

Behavioral vs. Performance-based Interviewing Using Stephen Covey's Seven Habits

By Lou Adler, September 2008

One of my all-time favorite books is Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. I started developing the [two-question performance-based interviewing system](#) in the early '90s to assess these seven traits. I felt that if candidates possessed them there was a high probability the person would be a strong performer and someone with high potential. These seven habits were later merged into our [10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard](#).

During the process of developing [Performance-based Hiring](#) we were often asked how the interviewing component compared to behavioral interviewing, which at the time was considered the standard for interviewing. As a means to demonstrate the comparison I'll use Covey's seven habits as the benchmark.

As most of you know behavioral interviewing is a structured interviewing process. At its core, the process involves asking candidates to provide examples of behaviors determined to be important to job success. Included among these are traits like personal drive, influencing others, decision-making, learning new skills and applying technical knowledge. Candidates are asked to provide a specific example of each factor with interviewers asking for clarifying details using the STAR questioning pattern - describe the Situation, define the Task, describe the Action taken, and explain the Result.

The big problem I have with traditional behavioral interviewing is that the candidate's examples rarely tie directly to real job needs, since you didn't need to know them to conduct the interview or assess the candidate. For example, a highly motivated sales person who's a farmer type might not do well in a hunter role, even though the person possessed personal drive. Behavioral interviewing ignored this critical job-matching issue. Worse, the one-time snapshot approach didn't provide an easy means to observe the growth of a person's performance over time. Also missing from the behavioral interviewing process was the basic concept that multiple behaviors were typically used to achieve any result, not just one in isolation (for example, using technical competency, learning, and planning skills to achieve on-time results).

As a retained executive recruiter offering a one-year guarantee, these core flaws eliminated the use of traditional behavioral interviewing as part of my practice. The research at the time also seemed to attribute all of the increased accuracy benefits to the structured interviewing process (asking the same questions to everyone), rather than the behavioral aspects. There is no question that eliminating emotional bias from the assessment will dramatically improve assessment accuracy, but this benefit should not be assigned to behavioral interviewing - any structured interview will achieve this same result. I suspect that the behavioral interviewing advocates conveniently overlooked this critical factor.

As a result of these critical flaws, I developed a modified form of the behavioral interview. Basically, it required the candidate to describe a series of major accomplishments comparable to the real needs of the job in question. These are the performance objectives developed when initially taking the assignment and summarized in the [performance profile](#). The [fact-finding behind this question](#) is what makes the question so effective.

During the candidate's description of the accomplishment the interviewer needs to dig deep and peel the onion, layer-by-layer, to better understand not only the results achieved, but also all of the major aspects of how the results were achieved. During this process the interviewer would also ask the candidate to describe any of skills, behaviors, and competencies used to achieve the results using a STAR-like questioning pattern. In this way the required behaviors and skills become a subset of each accomplishment, rather than the determinant or primary driver.

By asking the question multiple times for different major team and individual accomplishments, the interviewer not only sees the trend of performance over time, but also sees the consistency and growth of critical behaviors, competencies, and skills. Collectively, this allows the interviewer to better match the candidate to the real job, resulting in a more accurate prediction of on-the-job performance. While the one question is, "Can you please describe a major significant accomplishment?" the subsequent fact-finding, plus the repetition of the question, is what makes it so powerful and also easy to learn.

With this background here's how you can use the most significant accomplishment question to assess Covey's Seven Habits. Here are the slightly modified definitions:

Habit 1 - Be proactive: Go out of your way to do more than you're required to do.

Habit 2 - Begin with the end in mind: Understand the problem you're facing before you begin the process of solving it.

Habit 3 - Put first things first: Don't lose site of the need to execute the plan, to stay focused on the big things, and not allow yourself to get detoured by the small stuff.

Habit 4 - Think win-win: Don't be disagreeable, don't try to dominate, get everyone motivated to participate by allowing their views to be heard and incorporated.

Habit 5 - Seek first to understand, then be understood: Listen more than talk; proactively solicit the views of others before you push your own.

