

Advanced Interview Probing Strategies – A Practical Guide

Core questions (initial opening question for each area being measured) are very important in interviews. However, the real depth and clarity of an interview response is largely dependent on effective probing questions that seek to gain a fuller picture of the situation and the candidate's thinking. Probing questions are chosen depending on what the candidate has said – so, they are by nature more dynamic. However, there are common interview situations and probing strategies that can be used. Knowing these could significantly increase the effectiveness of your interviewing.

Situation:	Candidate pauses, and you are unsure if they have understood the core question asked.
Why this happens:	This can indicate that the candidate needs a few moments to think about their answer. They may be confused or have misunderstood the question and/or don't know where to begin their answer. They may not have a suitable example.
Probing Strategies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Become comfortable with giving the candidate a few moments to collect their thoughts and structure their answer. Often interviewers will try to explain the question further too quickly and this can be unhelpful. The use of pausing and silence is a probing strategy in itself.• If having given the candidate some time to think and they still appear unsure, then repeat the core question exactly as it was originally written. It can be tempting to try to re-phrase or explain the question. Doing this too early can be unhelpful. If you need to provide the question for a third time try to deliver it more slowly with emphasis on the key words in the question. For example: "Tell me about a time you solved a complex problem" would be "This question is looking for a time where you personally solved a complex problem".• If the candidate is unable to answer this question having tried three times it is not effective to try to explain it further as this begins to unintentionally change the focus of the question. In these instances, it would be more appropriate to ask the candidate if they have any example that may help to answer this. If they do not then change the question (only at this point and not sooner) to ask them "If you found yourself in that situation what would your approach be?". When doing this the absence of a relevant example should be reflected in your assessment.• Avoid the temptation to give the candidate examples of the type of situation they could describe (e.g. making reference to a role you are aware they have had in the past). The responsibility for the response has to remain with the candidate!

Situation:	Candidate asks you to explain what you are looking for from the core question asked.
Why this happens:	This can be a way of the candidate trying to get a better understanding of what the question is seeking. Sometimes this can be a way of the candidate gaining some time to think about the question further.
Probing Strategies:	When asked to explain something it is a natural reaction to do what we have been asked to. However, a good interviewer will avoid doing this too soon and will simply re-state the question as it was originally asked. Remember, the question if well designed should be as short, clear and unambiguous as possibly already. Explaining it often begins to vary the question unintentionally. Follow the process outlined above for when a candidate is unsure or unclear about the question.

Situation:	Candidate begins to tell you about their CV, biography, academic achievements or personal history – and this is not what the core question has asked for.
Why this happens:	This can be partly a cultural expectation or practice that people may have become used to doing. It can be reinforced by advice the candidate may have had from people who have taken part in interviews historically where this may have been a common or expected practice.
Probing Strategies:	The most important thing is that while the candidate is doing this, they are not providing any useful evidence to help them perform well. Interrupt the candidate immediately and explain that you have seen their CV and are aware of their background from the application process. Explain to the candidate that they should listen carefully to the questions and focus their responses to these as this is what is important and what the commission/panel need to gather evidence about. For competency-based questions, it is usually expected that the candidate describes a specific, past example of their behaviour, rather than talking in general terms or giving you a self-assessment of their their skills or achievements.

Situation:	Candidate says that they do not have an example for a core question that requires them to provide this .
Why this happens:	In interviews some people become overwhelmed by the situation and cannot think clearly. It may be that the candidate genuinely does not have an example relevant to what has been asked or they are struggling to bring one to mind
Probing Strategies:	The first step is to slow the candidate down and get them to think more clearly. To do this, ask them to take a moment and think about whether they have any instance or example that may have relevance to what was asked. If they continue not to have an example, then switch the question to ask “If you found yourself in that situation what would your approach be?”. When doing this the absence of a relevant example should be reflected in your assessment.

Situation:	Candidate starts to answer the core question and it is clear they are talking about what they do in general rather than providing a specific example as requested.
Why this happens:	There can be many reasons for this however sometimes it can be a cultural reluctance to talk about oneself as it may seem immodest. It can happen because the candidate does not have effective evidence and they are trying their best to say something they think may be relevant.
Probing Strategies:	While the candidate is talking generally about how they approach situations like the one asked about in the question they are not providing any evidence. As an interviewer it is important to listen out for this type of response and interrupt the candidate at very earliest opportunity to stop them from wasting valuable time when they could be providing evidence. Interrupt the candidate and explain – “the question requires you to provide a real and specific example, if you talk about what you do generally this will not be enough to perform well in the interview” - then repeat the original question asked.

