

Ask the Career Coach: Reading the Situation

Ask clarifying questions during interviews and observe your surroundings.

By [Lisa Chenofsky Singer](#)

As appeared in MillburnPatch.com on April 23, 2010 (www.MillburnPatch.com)

Dear Career Coach Lisa,

I believe I interview well but have not landed a position in the past six months. How can I learn to read the situation better?

HJ
Short Hills

Many times when we interview, we are busy forming our answers before the question is fully asked. We can miss what the interviewer is looking for when we do not listen fully to the question. Sometimes, we assume a "shared meaning" of a statement when in reality the interviewer and interviewee have different understandings for this statement.

Shared meaning occurs when two people share agreement in their interpretation of an experience or event. Shared meaning is when two or more words that "mean the same thing" and may be considered synonymous is communicated. Sometimes, we believe there is a shared meaning when there is ambiguity or cross talk. Ambiguity is when the sender's message and the receiver's interpretation do not correspond.

During an interview the role of sender and receiver is constantly flip flopping and demands active listening. Sometimes ambiguity can serve you well during an interview. When you are unsure of the question, you can either ask a clarifying question or preference your answer by explaining your understanding as you lead the interviewer through your answer.

For example, an interviewer says, "Please describe a time when you had influence over others to complete a project." This question is open ended and can be answered in a variety of ways. Some interpretations may include:

- How you managed teams or vendors;
- How you are in relationship management and business development;
- How you influenced other colleagues to assist in a project to meet your deadline.

Asking the interviewer a clarifying question such as "Can you share with me type of situations I may encounter in this position so I may respond with an example most fitting for this opportunity?" How you answer is received by the interviewer is left to chance without the clarifying question.

When clarifying questions are not appropriately asked, there is the cross talk approach. This is when you interpret that question one way and possibly give the "wrong answer" as interpreted by the interviewer. Conversations that do not relate to the question asked is one way to fill the silence space but does not add value to you as a candidate. You are better off saying to the interviewer, "I have not experienced his situation but would probably do... if faced with it today."

You may want to conduct mock interviews with a friend or work with a coach. Ask the receiver what they heard you say. See how many shared meanings occur and if the "correct" interpretation was received. The art of listening is truly an art and many of us do not do this well. The key to effective communications is to actively listen before you speak.

Observe the behaviors of those around you, the unspoken culture of the organization that you see while waiting in the reception area or gain from the recruiter. It's best to gather your information, and then formulate your response.

"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.

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