Habit 6 - Synergize: Motivate others by proactively getting them to be involved and have personal ownership in critical aspects of the work.

Habit 7 - Sharpen the saw: Constantly self-develop and improve yourself.

This is a pretty good competency model for identifying planning, team building, leadership skills, and potential. To assess these traits using a behavioral interview you'd ask the candidate to provide an example of when the trait was used, and then you'd follow-up with the STAR questions to obtain more details.

As described earlier, I have a number of problems with this approach. In addition to those mentioned, there is so much public information on the Internet on how to ace the behavioral interview that candidates over prep, invalidating the results. The performance-based interview overcomes all of these problems. Here's how:

For each major accomplishment, ask the candidate to provide a specific example for each of the habits. As part of this obtain specific details including the names of people, the issues involved, and the results achieved. For example, to get at "beginning with the end in mind," have the candidate describe the planning process step-by-step. Get examples of thinking "win-win," "seeking first to understand," and "synergize" for each of the team-related accomplishment. In addition, for each accomplishment ask about personal development and what the candidate specifically did to become better.

It takes about 15-20 minutes to obtain a complete understanding of each accomplishment, but after two or three accomplishments a pattern of performance will emerge. While other interviewers should ask similar accomplishment-based questions, their focus should be on different skills, traits, habits, competencies, and behaviors. Since there's so much to learn about the person, by narrowing the focus of each interviewer, the candidate will not be repeating much during each different interview. A formal debriefing should then take place among all of the interviewers to collect everyone's findings. The [10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard](#) was developed to guide this debriefing process.

According to Schmidt & Hunter in their massive study, *The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Research*, past performance is a better predictor of future performance than past behavior. This critical issue seems to be another point conveniently overlooked by those that advocate traditional behavioral interviewing. Using a performance profile as the benchmark for assessing the candidate's ability and motivation to do the work eliminates the need to compromise here. This further undermines the argument for the continued use of the traditional behavioral interview.

Even better, by seeking critical behaviors within each of the candidate's major accomplishments you get the best of both worlds - the ability to observe the growth of the candidate's performance against real job needs, and an understanding of how the person's competencies, behaviors, and skills have grown over time. This is Covey's "sharpening the saw" habit.

From a recruiting and hiring standpoint, a performance-based interview offers other significant benefits. Specifically:

- Candidates find the conversational tone extremely professional. They appreciate the fact that each interviewer has examined their most significant accomplishments in-depth. This helps improve the close rate, without having to "sell" the candidate.
- Interviewers pick up the fact-finding techniques very easily, resulting in high user adoption rates.
- Assessment accuracy soars since the 10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard provides an easy means to assess the candidate against real job needs.
- Looking for gaps in the candidate's background provides a means to clearly demonstrate that the job offers a true career opportunity. This naturally increases the close rate, without having to use compensation as the primary means to recruit the candidate.
- The performance profile used during hiring can be used as part of the on-boarding and subsequent performance management process. This way there is no "job shock" when the candidate starts, since performance expectations have been clarified at every step in the hiring process.
- Managers become better managers by clarifying job needs up-front before the candidate is hired. This is the essence of the Gallup Group's classic study described in Curt Hoffman's and Marcus Buckingham's book, *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. Clarifying performance expectations up-front enables managers to find candidates who are both competent and motivated to meet real job needs.

Covey's Seven Habits provide a unique means to demonstrate the predictive power of the Performance-based Interview process. More importantly, it offers everyone a guide on how to become a better team member, partner, collaborator, and leader. Looking for these traits in the people you hire will go a long way in improving the overall quality of your team and company. Behavioral interviewing might provide a sense of how the candidate scores on each of these criteria, but assessing how the person would fit within the organization and meet the performance objectives is problematic. Performance-based Interviewing, in combination with a group debriefing using the 10-Factor Candidate Assessment Scorecard, takes less effort and provides more predictable results. Since it's part of an end-to-end sourcing, recruiting, and hiring process you'll hire more top people as well.