

# Ace The Executive Interview: Strategies For Leaders

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## **STRATEGIES FOR LEADERS: PART 1 OF 2**

If it has been a while since your last job interview, you will find that there are some significant changes in the way leadership interviews are conducted these days, and what is being expected of the interviewee. To be effective, you must step into every meeting armed with your talent, knowledge, and the tools to present yourself as an exceptional leader and a valuable asset. If you apply the following strategies to your rich experience, you will surely “Ace the Executive Interview.”

### **Prepare a Career Summary**

As a leader, you are likely to encounter a series of meetings during your interview process. Through each step, you will run into a number of individuals that will be interested in learning about what you can offer. You may meet with each interviewer separately or in a group, on an “interview panel”. So, be prepared to provide a short introduction and brief career summary, which you are likely to repeat a few times.

Since our current business environment greatly determines how we must respond in an interview, you are likely to find that many of the issues that you encountered during your most recent position will be similar to the concerns that your prospective employer needs to deal with. So, before you step into your next interview, review the issues you have had to wrestle with and resolve in your recent career.

Rather than “telling” what is already on your résumé, use your career summary statement to “sell” yourself. Highlight the value that you bring to the table and give examples that relate to the company and position for which you are applying.

### **Know the Industry and Organization**

As a leader, it is critical that you are knowledgeable about the industry, organization, and stakeholders. Be assured that the quality of your research will separate you from the other candidates.

You must be up on the current market and how it pertains to your prospective employer's business needs. Investigate industry associations and read material on their websites or in their newsletters. Consider contacting industry colleagues and business partners that you may be able to leverage once you take on your new role. Ask your contacts to relay to you current developments and issues concerning the industry.

Before your interview, research your prospective employer as thoroughly as you can. Visit their website and make sure to investigate key corporate information that will give you insight into the important aspects of the position and the business. Determine the company's vision and mission. Download and read their annual report if it is available. Identify the company's key decision makers and stakeholders and learn what you can about their backgrounds. Read the HR section and learn about the company culture. Review recent press releases issued by the organization. They will give you important clues and glimpses into the organizations initiatives and future business plans.

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If there is a job posting available, make sure to review it and study it thoroughly. Go through each requirement line by line and determine which of your accomplishments will best meet each need.

Your prospective employer knows that your comprehensive knowledge will directly affect your ability to deal effectively with the issues that you will encounter. Once you have learnt all that you can, prepare a few detailed and specific scenarios and some concise accomplishment statements to demonstrate that you are the ideal candidate.

### **Impress Everyone You Encounter**

You must make a positive impression to all the people that you encounter during the interviewing process. Many decision makers will invite opinions from their co-workers and subordinates and be influenced by their input. Always treat the receptionist, assistant, and recruiter with the utmost of respect.

If you are in a panel interview, make eye contact with the other people at the table when you can. Respond to the person that asked the question and give every response the time that it deserves, regardless of what level that individual holds.

### **Display Confidence Not Arrogance**

A senior level candidate must appear confident, but not arrogant. During the interview do not be controlling or dominate the conversation. Do not name-drop, unless you have a valid business reason for bringing that person into your discussion.

Employers are looking for leaders that have interpersonal skills to connect with and positively motivate their staff and coworkers. When outlining your accomplishments, never exaggerate or brag. If your successes were part of a team effort, do not take a

greater role than you deserve or imply that you did it alone. If you feel that you are coming across too strong in outlining your accomplishments, try replacing the word “I” with “We.”

### **Use “SAR” To Your Advantage**

Prospective employers look for leaders that can get their point across clearly and concisely. You need to use vivid stories to capture the interviewer, draw them in, and create a lasting impression in your interviewer’s mind. Make sure to keep your storytelling concise and to the point.

An effective technique that you can use to prepare your responses is the SAR technique. Create responses that include a brief description of the situation, issue, or problem that you encountered. Outline the action that you took to resolve the situation. Then tell the interviewer the result or outcome, and how it positively affected the bottom line.

### **Communicate Clearly and Confidently**

It is essential to be able to convert the organization’s strategic vision into language that is easily understood by everyone. You will need to show your interviewers that you have the ability to make others feel connected with the organization, its goals and vision. Be aware of who you are speaking to. Make sure to talk to the level of the person who asked the question. Do not use sophisticated terms or technical jargon unless you are sure that the person that you are responding to will understand your response.

When communicating about a large issue or accomplishment, start with the “big picture” overview and smoothly work your way through to your final point. Try to keep your answers concise. Do not overwhelm the interviewer with peripheral details or information that does not directly add value to your point.

If you have difficulty communicating your value, think about taking advantage of the services of a professional resume strategist. Many senior executives understand the value of leveraging an expert to enable them to succeed in their job search!