Situation:	Candidate provides a specific example but the answer is very short and at a superficial or general level of detail.
Why this happens:	Sometimes the candidate may take the question literally and be unaware that they not only need to answer the question but explain the details about the circumstances, their personal behaviour and the impact. Some people have a communication style that means they are not used to talking in a fuller way.
Probing Strategies:	<p>As an interviewer it is important to get beyond the individual differences in the communication styles of candidates. There is the danger that interviews that credit candidates who simply speak well may disadvantage those who have the relevant skills, experience and behaviour but are less effective in presenting this. To avoid this the interviewer may need to work harder and probe more with candidates who provide short answers. Here is how to do this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Please can you take me back through what you have just said and provide more details about what you did at each step.” • “I’d like more detail about the circumstances that led up to this situation”. Then; “Tell me more about what you did and why”. Then; “Describe the impact of what you did” – in this the interviewer leads the candidate through the process of giving fuller and better evidence. • “You mentioned ‘x’ tell me more about that aspect of what you did”. This can be useful when there is an individual aspect they may have covered too superficially.

Situation:	Candidate provides a long response and you believe they may run out of time.
Why this happens:	This is the converse problem to that outlined in the previous section. It may be an individual difference in how people communicate. However, it can be based on what they think the commission/panel expect them to do – or based on advice they may have had. Interviews are a short amount of time and sometimes people are eager to say everything they have prepared. The situation often arises when the candidate has explained too much detail about the context, without allowing sufficient time to describe their own behaviour, or the impact of what they did – more telling the story than providing evidence and answering the question
Probing Strategies:	<p>Identifying that this is happening is often more challenging. It can be made more difficult if the candidate is talking in a relatively unstructured way too. To manage this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupt the candidate at an appropriate time and ask them to focus on what the competency area / criteria the question relates to. Explain that they should focus on the question asked too.

- Explain to the candidate that they will need to speak more concisely if they are to answer the question(s) in the interview.
- Tell the candidate that you would like to clarify some specific points – then get them to be clear about the circumstances, their role/behaviour and the impact.
- Ask the candidate to explain how what they have said relates to the competency area and/or the question asked. This is a very powerful probing strategy and places the responsibility for ensuring relevance with the candidate.
- To gain clarity in the long response from the candidate, especially if the response is “unstructured and challenging to follow, it can be helpful to ask the candidate to summarise in one or two sentences the essence of their own actions and how their actions contributed to the outcome of the situation.

Situation:	Candidate talks about ‘we’ rather than ‘I’.
Why this happens:	Culturally talking about one’s own successes can be uncomfortable for most people. However, it can also be a sign that someone is talking about something they were partly involved with but it was owned and driven by someone else. The more senior and complex something is the more likely it will require a team of people or even people from across various organisations working together – however, an effective candidate will be able to explain their role and unique personal contribution within the context of the work done alongside others. If candidates have prepared effectively for a competency based interview, they should be aware that the format of the interview will require them to be specific about their own behaviour and contribution in the examples which they are describing.
Probing Strategies:	<p>An interviewer you should be able to clearly evidence what the candidate did personally and what was done by others. If the candidate begins talking about ‘we’ then interrupt them immediately.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain to the candidate that you need to understand their individual unique contribution to the situation. You may acknowledge that the candidate was part of a wider group or team. • Ask the candidate to describe more clearly their personal role and to talk about what they did. • Ask the candidate about their role and what role others played relative to this. • Ask the candidate to explain the decisions that they took and the decisions that were the responsibility of others. • Ask; “What did you say?”, and/or: “What did you do?”.

Situation:	Candidate provides a response where it is unclear what the chronology of events were.
Why this happens:	This is sometime a matter of communication style but can also arise when the candidate has not considered the structure of what they are saying.
Probing Strategies:	<p>To address this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask them to briefly go back through the events and be clearer about the timeline associated with these. • Ask the candidate to explain when the example began and when it was concluded. • Use; “Can you take me back through that example being clearer about the individual steps of what happened”. • “Briefly summarise for me the circumstances that led to this event: - then; – “Summarise your role and actions” – then; “Tell me what the impact of that was”.

Situation:	Candidate is providing an answer that is at the wrong level for the role applied for.
Why this happens:	Often candidates will want to speak about the thing that they consider the most complex or interesting – this may or may not be at the correct level for the role. In interviews for more senior roles the candidate may think of the most challenging thing that has happened in their career but this may be quite limited (e.g. managing an individual one-to-one situation rather than something with organisation-wide implications).
Probing Strategies:	At the earliest opportunity interrupt the candidate – you are trying to help and support them by doing this. Explain that interview performance will be impacted by the level of the evidence and examples they use. Inform them that they should use examples that are as close to the level of the role applied for as possible. Ask them if they have an example that is more in line with the level of the role applied for. If they do not, allow them to continue with the example they began with. It is useful to remember – the candidate remains responsible for the examples they provide and you should not lead or steer them if you know of an example from their past you think would be more in line with the level of the role. This type of challenge should not be over-used (once within an interview is enough to remind the candidate of what they should be doing) at it is important to make a judgement about whether the candidate may have better examples.

