

Ask the Career Coach: Acing the Group Interview

How do you prepare when you will be interviewed by a group from a potential employer?

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Dear Career Coach Lisa,

I am about to enter my second round of interviews for a position I really want. When the recruiter gave me the information for this interview round, he mentioned that the company will be conducting a group interview with the hiring manager, human resources and a peer. Then I will be taken to lunch by some colleagues of this position. Is this typically and how do I prepare for this?

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Short Hills

The group interview and the lunch are essentially the same situation of being interviewed and observed by a group. The intent of the group interview is for the employer to assess you from multiple perspectives—hence the hiring manager, human resources and a peer during the formal interview, and colleagues at lunch.

At the conclusion of your meetings, typically the company will meet to review candidates interviewed and discuss their impression. Having facilitated these discussions, it is very interesting to see how the candidate's answers are interpreted so differently by the individual perspectives observing and hearing the same message.

Employers are observing how you handle stress potentially as you address questions from multiple interviewers and attempt to engage them all. They are observing how you communicate with different individuals in different job functions (HR, support staff, supervisors, etc.), how you build rapport with colleagues, you interact with potential supervisors and how flexible your communication style is.

The purpose of interviewing is to communicate, present and sell your skills and abilities while influencing the interviewers that you are the ideal candidate to hire. In a group interview it is often difficult to communicate effectively with multiple people all at once.

A couple of strategies to consider for the group interview setting are either to choose to address the group of interviewers as a group or as individuals within a group. If you choose to address the interviewers as a group, you would be engaging all of the interviewers within the group simultaneously. It can be described best as you facilitating a group discussion or a conversation.

Addressing the individuals within the group can be handled as a question and answer session where you answer each interviewer sequentially based on who asked the question or based on their seating arrangement within the group without establishing a collaborative dialogue.

Another option is to identify the leader or the interviewer with the most engaging personality. This may work, but, personally, I prefer when someone can engage the group as a whole. It speaks more to your ability to lead and guide teams.

Another factor to consider when answering questions is how you want to answer the questions. If you choose to answer what you perceive the group interviewers want to hear, then you are conforming. If you choose to answer according to your principles or values and what you believe the company needs based on your experience and the current market demands, then you are principled.

You can best communicate, however, by ensuring you maintain good eye contact with everyone. One option is to start with the speaker and move your gaze, pausing briefly on each one. This lets people know that you are speaking to them too, not just the person asking the question. Do the reverse as you finish your question, ending your answer with your eyes focused on the questioner. Be aware of which individual might be your supervisor and pay special attention to them as you make eye contact with everyone. Watch for body language and be aware of your own as well.

Remember it is perfectly fine to ask a clarifying question rather than assume and answer incorrectly. Treat everyone with respect. Prepare some questions ahead of time so you are prepared if and when asked if you any questions for them. These questions can help generate conversation at lunch as well. Enjoy the interview, let them take the lead and remember you are interviewing them as well.

About this column: "Ask the Career Coach" is a column dedicated to those who may be in transition or wrestling with a career dilemma by providing a forum for advice. We welcome your questions. Please send them to CareerCoachLisa@gmail.com. Lisa Chenofsky Singer is a Millburn-Short Hills resident and the founder of Chenofsky Singer & Associates LLC. She offers Executive and Career Management Coaching and Human Resources Consulting, writes and speaks on job search and career-related topics. Her web site is www.ChenofskySinger.com.