

## **Handling Multiple Interviewers**

*by Roger Manning*

Multiple interviews can take the form of a single sitting where you are the object of several eyeballs at one time. Also, a multiple interview can be a day-long process whereby you are passed from person to another on a pre-planned itinerary. Keep in mind that in either case, you must focus and take each interviewer one-at-a-time.

But how do you deal with so many interviewers in one sitting? The best way is to acknowledge them one at a time. You must answer questions directly back to the person that asks the question but simultaneously giving brief eye contact to each member of the team. Don't forget to smile and interject your personality. Staying focused too much on one person of the board could make others feel that you don't see them as important.

I had a client, female Chairman of the Board once tells me as story of how a candidate behaved during an interview with the 7-member panel. The candidate had a wonderful prior phone interview with the female Chairman and she was looking forward to the face-to-face interview. During the entire face-to-face interview though, my male candidate positioned himself in his chair so that eye contact was rather difficult with the female Chairman. In fact, she said, he would maintain eye contact with one of the male board members about seventy-five percent of the time during the interview and pretty much ignored her and some of the other board members. He would even answer her questions by removing eye contact from her to finish his answer with eye contact to the male board member. This was his last interview for this very important CEO position of a major healthcare organization.

This is especially important if one of the team members is primarily the spokesman of the group. The board or panel is not one entity, but several individuals coming together with the common goal of hiring the best candidate for the job. At the same time, each person has his or her own agenda or department's interest at heart. For example, the HR manager will be checking to make sure you are a good fit with the culture and people working at this company. They may have more traditional HR type questions and strive to dig into your past motivations for change and your career objectives. The hiring manager will want to know about your technical skills, industry knowledge or business know-how. They will want to clearly see how your prior experience and achievements are translated into success in this position. And the person from accounting will want to know if you are savvy enough to operate a business budget, use an Excel spreadsheet or pay attention to cost controls. Others who may be less active in the interview process may be involved for that "gut feeling" or confirmation that you are a fit into the company's culture and team personality.

Even though each person may have their own interests or agenda, Board or panel interviews are usually rather formal and organized, using a standard set-of-questions for all applicants. Sometimes the standard set-of-questions have been rehearsed and will play off of each other. Although there may be a board member that is clearly driving the interview process, another member may be the one who is taking careful notes and observation of your body language. Before going into

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any "board-type" interview process, it would be well advised to attempt to learn of the interviewer's names and positions. In that way, you should make every attempt to research and learn as much as you can about them in order to understand the possible "spheres of influence" within that management team. Perhaps this is something that the Search Consultant can assist you with. Once you have access to the names, sources such as [Hoovers](#), [Reuter's News](#), [Google](#), company websites or other internet research can give you the background and history of these individuals.

A female candidate interviewed for a senior-administrator job at a major health agency, facing a panel of 10 doctors, nurses, technicians and administrators. She felt like it was an inquisition, not an interview. But she had prepared well and was confident when she faced this tribunal. She looked at each person as he or she asked the question, and continued to look at that person for 30 seconds or so. She then shifted her eye contact to each member of the interviewing team. She made sure she made contact with each set of eyes while answering questions. She smiled and emitted an air of confidence about herself. She felt very much in control and her interview went well. The result was a job offer.

Another multiple-type interview is the team or "good cop/bad cop" interview. The team is usually made up of two interviewers, one who asks the questions and one who takes notes. The two typically trade roles, which can be confusing if they have different styles. In fact, one person may be kind and gentle and the other more harsh or pushy. It may be even difficult to identify with the company personality or management philosophy based on this type of interaction.

Just remember, these inquisitors are working together toward the same end. Treat them equally, not favoring one over the other. Do not make any prejudgment of them nor the company based upon this kind of interview. Your performance in answering their questions should remain at its peak as well as maintaining interest and enthusiasm for the position and the company.

