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How to Interview Your Next Boss



Job hunting is stressful. If you're working and job-hunting, you're anxious to make your move. If you're not working, you're under pressure to get a new job fast. As a job-seeker it's easy to forget that you're making as big a decision as your next employer is.

If a manager hires you and doesn't like your brand of jazz, he can cut you loose and find someone new. That will cost money and time, but those are costs of doing business. If you take a job working for the wrong person, it can damage your resume and destroy your mojo. If you've ever worked for someone you didn't mesh with, you know exactly what I mean.



On a job interview, you're interviewing your next boss as surely as he or she is interviewing you. Your job is not to impress anyone. If you're focused on making a good impression, you'll be out of your body, evaluating your own performance, rather than squarely in your body, being yourself. In "Please like me" mode, you'll contort yourself into pretzel shapes trying to say things the hiring manager will like. That's beneath you.

Your job is to stay yourself on a job interview whether the hiring manager likes you or not. If you aren't a particular manager's cup of tea, you haven't failed -- you've dodged a bullet. Only the people who get you deserve you, after all.

Your job on an interview is twofold. You've got to learn enough about the job opening -- and particularly about the business pain behind the job, the pressing problem that warrants an expenditure of precious salary dollars - to be able to gauge whether you and this job are a good match.

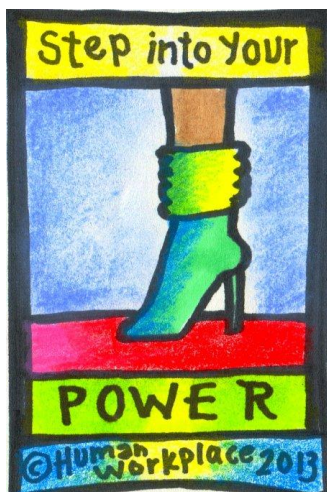
Of course, the good match can't just happen in your mind. If you decide that you'd love this job and thrive in it, you've got to make that connection clear to the hiring manager. You'll do that by telling mini-stories. At Human Workplace we call them Dragon-Slaying Stories, because they show your prospective next boss how you slew dragons very much like the ones circling his or her castle right now.



A Dragon-Slaying Story has a simple format. It starts with the problem your current or previous employer was facing, moves on to the solution you found, and ends by explaining why your dragon-slaying move was exactly what the situation called for. Here's an example:

MANAGER: I know you've managed trade shows. We've got a big bottleneck getting new sales leads to the sales team after shows. Have you been around that process?

YOU: Absolutely - I look after that process now. Last year, we ramped up our trade show presence and had the same issue -- a bottleneck, and leads going cold because we couldn't get back to them.



MANAGER: What did you do?

YOU: We couldn't keep feeding leads into a blocked pipeline. Our inside sales guys were swamped, which is a good thing, but there's no use pushing on a rope. We jury-rigged an email campaign that got the trade show leads sorted into High, Medium and Low priority groups based on the prospect's responses. Then I was able to make a case to the sales managers that their inside guys should drop other projects to call the High Priority leads. Two of our territories doubled their sales, and the others had big jumps.

MANAGER: What did you do with the lower-priority leads?

YOU: They got a bunch of email drips and calls to action, and we left the rest up to them. We toyed with the idea of getting some temps on board to call them, but we ended up using email to convert about twenty-five percent of them. The rest are still getting drips.

MANAGER: I like your practical outlook.

Now your hiring manager knows how you roll. Dragon-Slaying Stories will make that part of your job easy. But what about your other priority - learning enough about the job, the company, your personal opportunity in this organization and your potential boss's style to decide whether or not you even want the job?

How do you interview your next boss as he or she is interviewing you?



Here's how.

It's important to mention that this technique, like everything we teach at Human Workplace, is powered by personal mojo. It is sometimes frustrating for smart but change-averse people to realize that the Whole Person Job Search approach we teach at Human Workplace relies less on intellect than on finding your voice in the moment.

That is the one thing that many brilliant, talented professionals fear to do. They are hesitant to try. They've staked their self-image on their Good Boy or Good Girl credentials. They're not used to stepping outside the velvet ropes, and saying or doing unexpected things.

Yet finding your voice in a job interview, like using your influence at work, is not a radical thing to do. It is a matter of remembering your value in the talent equation.

If your mojo is low, you're likely to scoff and say "I can't interview my next manager! How absurd! I'm a job seeker, and I have no power. Liz Ryan is crazy." I understand that reaction, because I hear it all the time.

The Reactionometer below predicts this very reaction. In fear, people think "No! I can't do that!" As their flame grows, they think "Maybe I *can* do that!"