Situation:	Candidate says something that you are concerned may not be true or the full-story.
Why this happens:	An interview cannot establish unequivocally whether something is true or not. Candidates can sometimes offer a response that is not something they personally did but they have taken from a situation they are aware of. This may or may not be a deliberate attempt to misguide the commission / panel.
Probing Strategies:	<p>The more specific you require someone to be on the details of a situation the more challenging it is to do if something is untrue, they are embellishing their role or it's something they were not really involved with. To do address this, ask for specific details:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What did you say to that person?” “What did they say in response to you?” • “When exactly did this take place?” – then; – “Talk me through the steps in more detail.” • “Who else had a role or interest in what was happening with this?”

Situation:	Candidate says something that you need to establish clarity about.
Why this happens:	Candidates have to speak quite succinctly to ensure they answer the question in the time available and may not mean to cover some aspect in a superficial way. Some individuals may wish to talk about some aspect(s) superficially as they are aware these are the less strong parts of their example/answer.
Probing Strategies:	<p>Good interviewers will develop skills in carefully listening out for aspects of an answer that are covered superficially. To manage this, ask the candidate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You briefly mentioned ‘x’, please tell talk me through that part in more detail”. • “I am struggling to understand ‘x’, can you help me be explaining that a bit more”. • “I need to understand more about your role in relation to ‘x’”. <p>There can be instances when the candidate continues to be evasive. In these instances, using ‘closed questions’ is important in determining the facts. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You talked about a decision to do ‘x’ – was that a decision you took personally or was that someone else’s decision?” • “I need to be clear about how ‘x’ happened – was that something you took action on you own?”

- When the candidate describes an initiative, idea or suggestion and leaves it unclear whose initiative it actually was, ask the candidate directly: “Whose initiative was this?”. Whilst it is tempting to check by asking “Was this your initiative?”, try to avoid asking in this way, because the candidate may feel tempted to simply agree in the affirmative.

Situation:	Candidate is asked to provide one example but wants to provide more than one example.
Why this happens:	People are keen to try to convince a commission/panel they have lots of experience. They believe that telling the commission / panel about as much of this as possible will have a positive impact. However, they are often unaware that the range of their experience should come from across the questions and not within one question alone. In addition, they often do not realise that to cover two or more examples means this will be done too superficially to provide the meaningful evidence that leads to being rated more highly.
Probing Strategies:	<p>As soon as the candidate indicates they intend to provide more than one example; or they are about to move on from one example to another a good interviewer will interrupt and stop them.</p> <p>Explain to the candidate that you want them to use only one example as you need to gather details about how they did what they did. To use more than one example will impact on them performing well, as it will mean that you are not able to explore the level of detail needed in relation to their own behaviour and contribution.</p> <p>Ask them to stick to the example they believe best shows their behaviour in relation to the competency area/criteria being measured, answers the question asked, and is more aligned to the level of the role applied for.</p> <p>It is often helpful, at this stage, to repeat the question and emphasize the words “an example” in the question. Explain that this indicates a single example, e.g. “Please give me >>an example<< of a situation where (...)”</p>

Situation:	Candidates providing examples that are old.
Why this happens:	This can be because they feel the examples is the best they have to demonstrate their skills and behaviour. For some it is their only relevant example.
Probing Strategies:	<p>When examples are old it can be a sign that the candidate does not have recent relevant experience relative to the level of role applied for. This is a sign that they may not be a credible or strong candidate – credible candidates will have a range of experience which is relatively recent.</p> <p>To address this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupt the candidate and ask them to explain exactly when the example they are providing is from. • Explain that they may feel the old example is their best – but something more recent may help them explain the details more effectively. • If it is relatively old – ask the candidate if they have a more recent relevant example that shows how their recent experience is relevant to the role applied for. • Explain to the candidate they may wish to continue with the old example but in doing so it may impact on how well they can show recent experience relevant to the role.

Situation:	Candidate repeats the question in their answer and explains that “always do...” what the question is related to. For example: “Leading teams effectively to ensure they deliver the highest performance is something I always do...”.
Why this happens:	This can be because the competency the questions asks about resonates with how competent they believe themselves to be, or it can be an indication that the candidate is struggling to think of a situation in answer to the question. By saying they always do something, sometimes candidates hope this will give an impression of consistency and being effective.
Probing Strategies:	As soon as you notice that the candidate starts to generalise in this way, politely interrupt them and explain that you are asking for an example that illustrates a specific time they have done this. Then proceed by saying you will repeat the question; and then read the question again, being careful to ask the question at a moderate pace.

Situation:	Candidate answers by explaining the circumstances, what they did and the impact - but is less clear on their rationale and reasons for their actions and other options they considered but discounted.
Why this happens:	Candidate may feel that their rationale was obvious or unquestionable or may simply forget to explain this as part of their answer. They may not understand that providing clarity on why they did what they did is an important aspect of demonstrating the complexity of the situation.
Probing Strategies:	To address this ask the following question: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What factors did you have to consider and weigh-up in taking a decision about what to do?• What other options did you consider? In what ways was the decision you took a better option? How did you mitigate the risks and gaps your decision did not address?• How was the final decision taken?• Why did you take that action?