

BEP 110 ADV – Job Interviews: Stress Questions

As we've discussed in other episodes on job interviews, one goal of the person conducting the interview is to get you to "let your guard down." Often, after a series of "warm-up questions," the interviewer will give you a tough question. This will likely come "out of the blue," that is, unexpectedly. We call these types of questions "stress questions" because part of the intention is to see how you react under pressure.



Common types of stress questions range from problems, such as how to solve a business case study or even a mathematics question, to "behavioral questions," such as how to deal with imaginary work situations involving conflict or communication.

The key with this type of question is "Don't panic!" which is the theme of this episode. We'll be looking at strategies and language that will help you deal with this type of query coolly and calmly.

Let's start with a bad example. We'll return to Michael's first interview with the electronics store.

Vocabulary

Interpersonal conflict: "Interpersonal" means between (among) persons. So interpersonal conflict is fighting among people. "Some departments have a lot of politics, which is usually accompanied by a lot of interpersonal conflict."

Outcome: Result. "What was the outcome of the match?"

To handle conflict: To deal with or resolve conflict. "How people handle conflict tells you a lot about their character."

Scenario: A scene, event, or story. "Let me give you a specific scenario involving a manager and an employee, and you tell me how you would react if you were the manager."

Bear with me: Wait for me. "Just bear with me for a second, please."

To play out: To unfold or happen. "It's impossible to tell now – we'll just have to wait to see how things play out."

To be proactive: The opposite of reactive, proactive describes the approach or attitude of solving problems before they happen. "Being proactive is a highly desirable quality for employees today because solving problems before they happen helps save companies a lot of money."

To be tasked with sth.: To be given the job of doing something. "He was tasked with finding the leak."

To resolve the situation: To solve or bring the "situation" (usually a problem of some sort) to a conclusion. "Tell me how you plan to resolve the situation."

Executive team: The group of executives or leaders at the top of a company. "Our executive team has a combined total of over 200 years of experience in this market."

Buy-in: "Buy-in" here refers to commitment, that is, being emotionally or financially invested in something. "To solve union-management problems, you need to have buy-in from both sides."

To credibly refute a rumor: Credibly means believably. Refute means disprove. "You can make all the denials you want, but no one will believe you. To credibly refute this rumor, you're going to have to show us facts."

To take concrete actions: Concrete means real or specific. "What concrete actions have you taken to resolve the situation?"

Quarterly review meeting: Quarterly means every three months or four times per year. A quarterly review meeting is, therefore, a meeting held every three months to review something, i.e. progress, etc. "We decided to hold a regular quarterly review meeting to keep closer track of the project."

Dialog - Bad Example

Michael: Now, here's another hypothetical question. Say we have two lines of LCDs.

Alexander: Two lines of LCDs...

Michael: That's right. One sells very well; the other one is a cheaper price, but it doesn't sell as well because the brand is not as well known. What can we do to increase sales of the second brand?

Alexander: Ah! The problem is quite clear.

Michael: Good. What's your suggestion?

Alexander: So, in life, there are trustworthy things and untrustworthy things. And everything is so because we will it to be so. I'd say, just put them in the front of the shop, right in the window, or, just cut the price or something. In this case what is required is taking practical action, instead of speculation.

Debrief - Bad Example

In this example, the interviewer has asked Michael a "problem" type of question. How does Michael respond? Though on the outside he doesn't seem to be panicking, Michael actually responds in a way that shows he is "stressed." First, instead of giving himself time to think, he answers quickly that "The problem is quite clear."

How about the response itself? Does it seem organized and clear? Actually, Michael's answer is illogical; he jumps around from point to point without making a clear conclusion. The most interesting suggestion he has – to put the LCDs in the store window – is buried in the *middle* of his presentation. Because his thoughts are disorganized, it seems that Michael is either nervous or not thinking clearly.

Actually, if you're like me, a natural response to a stress question is to get nervous. Luckily, there's a couple of strategies that will help us deal with any stressful question without panicking.

Let's turn now to a good example. Yala, who is interviewing for an HR manager position, is asked a tough question by her interviewer. As you listen, try to answer the following questions. The answers will be posted in a few days on our website.

Listening Questions

- 1) What is the interviewer's "stress question?"
- 2) What does Yala do to give herself some thinking time?
- 3) How does Yala answer the question?

Dialog - Good Example

Interviewer: Now, I was wondering if you could describe a specific experience working in a group or team situation where there was interpersonal conflict?

Yala: So you mean how I approached the conflict?

Interviewer: Yes. Maybe you could describe what worked well, and what didn't, and what the outcome was.

Yala: Well, just give me a moment here to think about that.

Interviewer: That's okay. Take your time.

