

Competency-Based Behavioral Interviewing

by Sarah M. Garrigues



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Your day is busy enough, but now you have to find the time to interview for the Preschool Lead Teacher position, after the previous Lead quit last week without notice. You hastily place an advertisement, ‘interview’ or talk informally with the persons with the best résumés for 30 minutes each, and make an offer to the one that ‘just feels right.’ Phew! You are glad that is over with. Or is it?

Leaders in the field of human resources tell us this brief, more conventional style of interviewing has less than a 30 percent chance of accurately predicting job performance (Hoevemeyer, 2006). As directors, we too often rely primarily on our hunches to guide us in employee selection. But what if our hunches are only 30 percent correct? When you hire a teacher who performs poorly in the classroom, you have to spend time and resources to retrain her. In the meantime, the children don’t receive optimal care and parents grow dissatisfied. If the teacher fails to improve and you terminate employment, you are faced with even greater customer dissatisfaction because no parent likes teacher turnover.

Potentially, one bad hire could be responsible for a noticeable decrease in

enrollment and, as a result, your school’s net revenue. What if, instead of relying solely on your ‘gut’ instincts, you had a tool that would help you better select a high-quality teacher? Competency-Based Behavioral Interviewing (CBBI) is 65 percent effective in predicting job performance in comparison to more traditional interviewing styles (Hoevemeyer 2006). This is very good news for directors who have little time to waste with unproductive interviews and poor-performing employees.

Selection vs. Training

People ask me, “What is more important: employee selection or training? At first glance, it may seem to you like a chicken and egg scenario, but it is not. I naturally want to say that training is more important; after all, I have hired many inexperienced staff that I personally coached to be excellent teachers. However, there is at least one qualifier to those teachers’ improved performance: they were willing to be trained.

How many of you, like me, have hired highly-educated staff that you later discovered thought they knew it all and were unreceptive to new techniques? Selection, you see, is the answer. Education and experience aside, the two quali-

ties I look for most in a new hire are a positive attitude and willingness to be trained. If I hire someone with those two traits alone, there is very little we can’t do as a team. Since so much hinges on the hiring decision, we must focus on our interviewing skills, using new, more effective techniques to help us select a teacher who will fit our program’s needs.

Define Your Needs

When a position opens up at your school, the first thing you should do, as a part of the CBBI interviewing technique, is define your needs — so you know with greater clarity what you are looking for:

- Research what level of education and other credentials applicants must have to meet state regulations.
- Determine what personal characteristics are necessary for the classroom



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for which you are hiring. For example, you may want an Infant Teacher to be patient and able to multi-task, while you want a School-Age Coordinator to be flexible and a strong mediator. When you are hiring for an Assistant Director, you may be more focused on finding someone with excellent mentoring and delegation skills who handles conflict well.

Knowing what you want will help you to advertise more appropriately and puts you in the right frame of mind for interviewing, thus increasing the likelihood that you will find your ideal employee. Hoevemeyer (2006) says,

“When you identify competencies, and then interview against them — in addition to considering the technical and functional aspects — you are increasing the likelihood that the candidate to whom you offer the position is the one who truly is most likely to be successful” (p. 18).

Don't Box Me In

Prepare to leave your safe zone of the casual, non-structured interview. Why, you ask? Well, we have already established that they are not as successful as CBBI, but there are other benefits to having a better controlled interview.

■ It's easier for you, the interviewer.

Having an established protocol and set of questions will remove any stress or awkwardness you may feel, especially if interviewing does not come naturally to you.

■ It sets a better tone for the applicant.

Your preparedness puts the applicant at ease. Furthermore, it establishes the expectation that your school is run with orderliness and professionalism.

■ It protects you as the employer (and your parent company). In the current

litigious climate, you must demonstrate that your hiring practices do not discriminate. How can you do that if you don't have a standard set of questions for all applicants? An applicant could make the argument that he was not hired because you asked him tougher questions than you did the other applicants. Without a standard set of questions and hiring procedures you would be hard-pressed to defend yourself against such an accusation.

■ **It lends itself to appropriate documentation.** With notations made on a separate interview template for each candidate, your objectivity and impartiality is easily demonstrated. Also, appropriate documentation helps you recall each applicant's responses after a long day of interviews, preventing you from confusing or forgetting less memorable applicants.

