

Powerful Questions to Ask at a Job Interview

By **Kathryn Britton**

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Janet is about to interview for a new job. She wants to leave a toxic work environment where her boss stands so close when he yells that she can feel his spit hit her face. Her peers rarely greet her, and she feels vaguely in competition with them for opportunities, advancement, maybe even the job itself. She knows that she and her cubicle partner would both be happier and more productive if they swapped some tasks so that both could do what they do best, but she has gotten the message: that's not the way work gets done here.



Janet took that job with high hopes that were soon dashed, and it wasn't her first experience with unwelcoming work environments. How does she avoid yet another?

This is the dilemma Alan Foster described to an audience of junior and senior leaders in the Wharton program at the University of Pennsylvania. Janet had asked Alan for advice, after observing his good fortune working at Bain & Company. Alan proposed six questions that she could ask in an interview to see what the job environment would really be like.

These questions were so good that I got Alan's permission to share them on PPND. If you use them, ask potential employers and peers for specific examples so you can figure out what they mean by words like teamwork and collaboration. Do these terms represent strongly held cultural values, or do people just give them lip service?

1. Who will I learn from and how?

Is career development outsourced to training companies that know little about the specific environment? Does the company tell employees "You're responsible for your own career," avoiding involvement?

Or does the employer have a mentoring culture where more experienced people gracefully accept the responsibility of helping new people develop? Does it have a peer learning model where people are expected to take time to help each other learn? Do managers share the responsibility for career development with employees? Is mentoring ever tipped upside-down so that senior people learn new skills, such as computer proficiency, from younger people?



Jane Dutton describes a related key strategy, *task enablement* that can involve teaching, designing tasks effectively, advocating, and accommodating individual differences. Some of the references below explore the value of mentoring to the workplace, mentor, and protégé.



2. Who is held up as a hero here? What for?

Bandura's serial dramas are based on the theory that people learn from role models whose behavior they wish to emulate. In similar fashion, workplace culture is conveyed to new members through the stories of its heroes. What behaviors are valued here? Are those behaviors that you wish to emulate?

Are the heroes people who deliver on very aggressive commitments, no matter what — even if people leave their organizations burned out and demoralized? Or are the heroes people well known for collaborating and bringing opposing sides together?

Are heroes always individuals, or are particular teams held up as examples because of the ways they've pulled together?

3. How do you resolve conflict here?

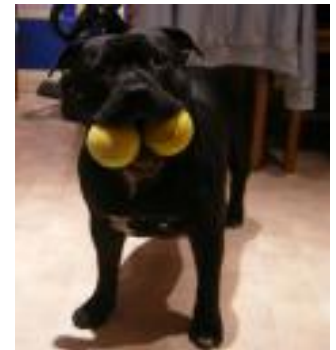
There will be disagreements in any work environment. So how do they get resolved? Are corrosive, threatening behaviors tolerated? Or are there procedures for giving everybody a voice but coming to agreement, either through explained decision-making or consensus?

Dutton, Frost, Glendinning, Sutton, and others write about corrosive workplaces where bullying is tolerated. According to Pearson, Andersson, and Wegner, people who instigated incivility were three times as likely to have more power than their targets than to be peers or subordinates.

This is the question that Janet most wished that she had asked in her last interview.

4. How willing are people to help each other?

Are people pitted against each other in job evaluations so that there is a feeling that helping someone else will put a person at a disadvantage? Or is helping others both valued and expected? How is work divided up? Are people given assignments and expected to complete them by themselves? Justin Berg suggests that the Job Crafting Exercise could be used by a team to divide up work so that people spend more time with tasks that line up with their strengths, motivations, and passions. How much flexibility is there for people to divide work and swap tasks?



5. How do you celebrate what's working?



It is so easy for organizations to focus on problems and negative events and then take victories, large and small, for granted. Gable and colleagues have demonstrated that people get much more benefit out of positive events when they take time to talk them over with trusted others who respond actively and constructively. At an organizational level, do people have an opportunity to capitalize on achievements?

Are questions asked that highlight what's working?

Alan mentioned that people in his company became much more willing to fill in employee surveys when the first question changed from "What is going wrong on your project?" to "What is going well on your project?"

6. What keeps you going when things get stressful?

Fear or a sense of purpose? Competition or comradeship?

Conclusion

By this point, many of you are probably thinking, “Jobs are so tight right now, I won’t have any choice.” Even if that is so, you can go into the job with your eyes open and perhaps with your armor on. But the job market won’t be like this forever. I remember the late 90’s when we couldn’t find people to fill jobs, and those times will come again.



These questions are important, not just for people looking for jobs, but for companies that want to be employers of choice when the job market turns up again. Job environments matter to people. Even now, there are people wondering if they’d rather starve than go to work in their toxic work environments. Whetten and Cameron justify the study of management skills by citing a study that revealed that “one factor—the ability to manage people effectively—was three times more powerful than all other factors combined in accounting for firm financial success over a five-year period!” (p. 6). Wouldn’t it be better if employees felt a deep sense of purpose, inclusion, and celebration at work so that they want to stay, even when economic times improve?

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