Yala: Obviously, I think handling conflict successfully is an important part of being a manager, particularly when you have to deal with many different groups of people...

Interviewer: Yes...so how has that played out in a specific scenario for you?

Yala: There was a time a couple of years back, the middle of 2006.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Yala: There were rumors that we were going to move a product line to another plant in Mexico. And... uh... just bear with me for a second... I was proactive and brought the workers' concerns to management's attention.

Interviewer: How did they react?

Yala: Well, I was tasked with resolving the situation. So we called a meeting with union leaders and I was able to get two key members of our executive team to attend.

Interviewer: Getting management buy-in in this sort of situation is important.

Yala: Yes, and we were then able to credibly refute the rumors, and we reassured workers by communicating about the production plans...

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Yala: And we solicited opinions about how to improve communication to avoid the problem in the future.

Interviewer: So what concrete actions came out of this...?

Yala: Well the two main steps we took were 1) to set up a quarterly review meeting between senior managers and union leaders and 2) create a local version of the company newsletter.

Debrief - Good Example

The first thing we need to do when we get a stress question is to take a deep breath, maybe take a sip from our drink and *slow down*. Take control of the interview.

In the dialog, Yala uses two different ways to give herself time to formulate a response. What are they? Let's listen:

Interviewer: Now, I was wondering if you could describe a specific experience working in a group or team situation where there was interpersonal conflict?

Yala: So you mean how I approached the conflict?

The first thing that Yala does is clarify the question. She says, "So you mean...." This serves two purposes: first, she makes sure she completely understands the query. Second, she buys herself time to think about her response. Various useful phrases and strategies for asking for clarification and handling Q&A were dealt with in BEP 36 & 37. Let's just review a few key phrases:

- So let me just make sure I understand exactly what you're asking.
- That's an interesting question. Are you more looking for a work-related experience, or can I tell you something from my general life experience?
- Let me just run through the question again to make sure I understand all the parameters...

What is the second strategy Yala uses to give herself some thinking time? Let's go back to the dialog.

Interviewer: Yes. Maybe you could describe what worked well, and what didn't, and what the outcome was.

Yala: Well, just give me a moment here to think about that.

Here, Yala uses a specific phrase – "Well, just give me a moment here to think about that" to give herself a little extra time. Interviewers generally don't mind if you do this. It looks much better if you take control of the interview and give yourself some space to consider the problem than if you panic and just say whatever comes to mind.

Let's go over a few more phrases to buy yourself thinking time during an interview:

- Good question. Let me think a little bit about that.
- Okay, just bear with me for a little bit.
- Well, there are a couple situations that come to mind. Let me just think it through a little.
- All right, please just give me a sec to organize my thoughts.

After Yala has bought herself some time to think, how does the interview continue?

Interviewer: That's okay. Take your time.

Yala: Obviously, I think handling conflict successfully is an important part of being a manager, particularly when you have to deal with many different groups of people...

Here Yala has not yet formulated a detailed response to the question. Instead, she begins with a general statement of principle. Starting with a broad statement like this both 1) allows you to say something that you know the interviewer will agree with and 2) enables you to take a few more seconds to think of a detailed response. Consider a few more examples.

A: So if you had two buckets, one that held three gallons and one that held five gallons, how could you use them to measure out four gallons of water?

B: Well, hmmm... let me think about that. Obviously, this type of problem requires a little creativity...

A: Can you describe a time when you had to change your communication style to deliver a message or get your point across?

C: That's an interesting question. Please give me a few moments.... Hmmm... Well, being able to communicate with different groups of people is, of course, absolutely critical to being a leader...

How does the discussion continue? The interviewer wants to know how Yala's ability to deal with conflict between different groups of people has "played out in a specific scenario." In other words, how have Yala's conflict resolution skills worked in a particular example? Yala begins talking about a specific time "a couple of years back in 2006."

Yala: There were rumors that we were going to move a product line to another plant in Mexico. And... uh... just bear with me for a second... I was proactive and brought the workers' concerns to management's attention.

Notice how Yala again uses a *thinking time phrase* and then takes a sip of water to give herself a little break while she puts her thoughts together. She then uses one of the vocabulary terms for positive personal characteristics that we learned in Talking About Accomplishments Parts 1 and 2, "to be proactive." This, as you'll recall, is the opposite of "reactive" – it means to solve problems before they occur instead of just reacting to them.

As Yala demonstrates, we can use the language we learned for describing positive personal qualities to help us to respond to behavioral-type stress questions. Interviewers and HR people generally believe past behavior predicts future behavior. By describing how our behavior demonstrates positive personal characteristics, we are "speaking the interviewer's language." How does the interview continue?

