

Toughest Interview Question (Weaknesses) Bernard Marr March 18, 2014

Most of us have been in the situation where we sit in a job interview and we feel things are going well until the interviewer pulls out the ultimate question: Tell me about your greatest weakness? Unless you are prepared, this is the question that can trip up even the most experienced interviewee.

The tricky bit is that you are in a situation where you want to make the best possible impression and sell your greatest qualities, not talk about weaknesses. Therefore, our natural instinct is to say: I don't have any weaknesses. Of course, you and the interviewer know that this is not true. So, do you lie or apply any other strategies?

Before I explore the ways you might tackle this question I just want to say that I don't like when interviewers ask the standard 'tough' interview questions. For me, it shows that the interviewer is a weak communicator, is inexperienced and not very imaginative. When I interview people I try to create a natural conversation to learn more about past experiences and expectations about the job I am interviewing for. I want to hear real stories and not contrived answers to artificial questions.

The reason why some interviewers like to ask about weaknesses is to get an insight about how self-aware you are. However, I believe that asking 'What is your greatest weakness' won't give the interviewer any real insights because interviewees will simply deliver a standard answer. The most cliché answers I have heard are 'I am a perfectionist' or 'I work too hard'. Don't give those answers, they just show that you haven't really prepared to find a good answer. Also, any good interviewer will try to not laugh in your face and then drill you until he or she finds the real weaknesses.

So if you get an interviewer that asks contrived questions you might as well give a contrived, but considered and honest answer. Here are some strategies you might want to consider:

Avoid the answer by focusing on the skills needed for the job

Normally, before we apply for a job we consider the skills needed and make a judgment that we have or can quickly develop those skills. Use this question as your opportunity to show that you have made such an assessment. You could say something like: "This is a difficult question to answer. Of course, we all have certain strengths and weaknesses. When I applied for this job I assessed the key skills I would need to perform well. For me, this job requires the key skills of X, Y, and Z and I feel that I have all of those. With my new role will come new responsibilities such as X, and in my previous job I have had limited opportunities to fully develop these. However, I am a fast learner and will focus on developing these areas."

Talk about minor weaknesses and the ones that don't matter for that job

If the interviewer insists on finding weaknesses, then talk about minor weaknesses that don't really matter to the job you are aiming to get. It acknowledges that you are self-aware and have weaknesses, like all of us, but none that are any real concern because they don't really matter for

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the job. For example, if you are applying for a job as a gardener, you might say that you are struggling with public speaking.

Avoid general statements

Instead of making general statements such as 'I am bossy' you might want to qualify this to specific situations along the lines of 'When there is a lot of pressure on a project I can come across as bossy'. This way you show that it is not a weakness you have all the time but one that you are aware of in that situation.

Talk about past development success

Another strategy is to avoid talking about current weaknesses. Instead, talk about your ability to self-assess, find weaknesses and deal with them. Give one or two past examples of how you identified 'development needs' (a much more positive term than weakness) and then improved in those areas. Along the lines of: "No body is perfect. I am always interested in keeping my skills up-to-date and seek out constructive feedback. In my last job I noticed that my social media skills were not as good as they could have been, which made me book on a training course. Now my social media skills are so good that I help to coach others in my company in that area."

Weaknesses to avoid in your answer

Finally, there are some weaknesses that you should avoid to mention when talking about weaknesses, because they are important skills that matter to any job, such as

- Not being a team player
- Not being able to take feedback
- Not being able to take initiative and work independently
- Not being trustworthy
- Not being reliable

What are your views on this? Do you agree that contrived questions deserve contrived answers? Any other strategies you would recommend? Do you agree that this is the toughest interview question? If not, which one would you say is the toughest? Please share any of your views...

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