplar response: *"I would first evaluate the problem thoroughly to gain a clear understanding of its scope and complexity. If the problem seems overwhelming or complex, I would break it down into smaller, more manageable components. By breaking it down, I can prioritize the issues and determine which ones need immediate attention and which ones can be addressed later. Next, I would explore various possible solutions. This might involve reviewing relevant literature or leveraging online resources and forums. If I am unable to find a solution independently, I would reach out to my teammates, supervisor, or other relevant stakeholders to discuss the problem openly and seek their insights and expertise. Despite my best efforts, a solution may not be readily apparent. In such cases, I would view the situation as a learning opportunity. I would document the problem, the steps I took, and the insights gained along the way. This documentation would serve as a reference for future problem-solving endeavors, enabling me to draw from my experiences and approach similar challenges with a more informed perspective. By adopting this approach, I can ensure that I am taking a proactive and systematic approach to problem-solving. Even if I encounter a problem that initially seems*

unsolvable, I believe in my ability to persevere, seek assistance when needed, and apply critical thinking skills to find viable solutions.”

Behavioral interview questions

Behavioral interview questions require that you provide an example of your past performance, relying on the notion that past performance predicts future performance (e.g., “Tell me about a time when...”).

A helpful framework for answering behavioral interview questions is the S.T.A.R. technique:

(S)ituation: In approximately one sentence, offer context by explaining the general situation.

(T)ask: Provide a summary of your task or objective.

(A)ction: Explain the action or strategy you chose and why, describing any hurdles you overcame along the way.

(R)esult: Describe the outcomes of your efforts. If your goal was not achieved, highlight what you learned and how you would navigate the same or a similar problem in the future.

Using the S.T.A.R. technique, you can prepare for various common interview questions in advance. Ideally, align each competency (as derived from your research of the position and organization) with a potential behavioral interview question you anticipate being asked. For example, one competency may be leadership. A potential behavioral interview question about leadership as a competency might be, “Describe a time when you successfully improved team performance.” Formulate your answer to this question using the S.T.A.R. technique. You may find it helpful to reference your list of accomplishments (as indicated in the above checklist) when formulating your answers. Consider notable moments and be ready to tell a story about your performance!

Example behavioral interview question: *“Tell me about a time when you worked with a difficult person and how you handled it.”*

Exemplar response:

(S)ituation: *“In my previous position at XYZ Organization, I worked closely with a team member who had a reputation for being challenging to collaborate with. This person consistently had a negative attitude, often disagreed with team decisions, and frequently missed deadlines, causing delays in project delivery.”*

(T)ask: *“Our task was to complete a critical project within a tight deadline, ensuring high quality-deliverables and effective teamwork. It was essential for us to find a way to work together cohesively and efficiently to achieve our shared objectives.”*

(A)ction: *“To address this situation, I decided to take a proactive approach. First, I scheduled a one-on-one meeting with the team member to understand their concerns and perspectives. I actively listened to their frustrations, validated their feelings, and sought common ground to build rapport. Then, I proposed setting clear expectations and guidelines for communication and deadlines to minimize misunderstandings.”*

I also implemented a regular check-in system to keep track of progress and offer support whenever necessary. During team meetings, I encouraged open discussions and facilitated a positive and respectful environment. I made an effort to acknowledge the individual's contributions and strengths, helping to boost their morale and foster a more collaborative atmosphere."

(R)esult: *"As a result of my proactive efforts, we experienced significant improvements in our collaboration. The difficult team member became more receptive to feedback and started meeting deadlines consistently. Our project progressed smoothly, and we successfully completed it within the set timeframe. Additionally, other team members also reported a more positive and cohesive environment, which ultimately increased team productivity and morale."*

Ask questions

If the interview structure allows, find ways to open dialogue for a back-and-forth conversation. Your interviewer(s) may specify to hold your questions until the end of the interview, but if the interview is more candidate-driven, then consider mixing your own questions into the interview itself.

At the end of the interview, prepare to ask at least three to four questions that allow you to learn more about the organization and/or showcase your fit. For example, you may consider asking more about the organization's goals. After learning more, you're in position to articulate how you would step-by-step lead the organization toward its future.

After the interview

Immediately following the interview, send an email to the hiring team that emphasizes your excitement and appreciation for the opportunity as well as the interviewers' time. Briefly reiterate your key qualifications – including knowledge, skills, and abilities – and how you would help the organization succeed.