

So, Why Are We Talking Today? Interview Tips for Executives

By Jason Petros

In my career as an executive search consultant in the healthcare industry, I've spent thousands of hours in interviews with chief executive officers, chief operating officers, chief medical officers and a myriad of other demonstrably successful healthcare leaders. These opportunities have allowed me to identify a few key components that successful candidates always seem to provide during the course of high-level interviews.

Expression of Interest

The first is a clearly articulated statement about their interest in a particular role. The question invariably arises, "So, why are we talking today? In other words, tell us about your interest in this opportunity."

The A-list candidate will take an approach which is less about themselves and more about the prospective organization. This includes information shared by the executive search team as well as the candidate's own research on a particular hospital, system and/or community.

Your interest in the role needs to be genuine and, when asked, you will most often describe the challenges or opportunities of the organization rather than espousing your own credentials. There is, of course, a compelling personal reason for your interest in the position being sought, and that has likely come across during one of the many conversations you have had with search consultants to get to this point in the process. But in short, the best answer to the "Why are we talking?" question is more about them (the client), and less about you (the candidate).

Ability to Negotiate Complex Issues

Second, typically there are some straightforward questions during an interview – do you have experience with x or experience with y? More often, at the level to which I recruit, the search firm and client are interested in your ability to negotiate complex issues: *the problem, the playbook, the execution, and the outcome*. The most successful way to delineate this information is in a three-part answer, reflecting upon a complex challenge in your recent professional past:

1. Here is the problem, and importantly, the context of the issues we identified or faced – sometimes as a team and sometimes me as an individual. (This usually aligns with issues experienced at the hiring institution.)

2. Here was my thought process initially (playbook) on how to solve a specific issue and here's how I went about presenting my thoughts to my team or leader. We had a few options with which to solve it – eventually landing on one approach.
3. Execution and outcomes – here's how we staffed the problem and kept track of the process. Eventually, we found that it worked, or it didn't and here were the results and my takeaways from the situation. It's important to attach numbers to your results – dollars, survey stats, top box scores, etc.

While it may seem didactic, candidates who can articulate this approach utilizing context, thought process and data tend to leap to the top of search committee's lists.

“Tell Us About Us”

Lastly, clients will often query your knowledge of their organization and market by asking for your future vision. It's expected that you will have done your homework on the institution and the community and this question is your opportunity to express that knowledge. You will no doubt have uncovered information that will shape some strategic priorities – there is a fine balance in your response to this question. You'll want to show humility and confidence at the same time – one candidate in a recent CEO search, in response to this question, began by saying, “While I don't portend to know all of the nuances about this market, from my research I think you have a clear strategic advantage against your competition.” He proceeded to dazzle the committee with his knowledge of the institution he was vying for, the competition in the market, and opportunities for potential growth.

Conclusion

Remember that interviews are more about the future than the past. While you will want to chronicle your successes and challenges overcome, do so for the purpose of shedding light on how you will perform in the future.

About the Author

Jason P. Petros is a consultant for the executive search firm Witt/Kieffer, based in the firm's Oak Brook, Illinois office. Jason works closely with boards, search committees and hiring executives in the recruitment of CEOs, COOs, and other top leaders.

For more information, contact: jasonp@wittkieffer.com.

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