■ **Finally, it allows you to compare applicants on identified competencies.** When all applicants answer the same question on how they feel children learn best, you can compare the strength of one's answer with another's. The best method is to devise a scoring rubric for each question (see sample on page 40). When a rubric is used, applicants' responses can be quantified (in numbers) for a more precise method of comparison.

Yate (2006) says,

“For your interviews to be productive . . . they must be based on objective criteria. You need to evaluate the same criteria in the same way. . . . You can achieve this by creating a structure or template for your interviews and following that structure when you conduct them.”

The Interview

Focus on building rapport. When the applicant walks through the door, your

first job is to put him at ease. Welcome him to your school. Make polite ‘small talk’ as the two of you get settled in the office: “Did you find us okay?” or “How about this strange weather we're having?”. Then transition into the interview by saying something like, “I'm now going to ask you some questions. Don't worry; there are no right or wrong answers. This is just a time for me to get to know you.” You want applicants to feel relaxed so they answer more candidly.

Focus on the applicant's résumé. This may be the most familiar part of the CBBI style, since it closely resembles the more traditional interview format. Begin by reviewing the applicant's résumé and asking questions about his education or work experience. You might, for example, want to probe gaps in employment and ask about state-required credentials.

If, after talking to the candidate for 10-15 minutes, you feel confident that he does not meet the minimum requirements, end the interview. There is nothing gained by spending additional time with someone who does not meet your needs. You can offer the applicant a general “We'll be in touch” or be more direct in letting him know he does not meet the requirements for this position. If you want to save even more time, conduct this portion of the interview as a pre-interview phone screen; only those applicants passing the screening would be invited to a formal in-person interview.

Focus on reality. For those individuals who seem promising, continue the interview. Now is the time to learn how they perform in the classroom setting by posing questions regarding the competencies you identified earlier. There are two types of questions that can be helpful here; ask two to three questions per competency: Behaviorally-based questions and Situational or “What if” questions.

- Behaviorally-Based — or Past-Performance — questions are useful in determining what (if any) experience a candidate has in performing certain duties.
 - To probe ‘teachability,’ say: “Tell me about a time that an employer corrected your performance and your response.”
 - An applicant’s response to this question can tell you:
 - If he has never been counseled by a boss before (score = 1/5), then he is at best overly-confident and at worst lying.
 - If he blamed the employer (score = 3/5), then he does not accept personal responsibility and may not receive constructive criticism well.
 - If he shares an example in which he gracefully acknowledged a shortcoming and showed evidence of growth (score = 5/5), you have reason to hope he will demonstrate the same humility and teachability at your school.
- The Situational Question will come in handy if you are interviewing a candidate with little to no experience, as it highlights a candidate’s knowledge base in early childhood education.
 - For a Classroom Management competency, ask the applicant to suppose she witnessed two children fighting over a toy when one child hit the other, specifically, “How would you respond to the child who hit?”
 - This question can serve as a Red-Flag indicator, as the applicant’s response can be very telling about his or her potentially negative habits.
 - If she answers that she would verbally (or even worse, physically) discipline the child in a harsh or demeaning way (score = 1/5), then it would lead to an automatic ‘No Hire’ as with all failed Red-Flag questions.
 - If she would place the child in ‘Time-Out’ without incorporating

other more positive guidance techniques (score = 3/5), then although it is not an automatic ‘No Hire,’ I would know that it is an area this candidate would need further training in.

- If however she would use age-appropriate discipline techniques, such as ‘talking it out’ with the children, reviewing with them what behaviors are acceptable, encouraging them to ‘use their words’ with each other, redirecting the aggressive child to another activity, and/or offering positive reinforcement of proper behavior (score = 5/5), I would have no hesitation about this candidate’s classroom management techniques.

The goal of these types of questions is to unearth the applicant’s actual personality, philosophy, and code of ethics. Do not be satisfied until you have achieved this; do not accept shallow answers or attempts to divert attention. To pursue a topic further, follow the original question with additional questions: “What you mean by . . . ?” or “Can you share with me another example of this?”. Another strategy to get a reticent applicant to open up is to summarize or repeat his answer and then remain silent. Often silence will spark conversation.