Interviewer: How did they react?

Yala: Well, I was tasked with resolving the situation. So we called a meeting with union leaders and I was able to get two key members of our executive team to attend.

Notice how the interviewer asks Yala for specifics. From the HR perspective, it's important not just to be satisfied with general statements. We need details so that we can get deeper understanding of the candidate's experience. From the interviewee's perspective, adding details makes your story more believable.

How does the dialog continue?

Interviewer: Getting management buy-in in this sort of situation is important.

The interviewer participates in the discussion by mentioning how important "management buy-in" is. Here "buy-in" means something like commitment. The interviewer is pointing out that Yala successfully gained a commitment from management to engage with the problem. Making this sort of comment encourages Yala to keep going.

Next, Yala discusses how, working as a team with her management, they were able to "credibly refute" rumors. That means *believably disprove the stories*. In addition, they "solicited opinions," that is, gathered feedback about how to improve communication in the future.

Finally, how does the interview finish off?

Interviewer: So what concrete actions came out of this...?

The interviewer is understandably interested in concrete follow-up actions. If he hadn't asked her this, Yala would still have done well to talk about it. It's not enough simply to deal with a situation. We also have to think about how we *learn* from it. These days, most organizations put a lot of emphasis on *learning* and *improving processes*, so no matter what kind of behavioral question we get, it's smart to emphasize the long-term results that came out of the situation.

How does Yala respond?

Yala: Well the two main steps we took were 1) to set up a quarterly review meeting between senior managers and union leaders and 2) create a local version of the company newsletter.

Notice that Yala talks about the "two main steps we took." This is a good place to use an ordered list, such as first, second, third, and so on. As we've learned in other episodes, this is called "signposting language." Of course, as we've discussed elsewhere, sequencing or signposting language is important when dealing with all kinds of interview questions, which are essentially prompting you to give a series of short presentations. It would therefore be a good idea to review signposting in such episodes as BEP 101 and 102.

Here, we'll just review a couple of useful phrases that can help get you out of a tight spot in an interview.

If you're like me, sometimes you can't think of anything to say, so you just have to start talking. But then, half way through your speech, you realize that you have a

much better, much more important point to make. What can you say? You can try something like this phrase:

But actually all of these points up to now, though worth mentioning, are rather minor. What I'd really like to emphasize is...

If you feel like you are just **talking nonsense**, you can say...

Sorry, perhaps I didn't make myself clear.

If it was too fast, and you sped through the main points **too quickly**, you can say...

Sorry, let me just recap on that...

If what you're saying sounds **too complicated**, you might try saying...

So, basically, what I'm saying is this...

Now, let's practice some of what we've learned today. In a moment, you will be asked a couple of stress questions. Use the strategies we have learned today to give yourself time to think. Start with a phrase, such as "Can you just bear with me for a moment..." or, "Let me just think about that for a second..." Then, make a general statement about the question to buy time as we've practiced already today. For example, if you hear, "Tell me about an assignment that was too difficult for you..." you might say something like, "Well, how people deal with difficult assignments really tells you a lot about a person's communication style."

Let's give it a try.

Cue 1: Tell me about a time when you faced a major obstacle at work.

Learner 1: _____

Cue 2: Tell me about a time when you failed.

Learner 1: _____

Okay, now let's listen to some example answers. Of course, your responses may differ from these.

Cue 1: Tell me about a time when you faced a major obstacle at work.

Learner 1: Well, let me think a little bit about that... How we deal with obstacles and what we learn from them is very important to job success...

Cue 2: Tell me about a time when you failed.

Learner 2: Hmm... good question... please just bear with me for a second. Life has its shares of successes and failures, and how we deal with failures says a lot about us...

That's about all for this episode. We've covered a variety of strategies and language for dealing with stress questions. We've talked about giving ourselves time to think and ordering our thoughts when we answer. The theme of today's show has been *Don't panic!* We can't be prepared for every question, but practicing strategies like these can help us stay cool and calm and *take control of the interview*.

Thanks for listening!

Study Strategy

Below are some more common behavioral-type stress questions. For each one, formulate an answer using the strategies we've talked about today. Role play your answer, including asking for clarification and thinking time.

1. What can you do for us that other candidates can't?
2. Give me an example of a time when you had to think out of the box.
3. Tell me about a time when you failed.
4. What book are you currently reading?
5. Tell me about a time when you faced a major obstacle at work.
6. Tell me about an assignment that was too difficult for you. How did you resolve the issue?
7. What is your management style?
8. How would your past experience translate into success in this job?
9. How would you tackle the first 90 days?
10. Give me proof of your technical competence.

