

Eleven Tactics for Oral Interviews

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BE THAT PERSON

The single biggest mistake that interviewees make is to interview for the position they already have. For instance, say you are interviewing for sergeant. You go into the oral and tell them what a great police officer you are. Guess what? When you leave the board thinks “What a great cop. Best thing to do is leave him there.” Be the position you are interviewing for. Approach each question as if you are already that person. When you talk about your previous training, education and experience – relate it directly to the job for which you are interviewing.

If they ask you about your leadership skills, you can tell them you are a great peer leader, but then relate that to how you are going to be a sergeant. Sergeants aren't peer leaders, they are first line supervisors. While the two concepts can be connected, many applicants fail to make the jump for what they have done to what they want to do.

SHINE OR DIE

If you go into the interview looking like an duffle bag with arms you will have to talk past your appearance. Yes, it's true – you never get a second chance to make a first impression. That means do everything you can to look your best. I have:

- Had my haircut three days before and then sat in the sun to get rid of the line.
- Had my teeth cleaned
- A manicure
- Purchased a new, tailored suit.
- Shined my shoes to a mirror finish.

Any thing, no matter how small, gives you an advantage. Think about it. If there are 100 applicants and there are ten spots...if you beat number eleven by a fraction of a point you are the sergeant.

KILL THE BEAST

Many of us could not go through our careers without breaking something. The beast is your past, the bad thing the department said you did. The beast is waiting for you, in the package. But, the beast is weak if you know what to do and you stab it in the heart at your first opportunity.

During my career I crashed 12 police cars. Ten of them prior to my sergeant's interview. The beast was in my package waiting. First thing to know is the beast ages fast. The more time that passes, the weaker the beast. Second, while vampires require a wooden stake, this beast can be killed by paper. Finally, the beast is a coward – he really wants to ambush you.

I went into the sergeant's oral and a commander asked me, "So, you are a new sergeant on patrol. You see two officers obviously overdriving on their way to a code two call. You decide to handle the situation by conducting roll call training. Tell the board what you would do." I realized immediately that the commander was giving the beast the ambush advantage. If I answered the question, no matter how good, the follow-up would be the beast jumping out of my package and shouting – "ha, you fool, you can't drive worth a damn, what qualifies you do even give roll call training." No way Mr. Beast, I attacked head on. I said, "Commander, before I answer that let's talk about my driving record."

The beast is killed in the interview by:

- **RESPONSIBILITY:** Even if there were mitigating circumstance you have to admit you did it. The department sees the first sign of recovery as admission. "Hello, my name is Raymond and I drive like crap." Well, actually, just take responsibility.
- **ACTION:** Show you are contrite by what you have done. A suspension, a letter of reprimand or training is what the department did. You don't get any credit for taking it on the chin. You do get credit for seeking out alternatives. Did you speak to "wiser" people? Seek training on your own? Contemplate you actions? Do something that shows you took action.
- **LEARN:** Tell the board what you learned by the taking responsibility and action. What did you learn about your job and yourself?
- **TRANSLATE:** Translate the experience into a positive. Tell the board how you are better able to relate to your peers. Now, because of the experience and what you did, you will be able to recognize when your subordinate employees are walking

toward that path. You can now steer them back onto the path of righteousness and prevent their evil doing.

The beast can be killed, wounded or at least weakened by paper. Make sure the good things you have done are documented and in your package. More on this in the section, it ain't wall paper.

RECON NOW

Think about two different foot pursuits. In the first, you are chasing the knucklehead through an alley with which you and he are thoroughly familiar. In the second, you are on temporary assignment, chasing the knucklehead through an alley with which he is thoroughly familiar and you are clueless. Who has the advantage?

Before the interview, go to the interview place. Ask the receptionist to see an empty room. Become familiar with the terrain. I know, its so simple. But, when you walk in you will know where everyone is suppose to sit, where you should go, etc. Me, I wanted to be a lieutenant so I volunteered for entry-level orals. I became very at home in the room, relaxed and prepared.