If my advice seems extreme, check your mojo level. Job-seekers interview their hiring managers all day long -- someone is doing it as you read these words.

Someone is doing it in Hong Kong, and someone else in Poland. People are finding their voices all over the world.

If you don't feel ready to do it yourself at this moment, don't despair! We are all growing new muscles and mojo for the new-millennium workplace. We are doing it together. That's what Human Workplace is all about.

You can interview your next boss to a greater or lesser degree depending on your mojo level. If you happen to have a job interview on a day when your flame is high, you can interview your next boss more aggressively. If you interview on a low-mojo day, use our Low Power setting (below).

Don't try to interview your next boss in a panel interview or one where the questions are highly scripted. If you see your next manager reading from a script in his hands, you may have difficulty getting him off the script.



At the same time, a manager who reads interview questions from a script is not your ideal next boss if you're over 21 years old. We forgive baby supervisors for scripted interview questions, and hold everyone else to a higher standard.

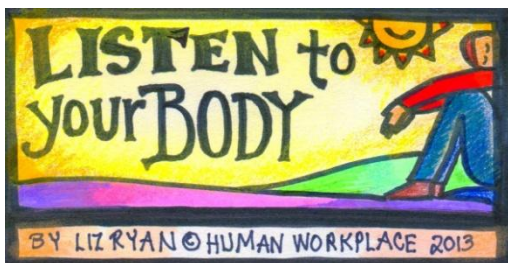
LOW POWER SETTING

If you're new to the Whole Person Job Search and the idea of interviewing your next boss freaks you out, try this approach. The hiring manager will ask you interview questions, and you'll answer each one. After each answer, you'll ask a question of your own back, like this:

MANAGER: So, what made you move to Minneapolis in 2007? That's a big move.

YOU: You're right! I'd never lived in a snowy climate before, but I love it here. My fiancée at the time was in grad school here. We got married two years ago. That reminds me, I notice that since your merger with Acme Explosives last year, you've added a lot more jobs in Phoenix than here in Minnesota. Do you see that shift continuing?

MANAGER: Sharp eye! Yes, I definitely see more of our operations moving to Phoenix, but the corporate headquarters is staying here, including Finance, HR, IT and my Sales Administration group. That's the plan. Since you asked, how do you feel about travel to Phoenix?



YOU: Love it! It's just that my wife is now getting her PhD and we wouldn't be able to move any time soon.

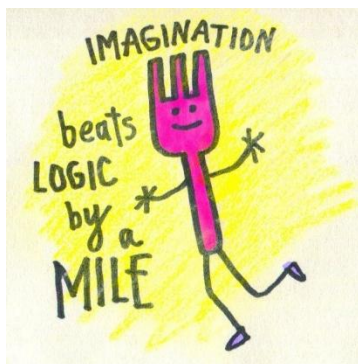
MANAGER: I hear you. That's fine. So many things are virtual now anyway, right?

Try the Low Setting if you're new to interviewing your next manager. It isn't difficult, but it may take a shift in your perspective.

Most of us have grown up with the idea that the manager is in the driver's seat at a job interview, and we fall into Student mode, sitting quietly and answering questions as they're put to us. We can shake off that old training and have a normal conversation with our next boss, just the way we'd chat with anyone we're meeting for the first time.

MEDIUM POWER SETTING

If you're already comfortable 'spinning the table' the way we described above -- answering a question and asking your own question back to the hiring manager -- try taking your interviewing-your-next-boss practice up a notch by helping your hiring manager get off the script entirely.



You'll do that by using some of your airtime during the interview to learn more about the pain behind the job ad.

Here's an example:

MANAGER: So, you've dealt with this trade show hand-off thing before?

YOU: For sure. I've got a story to tell you about that, in fact. Can I ask you a quick question about that issue first, though?

MANAGER: Sure.

YOU: You've got sales leads not getting out to the field, and I would imagine that causes some headaches. You've seen those lead forms and business cards, and you know some of them are hot prospects.

MANAGER: Not only that, I made commitments to some of them in the booth.

YOU: Exactly! So you come back to headquarters, and weeks go by, and the leads sit in the queue and nobody calls them. That's frustrating.



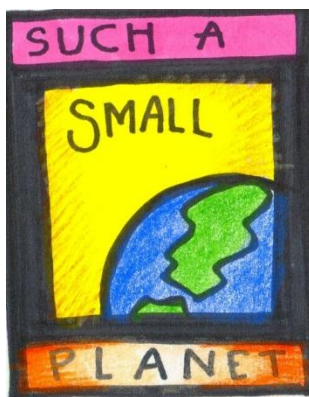
MANAGER: It is. It's a huge problem.

