

Successful Interviewing: How to respond to the “What’s your weakness?” question

It’s the time of year that students and postdocs ask about the most frustrating interview question: “*What’s your weakness?*” This seems to be the most misunderstood interview question, by candidates and interviewers alike. What’s the purpose of this question, and what’s an appropriate response?

The goal of any effective interview question is to gain some insight on your knowledge, skill level and work style. The “weakness” question was to be asked, by your direct supervisor, after they told you about the job responsibilities. Your answer gave them information about your learning curve, and how to support you as a supervisor. It also gave them insight about your ability to assess, manage, and communicate potential problems and to problem solve, if you were the selected candidate.

But at some point, everyone - not just a supervisor - started asking candidates about their weaknesses. In some cases, the question came before even hearing about the scope of responsibilities. Why is that? We in the OCPD think that it’s because most staff who are part of a hiring process are not experienced interviewers, and tend to just ask questions they themselves were asked in their interviews.

Students and postdocs frequently struggle with the question, “*What’s your weakness?*” Some torpedo their candidacy with candid answers:

- “I get angry easily.”
- “I hate disorganized people.”

Others tried to dodge or ingratiate themselves with the question:

- “I’m a perfectionist.”
- “I care too much.”
- “I don’t have patience for people who don’t bring their A game.”

And some failed to answer the question:

- “I can’t think of one.”

Why are these responses all wrong? Because these general foibles aren’t giving your employer useful information about your understanding or ability to do the specific tasks on the job description, or any sense of how they can help you succeed.

So what can you do? Reframe the question. That is, answer it as if was asked by a skillful interviewer who understood the purpose of the question. Rather than, “*What’s your weakness,*” imagine the interviewer asked the question this way:

Well, Lucy, you seem to have a fantastic skill set. You’re our top candidate and it’s been a pleasure talking with you about the role and responsibilities of the job.

As the person who would be supervising you, it will help to know three things: 1) As you reflect on the job description, which responsibilities you're comfortable with, 2) what's going to be a growth area for you, and 3) what you would appreciate from me and the team to manage any issues and meet the goals of the position. So what comes to mind for you?

This reframing is useful as it puts boundaries around the questions (discuss your weaknesses in relation to the job), and gives you an opportunity to both talk honestly about how you plan to handle the situation and what you need from your supervisor to do so.

Below are three variations of responses:

- 1. Well, Ted, while I understand the research, and have several years of expertise with X technique, one issue I note could be considered a weakness is that this will be my first experience working in a startup. Through informational interviews, I have an appreciation that the focus, metrics of success, and startup culture is different than academe. But then, every organization is different, and one of my first goals wherever I work is to make sure I understand the performance expectations and integrate into the work environment. If I'm off point, I'd value straight feedback early.*
- 2. Well Dr. Kent, as I mentioned earlier, In addition to my PNP clinical training and RN experience, I have several years of health education and outreach experience. In hearing about your patient populations today, one of the NPs noted that a significant number of your patients are affected by Tay-Sach disease, which is not one of the health conditions with which I have a great deal of experience. If I was the selected candidate, I would certainly make sure that I brushed up on this clinical issue, and any feedback you could give me on performance in this area would be greatly appreciated.*
- 3. I need to be cautious about agreeing to new projects before I review my workload. If I don't, I can, at times, overextend myself. Often, it's because the project or task is interesting, but I've learned that over-committing means that nothing gets done well. I manage this tendency by specifically asking about the scope, key deadlines and a little time to review my workload before I commit. I also try to keep my calendar with me so I can review my schedule if an answer is needed immediately– which is what I would do here as well.*

As you can see, all three responses give your potential employer useful information about your skills, experience, work style, and problem solving skills, and make it clear that you intend to take responsibility in managing whatever the issue is. Most importantly, you can be honest, and professional in discussing a weakness, without feeling you're shooting yourself in the foot.

Want to practice interviewing? Look for one of our upcoming workshops on interviewing at career.ucsf.edu or schedule an appointment in the OCPD. Call 476.4986 to make an appointment.