Make at least one dry one to the location during the time you are suppose to be there. Know the traffic pattern, where to park, etc. This helps ensure that you will not only be on time, but you will be relaxed.

DON'T LIE – PRETEND

Don't ever lie. But, they are going to ask you questions about stuff you have never done. Suppose the board asks you, "Tell us about a complex investigation you have led." A complex investigation is not getting your children to find the remote control. You have no

clue, no experience. You could, of course, talk about the burglary investigation at Walmart, make it sound complex, but the board will see through that.

If you are asked a question and you have no experience. Say, “I have never done that before. Can I tell you what I would do?” The board is going to say yes. They will pretend with you. Now, you get to be the lead investigator on the Mansion murders. Pretend, but don’t lie.

KSA OR ELSE

All interview questions are designed around the Knowledge, Skills and Abilities necessary for the job. Every department must develop KSAs and they have a copy. It is not secret information. Get a copy. Once you have the KSAs, you can use them to craft answers designed to get the highest score. You will know what KSAs are necessary to demonstrate leadership, etc. So, when you get a leadership question you answer with the KSA rubric.

SMOKE ‘EM OUT

Talk to everyone who has been in a similar interview. Take those questions they were asked and compare them with your KSAs. Really, the questions haven’t changed in 25 years. Yes, the departments are more sophisticated, but if you know the KSAs and some of the previous questions, you can craft excellent answers.

RECOGNIZE, DON’T MEMORIZE

If you memorize answers, an opening statement or a closing statement you are doomed. Your brain will seize up and your score will plummet. Put your potential questions

on index cards. Throw the cards in your personal vehicle's glove box. On the way to work, pull out ONE card at random. Out loud, answer the question, throw the card in the box and talk to yourself about the answer. Talk for 2 or 3 minutes. Take out another card and repeat same. Talk it through. Your mind will begin to recognize the best answers.

IT AIN'T WALL PAPER

All the commendations, ratings and citizen letters in your package are not wallpaper. Review your package at least a month before the interview. Make sure every positive thing ever written about you is in the package. Recall, the paper kills the beast. Also, before you walk into the room your package gives the board an impression about you. If a copy of your BA diploma isn't in your package they assume you don't have one. And, most boards will not consider documentation that is not in your package. You could bring them a commendation from the Pope and it wouldn't matter. Dress your package before hand. Also, go through it for beasts. They hide in your personnel evaluations as faint praise. Ferret them out and prepare yourself.

CLOSE 'EM OUT

How many times have you asked a question and the person went on and on with the answer. When they finally stopped talking you weren't sure if they were done. There was that awkward period where you waited to see if there was more. If you make the board feel awkward they are going to score you lower. Make them happy and comfortable. At the end of each of your answers have a phrase like, "And, that is how I would handle that leadership issue." See the point. You turned the ball back to them. They are comfortable and think you are really special because you took control and told them, "Hey, I'm finished." This is a

subtle, yet powerful tool. It makes you seem professional and knowledgeable even if you're a little stupid.

THE RAMBLING MAN

Great Ricky Nelson song, bad interview technique. If you start to ramble, stop immediately. It ain't a freaking secret, you know and the board knows you are rambling. So, stop. Take a deep breath, re-state the question, using your fingers if you have to and recap in short-short points what you said and then close the question out. It's the best you can do.

Good luck!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Raymond E. Foster, LAPD (ret.), MPA is the author of "[Police Technology \(Prentice Hall, July 2004\)](#)" and the co-author of "[Leadership: Texas Hold 'em Style](#)" and "[From NYPD to LAPD: An introduction to Policing.](#)" In addition to being the author of well over a hundred magazine articles, he is the editor of the [Hi Tech Criminal Justice](#) Newsletter, [Police-Writers.com](#) and the [War on Terrorism Blog](#). He can be reached at editor@police-writers.com.