YOU: At the same time, it's hard to imagine that that one problem gave rise to this \$80,000 job, which reports to you directly. Would you say the sales lead bottleneck is the main reason this job is open, or are there other pressing issues? I would love to get the full picture, from your perspective.

MANAGER: The sales lead thing is the most top of mind. There are two other big items on my plate. Our sales reporting has to get a lot better. We're hamstrung in a number of ways that I'll share with you. The other issue is sales training. It's all OJT and catch-as-catch-can stuff right now. So that's my trifecta.

YOU: Thanks for that explanation. I get the picture now. Let me tell you that trade show story with that added context.

MANAGER: Please do.



HIGH POWER SETTING

When your mojo is high and your spinning-the-table muscles grow, you'll make every job interview a conversation about pain. You won't sit meekly like a lamb and answer interview questions, then go silent and wait for the next question. It's much more fun and more interesting to dig into the pain behind the job ad -- and more useful for the hiring manager, too!

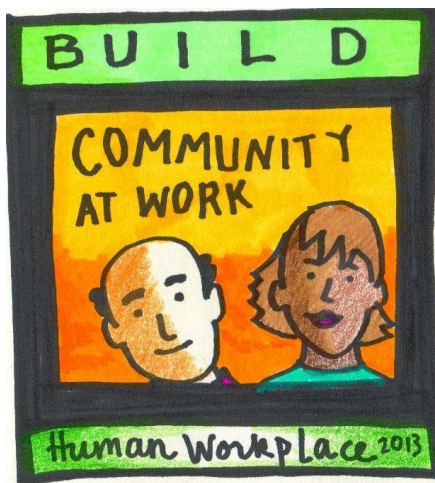
When you really understand what's keeping your hiring manager up at night, you can talk with him or her about more important things than when you first learned to use Excel or if you were an animal, what sort of animal you'd be. Hiring managers only ask brainless interview questions like "What sort of animal would you be?" and "With all the talented candidates, why should I hire you?" because they don't know any other way to get through a job interview.

If they want to learn a different way, then can learn Interviewing with a Human Voice, the Human Workplace alternative to the traditional weenie job interview. It will grow their mojo when they learn to interview like a human. But you don't have to wait for them to make that shift.

You can start interviewing your next manager any time the spirit moves you! Here's a sample High Power Setting interview to get your wheels turning:

MANAGER: So, how long have you been using Excel?

YOU: Oh, my goodness, when did that program come out? We can say forever. Can I ask you a quick question?



MANAGER: Sure.

YOU: You said this is a new position. What would you say gave rise to this opening, more than anything else? Was it the acquisition last year, or a change in strategy, or something else?

MANAGER: The acquisition was part of it, but it's really just taking our decision-making platform to the next level. This job is about taking our whole sales operations outlook up a notch. We're keeping up with sales growth, but the analytics aren't there. We need more altitude.

YOU: That's really helpful. Can you tell me a story that gives me a feel for that -- how that shortfall in analysis hurts you?

MANAGER: Okay, sure. I can tell you what we sold last year and last quarter by product, by territory and by sales rep. I can tell you which products and regions had the biggest growth. But I can't tell you the trends, anything longitudinal, or anything related to specific marketing campaigns and their effectiveness beyond the gut-feel level, because we don't have the data.

YOU: Okay, fantastic. So the ideal scenario would be...



MANAGER: The ideal scenario is that we choose twenty or thirty key metrics and we are on top of them by the day, by the hour, by the minute. That's not my only goal for this year, but it's a big one.

YOU: And when this person joins you, how will they start that process? Is it primarily an IT initiative?

Now you're talking to your next boss about things that matter, not goofy trivia items like where you got one of your certifications. Important things are happening on both sides of the equation. Your conversation becomes a million times more real to the hiring manager, and that's good for you as a candidate, one of several.

At the same time, you're getting a feel for the guy (a unisex term) opposite you in the room. Can you work for this person? What is his or her worldview? What does s/he care about? Could the two of you make a powerhouse team? Your job at the job interview is to answer these questions. If you can't get your hiring manager to open up about what's not perfect in Denmark, what does that tell you?

It's a new day, and no one is responsible for your career but you. The old-fashioned measure of a successful job interview ("They really liked me!") is the booby prize now. What good is a winning interview if the people who like you aren't people who can grow your flame?

Once you step up to this level of interviewing, you will never, ever go back to being a lamb in a visitor's chair. Your mojo will be far too big for that. Start with the Low Power setting and work your way up. It's a new year, and a new day in the talent marketplace. It's a great time to find your voice!

