

Surviving Stress(ful) Interviews

by Nicole Ayala

Interviews can be nerve-wracking for job applicants even when the easiest of questions is asked. Imagine, then, being in an interview that is either stressful by design or full of stress-inducing questions because it is for a high-pressure position. Let the sweaty palms commence!

For many law students and graduates — especially those pursuing legal services, public defender, or prosecutorial positions — stress interviews are to be expected. These types of employers need to know whether an applicant can handle difficult clients, complicated courtroom dynamics, and potentially volatile situations.

In order to help career counselors prepare students and graduates for stress interviews, this article explores the dynamics of a stress interview, why employers use them, questions an applicant might expect, and, finally, strategies for successfully navigating a stress interview.

Why Employers Use Stress Interviews

An interview that is stressful by design can take many forms. The interviewer may try to create stressful conditions through various techniques such as seeming uninterested, asking inappropriate or challenging questions, or even putting the candidate in a physically uncomfortable room or setting. You know you're in a stress interview when the interviewer asks you why you went to law school and then midway through your answer picks up a newspaper and starts humming "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." (I speak from personal experience.) Why do employers do this?

The answers range from wanting to gauge how assertive or self-confident a candidate is to evaluating how a candidate handles conflict.

Similarly, many employers use an interview style that, while not intentionally designed to create a stressful environment, is nonetheless geared toward evaluating how a candidate would handle real world stress-inducing scenarios. As previously mentioned, legal services organizations and public defenders' and prosecutors' offices use interviews as an opportunity to see how a candidate would handle the day to day challenges of working in a high-pressure environment. A candidate's passion and enthusiasm for the employer's mission is certainly key, but just as important is a candidate's ability to stay calm, be assertive, maintain appropriate boundaries, and remain focused when faced with stress and conflict.

Types of Questions to Expect

As all career counselors preach, preparation is the holy grail of doing well in an interview. This is particularly true for stress interviews. Students should familiarize themselves with the types of questions that employers may ask and then practice answering them.

For interviews designed to create stressful conditions, questions can range from being hostile to bizarre and even potentially illegal. What these questions have in common is the purpose of flustering the candidate and putting him or her on the spot.

The following are types of questions to anticipate.

- Why didn't you get a higher grade in [insert law school class]?
- Do you think you're really cut out to be a lawyer?
- What are your worst characteristics?
- Tell me about the weakest argument in your writing sample.
- What is your political affiliation?
- Do you think the questions I'm asking you are fair?
- How would you rate your performance in this interview so far?
- If I, as your supervisor, ordered you to contact the opposing party in a case without going through his or her attorney, would you do it?
- If I told you that I thought working here would be a huge mistake, would you still pursue this position?
- The answer you just gave me was ridiculous. Tell me what you really think.

For interviews for high-pressure positions, candidates should expect questions designed to see how they manage their own stress, other people in crisis, and heavy workloads. More often than not, employers will use a combination of straightforward questions and hypotheticals.

The following questions are based on a legal services model, however great examples of the types of hypotheticals used by public defenders and prosecutors can be found in "The Criminal Hypothetical and Other Unique Aspects of the Criminal Law Interview Process," which appeared in the November 2006 *NALP Bulletin*, and more recently in "Acing the Public Defender Interview" in the August 2009 *NALP Bulletin*.

For legal services, expect questions like:

- How would you handle a client who consistently makes racist comments?
- Imagine you have a client who has been committed to a psychiatric hospital. He calls you multiple times a day, and in addition to telling you that he is being abused by the doctors and nurses, he tells you to drop his case. Would you? How would you handle the abuse allegations?
- What would you do if you found out your client had been lying to you about something crucial in his or her case? How would you address the issue with your client?
- Why do you think people are poor?
- What would you do if you got a call from the receptionist stating that your client was in the waiting room and hitting her toddler?
- Your client is a high school sophomore who is being expelled for bringing a knife to school. You receive a call from her guidance counselor wanting to talk about the expulsion hearing. Do you discuss the case with the counselor?
- Do you have any experience working with clients who suffer from mental illnesses? What are some of the biggest hurdles in working with this population?
- You've filed a motion to dismiss on a case, but later learn that the judge you will be appearing before has told other attorneys never to make that argument in front of her again. How would you proceed?
- Law school gives you experience researching and writing, but what kinds of experience do you have with the day to day part of being a lawyer (e.g., phone calls, filing deadlines, running to court, client meetings)?

Strategies for Success

There are four main keys to successfully navigating stressful interviews, and they apply equally to interviews with stressful conditions and interviews for high-pressure positions.

Get distance from the situation. Candidates should seek to depersonalize the employer's actions and recognize the interview tactics for what they are. For example, when the interviewer asks, "Why do you think you can make it as an attorney?" the candidate should remember that the reasoning behind the question is to see how one handles hostile questions and to gauge one's self-confidence, *not* to actually personally attack the candidate.

Maintain your confidence. When asked to make judgment calls or questioned on their qualifications, it is easy for candidates to second guess themselves or become intimidated. In a stress interview, however, it is crucial to stay confident. For example, in a legal services hypothetical, a candidate may be asked how he or she would handle a situation that does not have a clear cut correct answer. In this situation, the candidate should choose an answer and then defend it. It is likely that the employer is more interested in the candidate's reasoning and thought process than in hearing a particular answer.

Do not become defensive. When an interviewer is insulting you or challenging everything you say, staying calm and refraining from becoming defensive can be incredibly difficult. Nonetheless, it is absolutely crucial. Even if the interviewer is

rude, a candidate should keep his or her answers analytical, clear, and controlled. More often than not, the employer is evaluating a candidate's ability to stay focused and emotionally centered.

Stay on message. Every job applicant should come to an interview with a message he or she wants to convey to the employer. Staying on message can be difficult even in a low-key interview but becomes even more challenging in stress interviews. Consequently, candidates should prepare their message prior to going to any interview and commit the main points to memory. This will help create an ease of response if candidates find themselves getting rattled by interview questions or conditions.

Conclusion

It is rare to find the job applicant who actually enjoys stressful interviews, but despite their level of difficulty, these types of interviews often lead to the jobs that attorneys love the most. The key, of course, is to prepare, practice, and persevere. And if that doesn't work, you can always try harmonizing with your interviewer's humming.

Nicole Ayala is a former legal services attorney and the Assistant Director for Public Interest & Fellowships at the Career Planning Center for the University of Connecticut School of Law. This article was submitted on behalf of the NALP Public Service Section.