Guardian Jobs advice on how to use the STAR technique in an interview

Published: 16 Dec 2015 By Kirstie Brewer

Have you ever been caught off guard with a question in an interview? A competency-based question could well have been the culprit. These questions typically require the candidate to demonstrate they have the right skills for a role by using a previous experience which showcases those skills in action. For example, the interviewer might say, "describe a situation when you resolved a conflict within your team" or "tell me about a time when effective time management skills were the key to success."

In the heat of the moment it is easy to panic and give an answer that is unstructured and misses out the key details. This is where the STAR technique might be useful.

What is the Star Technique?
Put simply, the STAR technique means giving a response to a question based on:

Situation: set the context for the story
Task: what was required of you?
Action: what did you actually do?
Result: what was the outcome?

"Using the STAR technique in an interview allows you to break your response down in a logical way," explains David Cairncross, director at Hays Recruitment.

How can you prepare for an interview using the STAR technique?
Preparing for an interview normally means sitting and thinking about the questions you might be asked and then how you will respond - an interview using the STAR model is just the same, says Lianne Lambert, HR consultant at Lighter Business Solutions.

"Candidates need to think about the skills and behaviours that they are likely to need in the role they are applying for and then consider scenarios where they have demonstrated these skills," she explains. "No interview is entirely predictable but you will thank yourself for spending some time

thinking through the situations faced during a career and what skills those situations demonstrate."

Remember that not every situation you talk about has to have had a glowing outcome, Lambert stresses, because in reality, not all endeavours are successful but that doesn't mean you can't learn from them.

"If there is a scenario that demonstrates the skill being assessed but, due to factors that were beyond the control of the candidate, the outcome was not what was hoped for, this scenario can still be used in a positive way."

Putting the STAR technique into practice
Here are two examples of how to use the STAR technique in an interview.

Example one: A candidate for a project manager role might be asked, "Tell me about a time you were forced to take charge of a high-pressure situation". Bev White, managing director of career services at Penna, a global HR services group, gives the following hypothetical answer:
Situation: "My colleague was suddenly hospitalised and I had to pick up a significant project, with no briefing, that was launching that week"
Task: "I had to get up-to-speed with the existing team, introduce myself to the client, shuffle my existing workload and successfully launch a website for the client"
Action: "I organised a briefing with my whole team in order to get up to speed and worked through a timeline of urgent and non-urgent actions, assigning people to each. I then explained the situation to the client and assured them they were in safe hands. I also kept everyone in the loop twice a day with a current status of activity"
Result: "We managed to successfully launch the website, the client was very happy with the end result and my colleague that was hospitalised could recover knowing all was in hand. It united the team and I've proven myself to be a reliable member of that team"
Example two: A candidate going for a role in HR might be asked, "Tell us about your biggest failure. How did you recover and what have you learnt from that incident?"
Sue Alderson, director of Azure Consulting, a management consultancy specialising in people issues, gives the following hypothetical answer:
Situation: "Taking on a new role, I inherited a disinterested and underperforming team member."
Task: "It was my job to bring them onboard with the rest of the team and get them to perform at the same level as colleagues."
Action: "I initially tried to use peer influence to achieve my aims, before moving on to discuss performance during team meetings."

Result: "Unfortunately, the individual left the team and the company. However, what I learned was that I should have addressed the situation more directly at an earlier stage and been clearer on what my expectations were of the individual and their contribution to the team."

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