Top salespeople learn how to "mirror" their client in order to "break-the-ice" and bond with the client. If Mr. Buyer speaks softly and deliberately, Joe salesman knows that it best not to speak rapidly and with too much enthusiasm. Slow it down and be more deliberate and careful in your speech pattern. In this way, Mr. Buyer sees and hears someone who is similar to them. This should not be confused with trying to copy a person and coming off as insulting. If your personality however is one of extroversion and high enthusiasm, you will still want your personality to come out and glow but not to shine so bright to make the buyer feel uncomfortable. So then in comparison to the multiple interview scenarios, one would pay special attention to personality traits and mannerisms and make an attempt to mirror your interviewer. If the interviewer expresses themselves with high emotion, you may want to "mirror-up" slightly to show that you, too, have emotion and enthusiasm. If your interviewer is more introverted and soft-spoken, you may want to "mirror-down" somewhat however be warm, friendly and professional. They will respond better to you than if you were flamboyant. You may say that this will be tough to do if you are sitting in a boardroom of 5 interviewers and everyone has drastic personality differences. It may be. Relax, keep eye contact with each interviewer, maintain professionalism, smile and be warm. Chances are that you have responded well to all personality types in the room.

Lastly, you are sure to encounter the day-long interview itinerary. Mary began her interview at 8:00am sharp with the Director of Human Resources. At 9:00am she was passed on to the Director of Information Systems. At 9:30am, she met the VP of Operations to be followed at 10:30am by the VP of Sales. Mary thought she had just about answered all of the questions that she could bear and was about to go out to lunch with the VP of Sales and 2 other team members. What more could they need to know? Why so many people? Mary was beginning to become wary. So much eye contact! She had told "her story" so many times! Her enthusiasm at 11:00am was not as strong as it was at 8:00am. Does this sound familiar? My advice is still the same- you must focus and take each interviewer one-at-a-time.

Some advice and tips that will help and enhance your performance:

- Prepare and practice answering some classic interview questions beforehand; this includes practicing in front of your bedroom mirror; Ron Fry's book, "[101 Toughest Interview Questions](#)" is a good book to reference for practice interviewing; also the University of Michigan Human Resources Department lists some outstanding "behavioral interview" questions on their website that deserve some review. Click for a [link](#) to those questions. Check your body language. Are you sitting up right and breathing fully? Practice smiling. Yes I said practice smiling! Can you answer a question sincerely and put some smile and personality into the answer? How about practicing answering the question and pretending to be establishing eye contact with more than one team member?
- Review your "atta-girl" or "atta-boy" files the night prior to the interview; Be knowledgeable and confident with prior performance numbers;
- Ask for a business card from each person up-front; place the card in front of you for easy reference and use their name at least 5 times during the interview;
- As an alternative-as each team member is introduced, write their name and title on a pad of paper in relation to where they are sitting to you. Frequently glance at this floor-plan during the interview to become familiar with names as well as ease of turning to a specific person to answer a question regarding their department or position (i.e.: turn to the accountant when emphasizing a point about your knowledge of a Profit & Loss statement);
- On your pad of paper that you will using for notes and getting answers to your questions, draw a simple smiley-face and write the words "relax" and "breath"; when you look at your notes, you will remind yourself;
- Purchase and carry/conceal on your person some small comfort items to use in between each interview to help refresh yourself:
  - Eye drops for redness or moisture
  - Breath mints or Fresh Burst Listerine Pocket Paks-also helps to provide moisture in a dry mouth
  - 1-5 sheets of Kleenex tissues for moist hands
  - Lipstick for ladies

Regardless of the type of interview, the best advice is to prepare and practice beforehand. When you have your script and have rehearsed your answers, you will feel prepared and more confident no matter how many people you have to face.

Lastly, a good tip to remember is to make sure that you immediately write a thank-you letter to each person's business card address. As long as the person has given you their business card, you may also be able to send an email for the sake of expediency. If were not able to obtain a business card from each person, be sure to acknowledge the group in your letter to the direct hiring authority and ask them to share your gratitude. Upon leaving the premise of the employer, heartily thank the receptionist or Administrative Assistant for assisting you today. (A well done interview can un-done if the Hiring Authority asks his/her gate-keeper what they thought of you and they are told of a different person than what the team had seen in the interview).