Tough Question or Great Opportunity?

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Few things can trip up an interview like those three little words, “Tell me about … ”. Open ended questions like that can lead to a long rambling answer, and a short interview.

There’s a way you can prepare for these “essay” questions. With a few minutes of preparation you can take this potential pitfall and turn it into a great opportunity to show your interviewer that you’re the right candidate.

When interviewers ask an open ended question, they want to see how well you express yourself. It could be a general question such as “Tell me about yourself”. Or it could be a more specific question having to do with something on the job.

If the question is general, you might be tempted to start with the personal. However, unless your interviewer specifically asks for personal information, keep your focus on the professional. Think of your answer as a “highlights film” of your work history. You can open with a brief statement of how you were attracted to business valuation in the first place. Think of the theme of your highlights film as: “Everything I have done up to now has prepared me for the job I’m here to talk to you about.” Edit your response so it’s no more than 45 seconds to one minute long. Then, practice, practice, practice.

When the question is “specific”, you will want to put yourself in the best light possible. This means handling two aspects of your response: What you say and How you say it. The “What” refers to choosing examples of you at your best. The “How” refers to telling the story succinctly.

We’ll start with an exercise to discover the What, then turn to an outline you can use to deliver the How.

Exercise 1: Self Promotion...
As you read this section make brief notes about times when you:

- Discovered some industry research or data no one else could find.
- Found a way to meet a very short deadline.
• Came up with a way to shorten the time required for modeling or analysis while keeping the integrity of the process.
• Jumped in to take the lead on a project that no one else wanted, or maybe had no time for.
• Were able to explain something to a client about a report or an opinion of value that he couldn’t quite understand.
• Improved the way staff were hired, trained and/or mentored.
• Took the initiative on a business development idea.

Your note can be quick; just a few words. “Quigley Project”; “Hiring four staff”; “Faster model”; “CEU presentation”; something to jog your memory later. Once you start thinking about these scenarios, you should come up with plenty of examples. In any case, push yourself to come up with a minimum of five. The more raw material you start with, the better prepared you will be to answer your interviewer’s questions.

Thinking about each example, make a note about:
• How did you come up with the idea?
• What did you have to teach yourself in order to do this?
• What kind of plan did you have to create for yourself?
• Who did you have to ask/convince/get buy-in from?
• What about the example was especially challenging?
• What did you risk if things hadn’t gone well?
• What was the client’s feedback?

By answering these questions, you are starting to shape the story of you at your best.

Now, let’s take a look at the outline which will guide how you edit the story.

**Exercise 2: Mental Outline...**
**Practice this as you’re behind the wheel, in the shower, eating breakfast, etc.:**

Even though the words you use will change depending on the specifics of the question, how you say those words always relies on the acronym – STAR. Each letter in the acronym represents a segment of your story.

**Situation**  **Task**  **Action**  **Result**
Situation: What kind of engagement was it? What industry was the client in? What special circumstances were there?

Task: What had to be accomplished? Was there a particular problem to be solved? What was your job, or assignment? Did you take some kind of initiative?

Action: What did you do? Was the action unusual in some way? Was it faster? Did it incorporate a new idea?

Result: Did you meet a tough deadline for the client? Was the client especially happy with the outcome for some reason? Was there follow-on work? Does this result continue to be used in other engagements?

Putting It Together...

Pick one of the examples in the Self-Promotion Exercise. Use the STAR outline to create a story. Keep your story short. Use no more than two sentences – one if you can manage it – for each segment.

Write a story for at least three of your examples. Practice telling the story. Re-write it to make it more conversational, if you need to.

Don’t go for perfection. Think of different ways to explain the Situation, the Task, the Action or the Result. For even more practice, go back to the Exercise and come up with an entirely new example. Use STAR to tell the story off the top of your head.

With a little bit of practice, you can come up with examples that you will have at your fingertips. As you practice, you will also become more skilled at finding ways to craft an answer to a question you may not have anticipated. By listening carefully during your interview, you can take a tough question and turn it into a great opportunity.