

Chronicle Careers

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HEADS UP**The Fourth Factor for Hiring**

Research, teaching, and service are the big three, but there's one more criterion interviewers need to evaluate -- attitude

By M. MARK WASICKO

"Tell me how you used your sense of humor to defuse a difficult situation or teach an important lesson?"

As a dean, I ask questions like that regularly when interviewing job candidates. In academe, we hire faculty members based on their teaching, research, and service, so I also ask a lot of questions about each of those facets of a candidate's career. But there's a fourth factor that is important, too -- attitude.

I ask unusual questions during interviews to increase the likelihood that my university hires someone who, in addition to possessing significant knowledge and experience, has the attitudes that are essential to enhancing learning, teaching, and departmental culture on the campus.

To get a glimpse into a candidate's character, I might ask the applicant to "describe your perfect day." One applicant sent to me after receiving high marks from the search committee responded, "I would sleep until noon and then lie in bed the rest of the day watching TV -- I just subscribed to the 24-hour sports channel -- and eating snack foods."

That answer triggered further inquiry into the applicant's energy and motivational levels, his willingness to learn new things, and his ability to engage in meaningful interactions with others. By the end of the interview, I was certain that he was not a good fit for our program. He was not offered the position.

It's not always so easy to make reliable and valid determinations about a candidate's attitudes in the short span of an interview. Fortunately, research with roots in the "perceptual psychology" work of the late Arthur W. Combs shows that effective educators possess discernable attitudes (Combs called them "perceptions" and used the term synonymously with "values, attitudes, and beliefs") about themselves, students, and teaching.

Further, those qualities can be observed and measured during the interview process through the systematic use of carefully crafted questions. By listening thoughtfully to the answers, valuable insights can be garnered into how applicants perceive themselves, their students, and their chosen profession. Following are some of my favorite interview questions that can be used to detect those qualities:

How would your students describe you? The best candidates will quickly recognize that this is a meta-question and may require a moment to think before replying. To answer that question well, applicants will have to have some idea about what students think of them and will disclose their own strengths and

weaknesses without having to be asked that question directly.

Research and experience tells us that effective educators have positive yet realistic self-perceptions and demonstrate an inherent ability to identify with people of diverse learning styles and backgrounds. The ability to "identify" or see things from another person's viewpoint is critically important for individualizing instruction at the student level and for appreciating diversity of thought, culture, and deed in academe.

Not surprisingly, ineffective educators show difficulty identifying with and teaching some students, show inflexibility when dealing with issues and colleagues, and can be pessimistic and closed-minded.

Tell us about a situation in which students you taught learned a significant lesson. That is a good question because it is so open-ended. The candidate can take it anywhere, and it gets to the root of his or her educational philosophy and core attitudes about students and teaching.

When you pose this question during an interview, look for at least two things. First, look for evidence that the applicant understands the difference between "teaching" and "student learning." The former focuses on the mechanics of instruction, while the latter requires an ability to identify with students or to see what was learned through the student's eyes. If the focus of the candidate's answer is not on what the students learned, that person might have a difficult time identifying with some students or colleagues.

The second thing to look for is how the candidate describes students in his or her reply. The best instructors maintain high expectations of students and believe that they are worthy of significant time, thought, and effort.

When undergraduates are asked about their favorite teacher -- the one who had the greatest positive impact on their learning -- they often say things like, "She maintained high expectations of me," or "He made me feel worthwhile and important," or "She cared that I was learning."

Conversely, the worst instructors have low expectations of students, find it difficult to work with some types of students, and offer many excuses for why they fail. You can sometimes find hints of those attitudes in how the candidate responds to your question.

What kinds of problems do people bring to you? How a candidate answers that question can illustrate if others have confidence in the person and can provide insight into his or her teaching or administrative philosophy.

A good follow-up question to ask is what advice was given and what, if anything, happened afterward. Those questions are especially good for understanding a candidate's attitudes toward teaching, learning, and problem solving.

Research shows that effective educators are people-oriented, expend a good deal of effort building positive relationships with students, colleagues, and the community, and have a service orientation. They see the larger issues rather than the more immediate and less important ones, and constantly ask themselves, "How will my students be better 10 years from now because of what we are learning today?"

Ineffective educators, on the other hand, tend to focus on the mundane, short-range, impersonal aspects of teaching and frequently center most of the attention on themselves.

If your life works out in the best way you can imagine, what will you be doing in five years? That question is a good for two reasons. First, it can show if a person is forward-looking. Answers such as, "I will have won the lottery and be living on my private island," or more subtle variations of "I will be in a position that better suits my needs and interests," don't bode well for a candidate being a good fit.

Second, it's a good way to look for administrative talent. Some of the best coordinators, department heads, and future administrators have been discovered by listening to people's aspirations. When applicants indicate that they hope to have greater responsibility or a meaningful impact on the profession, that is a good sign.

Also, as a rule, I never hire a person to whom I would not want to report. You never know what might happen.

How do you balance your life? What do you do for fun? Those are probably my favorite questions.

Research about educators who maintain positive mental health indicates that they have found ways to balance work and play. They realize that being in higher education is more than a job but less than a life.

This is usually the best question for getting people to engage and open up. Your ultimate goal is to hire talented people with good mental health who are fun to be around.

You must tread carefully when trying to infer things about a candidate's attitudes from their replies to interview questions. None of the questions have an absolute right or wrong answer. All you can do is reflect on their answers and ask yourself, "What attitudes must a person have to have responded this way?"

Treat their answers as you would any other piece of self-reported information, keeping in mind that applicants will present themselves in the best possible light. Most candidates rehearse for an interview. By asking some unanticipated questions, you can get beyond the rehearsed remarks, engage people in conversation on topics that interest them, and ideally learn a few things about how they think in the process.

Always start an interview with the usual questions: "Why are you a good fit for this position at this time?" "What is it about this position that interests you?" Then move on to some less typical ones, such as those I've suggested.

Finally, always offer applicants an opportunity to ask questions. The type and quality of their questions provide significant insight into what they see as important and into their motivation for applying for your position. Hoping that an employee's attitude will improve after you have hired him or her is akin to the naïve belief that the performance of a marginal colleague will suddenly improve after being granted tenure. It just doesn't happen that way.

In the long run, it may be better to fill a position on a temporary basis rather than hire an "attitudinal misfit" who ends up burdening the system with time- and energy-zapping issues.

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