What's Your Story?

Three simple steps to conquering a tricky interview question

by Peter J. Sherman

In the QP article, "One Good Idea: Networking in 20 Seconds,"[1] I defined the "elevator speech" and how to prepare it in three steps. The elevator speech will help you get noticed and your foot in the door for an interview.

Next comes the hard part: What to say during the interview. One of the most common questions you'll encounter during an interview is: "Tell me about some of your professional accomplishments you are most proud of." How you answer this seemingly simple question can determine whether you're invited for a second interview or—better yet—offered the job.

Try using a powerful technique called the situation, action, results (SAR) method to describe your accomplishments and maximize your odds of getting an offer. An SAR answer offers a coherent framework for telling a story rather than rattling off facts about yourself. The best SAR answers are vivid, action-oriented, contain a mix of quantitative and qualitative attributes, and last about a minute.

Follow these three steps to master your SAR answers:

1. **Situation.** Describe a particular situation you faced in a previous job. It could be a process improvement project that didn't meet its goals or a software release with lots of defects, for example. The situation provides the context and background. Your goal is to draw the interviewer into your situation with a mix of qualitative and quantitative attributes so he or she can empathize with you.

    Example: "In my last position, I faced a challenging situation as the new project manager when a product release was riddled with defects and over budget by $500,000. It was a serious situation because the organization was counting on this new release to generate profits that would meet the forecast."

2. **Activities.** Describe the specific activities you undertook to address the situation. Focus on the two or three key activities that were most relevant to achieving your accomplishment. Active verbs—"We quickly triaged the key issues using failure mode and effects analysis (FMEA)"—are preferable to passive verbs—"FMEA was used to quickly triage the defects."

    Incorporate the specific frameworks, techniques or tools you used, such as root cause analysis (RCA), responsible-accountable-consulted-informed diagrams, Pareto charts and fishbone diagrams.

    Example: "My first step was to assemble a project team and conduct a project risk assessment. We quickly triaged the key issues using FMEA. Next, we brought the sales and marketing teams in to help map those issues to the specific product functionality and quantify the revenue impact for further prioritization.

    "At that point, the development team performed RCA using fault tree analysis, fishbone diagrams and five whys. The team evaluated the fixes in terms of time, cost and technical feasibility. I used this information to develop the return on investment, payback period and break-even volume for each fix.

    "My follow-up meeting with finance went exceptionally well. We had all the information needed to make smart funding decisions and used agile techniques such as scrum and lean development to rapidly develop, test and release the fixes."

3. **Results.** Wrap up your SAR answer with the tangible accomplishments you and your team achieved. Results should be SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound. Remember to balance first-person singular ("I") with first-person plural ("we").

    Example: "Our efforts paid off. We successfully deployed the key fixes within 60 days, which helped generate $2.5 million in incremental revenue for the quarter and make our numbers. It was a terrific team experience."

Before your next interview, formulate two or three SAR responses from your past experiences and practice them so they flow naturally. **QP**

REFERENCE

1. Peter J. Sherman, "One Good Idea: Networking in 20 Seconds," *Quality Progress,* October 2016, p. 63.

Peter J. Sherman is managing partner of Riverwood Associates, LLC in Atlanta. He earned a master's degree in civil engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge and an MBA from Georgia State University in Atlanta. A senior member of ASQ, Sherman is an ASQ-certified quality engineer, a Smarter Solution-certified Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt and an APICS-certified supply chain professional. Sherman serves as chair elect and programs chair of ASQ's Atlanta Section.