

## Executive Level Interviewing – A few tips

By Scott Hahn

One of the things I tell most of my candidates and always for anyone interviewing for a “C Level” position or with “C Level” executives is to practice the “Three Be’s” of interviewing: Be brief, be brilliant and be gone. To me, one of the best assumptions you can make going into an interview is to assume that you only have 20 minutes to sell your product, you. Answer all questions asked in as succinct manner as possible. Try not to go off into a monologue at any point in the conversation. In so doing you run the risk of having the interviewer tune you out and lose interest in the interview. There will be plenty of time to regale your boss with amusing anecdotes if and when you get the job.

If you are interviewing for a VP or higher position you will most certainly be involved with the company on a very strategic level. It is a good idea to do as much research about the company as you possibly can. This must extend beyond what can be found on the company’s website. Try and do as much as you can to gain insight into the company’s vision, competitive place in the market, long term strategy, etc. Once you have this information you can begin to put together insightful questions regarding the company’s plans and how you and your prospective position and department can help fulfill those plans. Have as many specific questions as you can that address your department’s role in the overall scheme of things. One quick warning regarding questions during the interview. Be sure to pay close attention to verbal and non-verbal cues. Asking lots of questions can be a very slippery slope. Many people can take offense to the “reverse interview” and feel threatened. If the tone of the interview is clearly being driven by the interviewer you may have to wait your turn to start asking your questions. Be mindful of this and watch the situation. Once you have your opportunity start slowly and observe the interviewer’s reaction. If all goes well your line of questions will not only demonstrate that you understand the business and your prospective role, it will help you better understand what your future role will be like. Some potential questions might be something like:

- “Describe your company’s management philosophy.”
- “How would you describe your culture?”
- “What are this company’s biggest challenges?”
- “How can I and my department help with those challenges?”
- “What are the expectations for myself and my department?”
- “How do you measure performance/success?”

I could go on but I think you get the idea. Be sure to pay close attention to the answers to each and be sure to ask additional questions that may come up due to the response. If you ask a question that can not be easily answered or the interviewer does not know the answer gloss over it and move on with your thoughts and questions. Not only will this help you further delve into more important topics but it can very likely turn the interview into more of a conversation. Have you ever noticed that conversations are far more relaxing than interviews? Each of the ensuing discussions will not only demonstrates your experience, knowledge and insight, but should tell you quite a bit about your future boss, the company and potentially the culture; which raises an interesting point.

Culture is an often overlooked aspect of an interview. While very few interviewers consider asking a prospective employee a question regarding what kind of culture they prosper in (I wish more hiring managers would ask this question) I find that

most interviewees fail to thoroughly understand the company's culture prior to going to work there. It can be a very tough nut to crack but in my opinion a very important one. There are so many ways in which each person would think of and accordingly describe a company's culture that it is a very difficult subject to objectively identify. Here are some of the areas that I try and flesh out when meeting with a company for the first time:

- Work hard, long or smart?
- What are the normal and usual office hours for VP and above? What about everyone else?
- Office attire? Is it different for staff verses officers? (Think about the implication of that answer) What about Fridays, is it the same?
- Work to live or live to work?
- How are employees regarded; expenses or assets?
- Company first or life balance? Its 3:00 on a Friday and need to get home for my daughter's birthday but there is a meeting scheduled that I am supposed to be in. Which do I need to attend?
- What are the company's performance metrics? What about the departmental metrics? Individual metrics?
- Its 8:25 on Monday morning. Are we talking about the big game yesterday or are we talking about the big meeting coming up?
- Does anyone telecommute now? Does anyone enjoy flex time? What about job sharing?
- Is the company take a top down management approach or is authority delegated?
- What is your company's high level decision making process?

With these and a host of others it might not always be the answer but more the reaction to the question that will be more telling.

Another question that I get asked quite a bit is "When is the appropriate time to discuss money?" There is no pat answer for this, unfortunately. It will all depend on the circumstances that surround the situation. I can think of three primary scenarios with virtually unlimited variations of the three.

1. You applied for the position, blindly or via a referral and have been asked to come in for an interview.
2. You were specifically recruited by the company. This could be via an internal recruiter or a third party recruiter.
3. A recruiter blindly called you and has gotten you the interview.

In my opinion you should not bring up salary during the first interview in any of these three unless it is brought up by the interviewer. Once you get to a certain level in management there are certain assumptions about compensation packages that can be made. The prospective employer should have a good idea of your current income and you should have a reasonable idea of what a job like this should be paying. Scenario two is unique in that if you are being specifically recruited you can just about guarantee that the company knows what it will take to get your attention. You can also just about bet that they will be the first ones to bring it up and it will be early in the process. When considering scenario one I would say upon concluding your first interview I would suggest that you close with a question. Something like "so what are next steps?" or "what is your interview process?" If the answer is vague, then you probably won't be coming back and salary is the last thing you should be thinking about. If they describe the process in enough detail, you'll know when it will be time to talk about your compensation. That will probably be some time during your final interview. In scenario three the recruiter that contacted

you should, at a minimum, have a compensation range to discuss with you. As with the other scenarios you will know when it is time to discuss your compensation package. Only you can truly judge when the appropriate time will be to broach the delicate subject of compensation.

I have one other piece of advice I pass on to senior level people that are getting into the interview process. Find a good coach. Of all the skills that one hones while in the work place, interviewing is not one of them. I think that most people think because they have interviewed hundreds of candidates they feel they are equipped to interview. I think that is a very unwise assumption to make. Being ready to interview is no different than preparing to run a marathon. You may have done it once, but unless those muscles are in race day form you most certainly will not be able to perform at your peak capability. A good coach can help you get conditioned and ready to perform at your best.