

Improving Teacher Selection with Behavior-based Interviewing

Mary C. Clement

An interviewing technique borrowed from the business world is growing in popularity.

Interviewing and hiring teachers should be based on more than a feeling that a particular candidate can do the job. School leaders know that teacher recruitment and retention are critical to building a strong faculty and recognize the need to develop and use best practices in hiring. One such practice is behavior-based interviewing (BBI), which has come to education from the business world.

Based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance, this interview style uses specific questions based on candidates' skills, background, and experience to determine if they can do the job. What many successful interviewers have found is that the way a person handled a specific situation in the past provides valid information about how that person will approach a similar situation in the future (Deems, 1994).

Identifying Teaching Skills

Ask any principal to list the characteristics of effective teaching and a long list will evolve. Good teachers know subject matter, how students learn, how to motivate, how to manage, and how to assess. They use a variety of teaching methods and know how to reach students with diverse needs. They also are team players, have strong interpersonal and communication skills, are well organized, and enthusiastic. Therefore, the first step in preparing for teacher selection is to do the advance work of "envisioning and defining the new position" (Clement, 2000) and deciding the specific skills and experiences that a new hire would need to be successful.

The performance skills of teachers will vary with grade and subject area, but some skills can be generalized for all teachers, such as knowledge of curriculum, methods and planning, classroom organization and management, homework and grading, individual students' needs, communication, and professionalism (Clement, Kistner, & Moran, 2005). Once specific performance skills are identified, the interviewer can prepare questions that will ascertain whether the candidate has those skills and the experience in applying them. A master list of interview questions should be asked of each candidate, in the same order and with the same wording. The questions will need some form of assessment, for as a wise interviewer once said, "Why ask a question if there is no way to evaluate the answer?"

Creating the Interview Questions

BBI questions are much deeper than yes or no questions. They require the candidate to discuss past situations and problems and how they were resolved. Typical BBI questions begin with phrases like, "Tell me about a time when ..." or "Describe a situation where ..." A question might be, "Describe



IN BRIEF

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how you have implemented one topic of the state's curriculum in a lesson you taught" or "Describe a unit of study that you have taught." When asking for specifics of methods and planning, typical questions include:

- How have you divided a large amount of material to be covered?
- How do you write a daily lesson plan, and what is included?
- Describe a practical way to teach _____. (*e.g.*, the concept of symmetry in mathematics, or democracy in social sciences).

Questions must address each performance skill that has been identified as important by the interviewer. For example, if communication skills are important, then a question might be, "Share an example of a positive communication that you have sent to parents." If creation of homework assignments is deemed an essential skill, then a relevant question would be, "Tell me about a typical homework assignment in your class and what you have done to deal with students who do not complete homework."

The premise of BBI is that a person who can describe previous experiences with a particular topic is equipped to deal with that topic in the classroom. Although some people can talk about their teaching experience and still not really be able to teach, those who cannot even talk about how to plan a lesson, set up a grade book, or move a class of 27 third graders to the cafeteria

most certainly won't be able to do those things if hired.

New teachers are not expected to have *every* experience before getting their first teaching job, but candidates who can talk about what they learned in classroom observations, field experiences, and student teaching will be better prepared to start in their own classrooms.

Two Techniques that Guide BBI

PAR (problem, action, and result) and STAR (situation, task, action, and result) guide both the questions and the assessment of candidate answers in a BBI-style interview. Using the PAR technique, the question can be worded to address a problem, such as management. The interviewer then listens to see if the candidate has experience with the problem, took appropriate action, and learned from the result.

For example, in response to "What have you done in the past to refocus a class and get it back on task?" a

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strong candidate might answer: "Keeping seventh graders focused can be a challenge, as I learned in one of my practicum experiences (*problem*). My teacher always had a list of what the class needed to accomplish on the board, and that helped. We also used a rainstick to make a noise that the students recognized to get their attention when we needed to end group work and start something else (*action*). That worked great. I will always put part of my lesson plan on the board so students know what we are doing, and I will use a rainstick or a little bell to help get their attention (*result*)."