## **STRATEGIES FOR LEADERS: PART 2 OF 2**

Following up on Part 1 in our last newsletter, here are some additional strategies that you can use to ace the executive interview.

### **Study Your Timelines**

During your interview, it is likely that questions will come up regarding what you did and when you did it. The interviewer will probably have your résumé in front of them and should easily be able to refer to points that you are discussing. Make sure to know the exact start and end dates of all the positions that you have held.

In addition, when you are discussing accomplishments, you must be able to clearly tell your interviewer when you did what you did. If you start fumbling during this process, you may appear to be less than truthful. Therefore, it is quite helpful to know these details thoroughly.

### **Focus on Achieving Immediate Results**

Years ago, it was common to be asked by an interviewer about your long term prospects because loyalty to one organization was valued quite differently than it is today. Organizational values have moved to favour speed over stability. Most organizations today are looking for leaders that can produce results quickly.

Since these employers tend to value immediate results over company allegiance and longevity, it is in your best interest to focus on what you can do immediately upon hire. In your discussions, use examples of how you resolved issues and instituted positive change, in a decisive way. Demonstrate how you produced results that impacted the bottom line within a short period.

### **Demonstrate Cultural Fit**

A large portion of your executive interview will be geared towards learning if you are the right “fit” for your potential employer. In order for you to make an impact, your personal qualities, values, and associated behaviours will need to match the organization’s needs. Your prospective employer will want to find a leader who will passionately share their vision. Therefore, it is critical that you have the personal characteristics and vision to help them get there.

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During the interview, focus on cultivating a personal connection with your interviewers. Build chemistry with them by interacting in a pleasant and relaxed style. To demonstrate cultural fit, concentrate on your soft skills such as your strong work ethic, interaction, and team building abilities. What you say is just as important as how you say it, so remember to stay positive and smile often.

### **Concentrate on Creating Organizational Synergy**

Years ago, the ability to build solid teams and change corporate culture in a systematic, long-term process were of utmost importance. This is still important today, but because of our fast-paced environment, it is equally important to be able to create teams with the flexibility and adaptability to deal with change inside and outside the organization.

Show how you can help the organization to deal effectively with the constantly changing business environment. Demonstrate your ability to create synergy and motivate individuals and departments to work together no matter what comes their way.

### **Show How You Manage Major Transformations**

Prospective employers are looking for leaders that will build on and improve their organization. You must be able to show the ability to transform the organization and lead it into a strong and healthy future.

Our business environment is in a constant state of flux. Many organizations are continuously undergoing major transformations in the form of mergers, acquisitions, centralization, decentralization, downsizing, upsizing, restructuring, and so forth. In order to address this need effectively, you will need to deliver some stories that outline your ability to plan and lead organizational change initiatives. Highlight how you can

institute stability during a state of change, all the while maintaining strong financial performance.

### **Appreciate the Power of Technology**

Development in technology will not be slowing down anytime soon. It is likely that you will need to show how you can exploit appropriate technological advances to improve the company's market position and take advantage of emerging business opportunities.

Since your interviewer will be more interested in the "big picture," rather than focusing on your personal technical skills, use examples of your achievements to demonstrate that you are comfortable with technological change. Show how you can harness technology to meet the organization's needs and deal effectively with the bombardment of technical information.

### **Answer Unasked Questions**

Many interviewers have difficulty asking appropriate questions to leaders, so if you feel that there were some points left unsaid, you must find a way to bring them up. Know what information you want to communicate and make sure to answer any questions that you feel should have been asked.

If there is a point that you would like to bring up, you can ask a question related to that area. When you receive your response, you can follow up by introducing your point. In addition, you can certainly take the initiative to indicate to the interviewer that you have some additional details to share with them. Your prospective employer will want to know all the pertinent information to select and appoint an effective leader.

### **Take Advantage of Professional Services**

There is no doubt that you must conquer the executive interview to open up the doors to the next phase of your professional career. Many executives leverage the expertise of a professional interview strategist to enable them to articulate their value. By partnering with an interview strategist, you will be well positioned to receive, evaluate, and accept a top-notch employment offer!

#### **About the Author**

**Sharon Graham** is an executive résumé writer, employment interview strategist, and author of *Best Canadian Résumés*. With multiple certifications in résumé, interview, and career strategy, Sharon has elevated the industry by delivering cutting-edge innovations to résumé writers and career practitioners across the nation. She assists six-figure job seekers through her consulting firm Graham Management Group, [www.GrahamManagement.com](http://www.GrahamManagement.com) and is executive director of Career Professionals of Canada. You can reach Sharon by e-mailing [info@GrahamManagement.com](mailto:info@GrahamManagement.com).