Practice the 80/20 Rule. Too often hiring managers will dominate conversation in the traditional interview setting. If you do all the talking, how will you get to know the applicant? While it’s tempting to validate the applicant’s answers to put him at ease, you must refrain. Offering any response (positive or negative) communicates to the applicant how you want questions answered. Remember, you want to hear the candidate’s candid responses. Keep your facial expression open, nod encouragingly, and look interested in responses, but avoid adding your own comments. If you are doing more than 20 percent of the talking, then you are doing too much.

Focus on response. After concluding the heart of the interview, applicants will want

information on what they can expect from you. When you are ready to wrap things up, transition to this phase of the interview by asking if the applicant has any questions for you. Then, give him an idea of your timetable for concluding interviews and/or making your final selection. If you are still interested in the candidate as a potential hire, take time to talk about the strengths of your company and possibly offer him a tour of the school. Again, do not hesitate to end the interview if you know you will not be hiring a certain applicant.

Scoring As a Guide to Selection

At the conclusion of each interview, take 15 minutes to score and tally the applicant’s responses while they are fresh in your mind. It is wise to establish a threshold score. You may choose to only consider hiring applicants who scored at least 70 percent (e.g., 70 out of a possible 100 points). The scoring serves two purposes: 1) It offers an objective means for comparing candidates, and 2) It distinguishes low- and high-performing applicants. You do not want the scoring to select an employee for you; as the director you must also use your judgment and incorporate other considerations such as education, experience, and observed interpersonal skills when making your hiring decision.

What Really Matters

For those of you accustomed to a more relaxed style of interviewing, the CBBI approach may appear daunting, but it is well worth the effort. Studies have shown this method to be three to five times more accurate in forecasting job performance than traditional interviewing (Hoevermeyer, 2006), and we all know that a school succeeds or fails by its teachers. Our first priority as directors is to ensure the placement of highly-skilled personnel in our classrooms; everything else flows from there. Great teachers lead to happy kids, contented parents, and a fully-enrolled school. Spending a few hours (even a day) developing a list of competencies, corresponding

interview questions, and a scoring rubric will be less time-consuming than repairing the damage caused by a poor-performing new hire. When you take the care necessary to select the right person for your team, you demonstrate your commitment to the highest standards for your school.

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Sample Partial CBBI Interview with Rubric

Customer Service			
1. Tell me about a time when you went above and beyond to give a parent a superior level of customer service.			
1 = Cannot offer an example. Example demonstrates mediocre customer service.	1		
3 = Gives example of adequate customer service.		3	
5 = Gives example of superior parent-centered customer service.			5
Notes:			
2. Describe a time when you addressed a parent complaint. (Extension: What was your response?)			
1 = Reacts aggressively; blames parent or other staff; no resolution reached.	1		
3 = Eventually comes to mutually acceptable solution; seeks assistance from director (if unable to address complaint independently).		3	
5 = Listened to parent, showed empathy, adequately addressed concerns.			5
Notes:			
3. When facing an upset parent or customer, what is your first priority?			
1 = Makes excuses, passes the responsibility to someone else.	1		
3 = Immediately tries to find a solution that meets the parent's needs.		3	
5 = Listens for understanding before proposing a solution.			5
Notes:			
Teachability/Commitment to Professional Development			
4. Tell me about a time when a supervisor offered negative or constructive feedback about an area of your performance.			
1 = Talks negatively about or blames supervisor.	1		
3 = Accepts some responsibility for own performance.		3	
5 = Took feedback constructively to improve own performance.			5
Notes:			
5. What steps have you taken recently to expand your knowledge of early childhood education?			
1 = Cannot think of anything; is vague; no defined plan.	1		
3 = Names 1-2 steps taken for professional development.		3	
5 = Shares a plan for professional development with completed steps.			5
Notes:			
6. What do you consider to be an area of weakness for yourself? (Extension: Why is that? What steps have you taken to improve?)			
1 = Cannot think of anything; is vague; area of weakness is red flag.	1		
3 = Demonstrates self-awareness; wants to improve, but has no plan.		3	
5 = Shares plan and steps taken to strengthen in area of weakness.			5
Notes:			