The STAR technique can guide the question as well as the assessment of the candidate's answer. If a candidate is asked, "How have you modified assignments for English-language learners (ELL) or special education students in your class?" then a strong answer would begin with a description of having experiences with these students and what was done to help them. A candidate lacking experience with special needs populations or ELL students will probably not know where to begin with these students. However, a candidate who can discuss how she and her cooperating teacher always made visuals for ELL students to help them, or how she worked with an inclusion teacher during student teaching will be able to explain tasks, actions, and results.

Assessing the Answers

As with any set of interviewing questions, the interviewer (or team) needs to decide in advance what answers are sought. A rubric or scale can then be



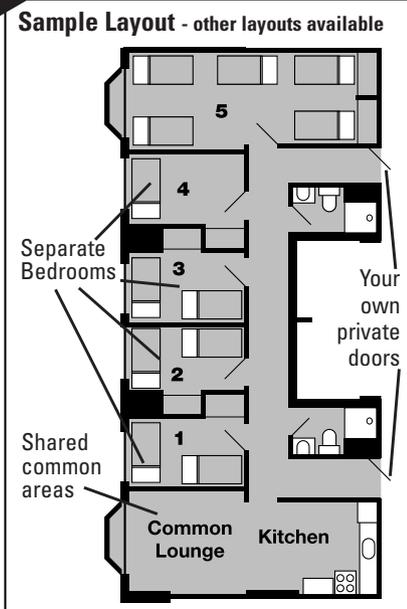
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developed as an assessment instrument for each interview question. A numeric scale can be used, with numbers ranging from 1 to 5, 7, or 10. The higher the number, the more complete the answer.

The use of a three-division assessment scale also can be very helpful. Here, each answer is simply rated as unacceptable, acceptable, or target. A rating of unacceptable may mean that the candidate had no answer or attempted an answer that was not correct.

An acceptable answer meets minimal criteria, indicating that the candidate has knowledge of the topic or skill, perhaps practicing it in a class or at least watching another teacher do so.

Target answers will wow the interviewer by going above and beyond the minimal answer and indicating much positive experience. In essence, a tar-

get answer indicates that the candidate not only has experience with the problem/situation/task, but knows how to implement an action that will make a difference.

This assessment approach also can be applied to sorting the pre-interview paperwork. By sorting out those candidates who have unacceptable, acceptable, and target cover letters and resumes, the interviewer ensures that there is a match between the candidate and the position even before on-site interviews are conducted.

Better Hiring Leads to Higher Retention

What do new teachers want? Most want their expectations to be met or exceeded by their new employer and their new position. If they are not satisfied, many leave their first jobs for ones they perceive as better or more supportive, while others leave the profession permanently.

The use of BBI can lead to better hiring and retention, as this interviewing

style strives to ascertain the performance skills needed to do the job, and to determine if the candidate possesses those skills. The days of asking hypothetical questions and the standard "Tell me about yourself" are over. To meet the need of filling today's classrooms with competent and qualified teachers, administrators must systematize and professionalize the teacher selection interview. BBI provides a useful model. 

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- Deems, R. S. (1994). *Interviewing: More than a gut feeling*. Des Moines, IA: American Media Publishing.

WEB RESOURCES

Mary Clement's article, "The Game Has Changed," includes questions and techniques for behavior-based interviewing. www.kdp.org/pdf/publications/Rsp06Clement.pdf

General information about behavior-based interviewing can be downloaded. www.quintcareers.com/behavioral_interviewing.html and www.eslteachersboard.com/cgi-bin/resume-tips/index.pl?noframes;read=1101

Essentials for Principals: How to Interview, Hire, and Retain High-Quality New Teachers can be purchased from the Educational Research Service. www.ers.org

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