Links (click a link to open the exercise)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions - Listening Quiz](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions - Gap-fill Exercise](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions - Dialog & Vocabulary Definitions](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions – Asking for Clarification](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions – Thinking Time](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions – Making an Additional Point](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions – Stress Questions Review](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions – Useful Vocabulary](#)

[BEP 110 ADV – Stress Questions - Flashcards](#)

Language Review

I. Asking for Clarification and Thinking Time

Review asking for clarification and thinking time by filling in the blanks with words from the box.

bear	situations	understand	organize	run
looking	understand	think	related	general

Asking for Clarification

1. So let me just make sure I _____ exactly what you're asking.
2. That's an interesting question. Are you more _____ for a work-
_____ experience, or can I tell you something from my
_____ life experience?
3. Let me just _____ through the question again to make sure I
_____ all the parameters...

Thinking time

4. Good question. Let me _____ a little bit about that.
5. Okay, just _____ with me for a little bit.
6. Well, there are a couple _____ that come to mind. Let me just think it
through a little.
7. All right, please just give me a sec to _____ my thoughts.

II. Getting Yourself Out of a Tight Spot

Sometimes during an interview, you realize in mid-sentence that what you are saying isn't the best way to answer a question. How can you get yourself out of the tight spot? Let's review some useful phrases. In the following exercise, first unscramble (put in order) the sentences. Then match each sentence with its main purpose from the box.

A. <i>I'm talking nonsense...</i>	B. <i>I have a more important point to make...</i>
C. <i>I'm saying something too complicated...</i>	D. <i>I'm speaking too quickly...</i>

1. basically is what I'm so, this saying

2. on that let sorry me just recap

3. clear make I sorry didn't myself perhaps

4. though but what now, all of like to these points actually up really to
mentioning, are emphasize rather worth minor I'd is

Answers

Listening Questions

- 1) The interviewer asks a behavioral question – i.e. a question meant to help them understand how you react to a particular kind of situation – about how Yala deals with conflict.
- 2) To give herself some thinking time, Sherry both clarifies the question and uses a phrase – “Well, just give me a moment to think about that.”
- 3) She says that she was “proactive” in getting the two sides of the dispute to communicate with each other and, as the interviewer follows up on the question, she describes in a logical way the two key actions her company took to prevent future conflict of this kind.

Language Review

I. Asking for Clarification and Thinking Time

Asking for Clarification

1. So let me just make sure I **understand** exactly what you’re asking.
2. That’s an interesting question. Are you more **looking** for a work-related experience, or can I tell you something from my **general** life experience?
3. Let me just **run** through the question again to make sure I **understand** all the parameters...

Thinking time

4. Good question. Let me **think** a little bit about that.
5. Okay, just **bear** with me for a little bit.
6. Well, there are a couple **situations** that come to mind. Let me just think it through a little.
7. All right, please just give me a sec to **organize** my thoughts.

II. Getting Yourself Out of a Tight Spot

1. So, basically, what I’m saying is this... **C. I’m saying something too complicated**
2. Sorry, let me just recap on that... **D. I’m speaking too quickly**
3. Sorry, perhaps I didn’t make myself clear. **A. I’m talking nonsense**
4. But actually all of these points up to now, though worth mentioning, are rather minor. What I’d really like to emphasize is... **B. I have a more important point to make**

Useful Language

Asking for Clarification

- So let me just make sure I understand exactly what you're asking.
- That's an interesting question. Are you more looking for a work-related experience, or can I tell you something from my general life experience?
- Let me just run through the question again to make sure I understand all the parameters...

Thinking time

- Good question. Let me think a little bit about that.
- Okay, just bear with me for a little bit.
- Well, there are a couple situations that come to mind. Let me just think it through a little.
- All right, please just give me a sec to organize my thoughts.

Starting with a general principle

A: So if you had two buckets, one that held three gallons and one that held five gallons, how could you use them to measure out four gallons of water?

B: Well, hmmm... let me think about that. Obviously, this type of problem requires a little creativity...

A: Can you describe a time when you had to change your communication style to deliver a message or get your point across?

C: That's an interesting question. Please give me a few moments.... Hmmm... Well, being able to communicate with different groups of people is, of course, absolutely critical to being a leader...

Adding an Additional Point/Correcting Yourself

- *But actually all of these points up to now, though worth mentioning, are rather minor. What I'd really like to emphasize is...*

If you feel like you are just **talking nonsense**, you can say...

- *Sorry, perhaps I didn't make myself clear.*

If it was too fast, and you sped through the main points **too quickly**, you can say...

- *Sorry, let me just recap on that...*

If what you're saying sounds **too complicated**, you might try saying...

- *So, basically, what I'm saying is this...*