

INTERVIEWING AS A COMMUNICATION PROCESS

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Published by Orlando E. Blake, CPT, PhD, The Blake Group Organizational
Consulting LLC, HC1 Box 577, Elgin, AZ 85611
www.blake-group.com

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Role of Interviewing

In addition to meeting the goals of your organization, supervisors and managers in today's business environment have an added responsibility of interviewing for several purposes:

- **Selection: matching the person to the job.**
- **Counseling: listen reflect, advice, not prescriptive.**
- **Induction: company/department introduction to a new employee.**
- **Grievance/Complaint: employee complaint hearing and resolution.**
- **Appraisal: assess performance and set targets.**
- **Disciplinary: inform, discuss and correct.**
- **Dismissal/Termination: attrition analysis and P.R.**

Each of these interviewing categories requires different approaches and techniques for them to be effective. In addition, each category is part of the communication landscape that requires planning, practice, and polished performance. With exception of Induction, this book will provide an overview and checklist for each interview category.

First, consider the definition of communication:

The transference of ideas, facts and feelings between two or more people in order to achieve an understanding between them. Conversation is a natural form of communication between people.

The interview is a bit different:

The interview is a conversation which has a purpose and is directed towards its object by the interviewer. The interview is a face-to-face meeting and discussion between two or more people for a specific purpose.

The four essential ingredients are:

- 1) communication
- 2) between 2 or more parties
- 3) one of which is in control
- 4) with a purpose

These four ingredients are common to all interviewing categories.

This series of articles covering interviews will explore:

- Problems and how to overcome them
- Approach, preparation and structure
- Questioning techniques
- Maintaining control
- Note taking
- How to find out what we need to know
- The importance of clear job descriptions and specifications.

What a Job Description Does

- Enables both employer and employee to have a common understanding about what the job is and what it involves.
- Any newcomer to the job can be told exactly what the job entails, and what other people's jobs are.
- It can be used as the basis of an Induction course.
- It can help in the recruitment, both by providing a basis for the job advertisement and telling the applicant what the job entails.
- It can be used as the basis for assessing performance.
- It can be used to indicate the level of knowledge and skill required to do the job properly

Basic Points

While each interview situation will be different because of its purpose and the individual concerned, the following general points apply to each.

Preparation

- Gather facts: all interviewing requires the interviewer to gather facts prior to the interview. Whether it is analyzing the job specification and knowledge, skills and abilities before a selection interview or investigating and fact-finding before an employee complaint.
- Ensure privacy and no interruptions: pick a place where you will have privacy and make sure you are not interrupted. If you are constantly interrupted you will lose momentum and communicate that the interviewee is not important to you.
- Allow adequate time: make sure in your planning you allow enough time for each interview. Some interviews will take longer than others; be clear about the purpose so you will be able to carve out enough time in your schedule.
- Plan your approach: do your homework, plan your method with your technique in mind, and make room for the unexpected. Develop a list of preplanned questions that will help you stay on track.

Conduct

- Put interviewee at ease and establish rapport: interviewing is stressful enough. You will get better results by establishing rapport with the person you are

interviewing. People feel comfortable talking about things they are familiar with. You might try the weather or as I did when in Southern California – the traffic and parking.

- Explain the purpose: take time to verbally outline what you will be focusing on during the interview and how you will conduct the interview.
- Encourage the interviewee: establishing rapport is the first step in encouraging the interviewee. Verbally explaining the structure and purpose of the interview gives you the opportunity to explain the person will be given ample time to present his or her back ground or his or her issues, etc.
- Do not ask leading questions or those which can be answered with yes or no: open ended questions are the best way to get the person talking. You sequence your questions by using a mixture of open and closed questions depending on the subject.
- Listen and observe: get the interviewee talking and listen to what he or she is saying as well as what is not being said. Observe body language and make eye contact with the person. Be respectful of cultural differences.
- Investigate areas which are not clear: if you encounter some thing that is not clear explore it further. You can ask the person, “help me understand...” or you can make a note and come back around to it later in the interview.
- Take notes: how can you make a decision if you don’t take notes? Practice taking notes without looking away from the interviewee. It will seem strange at first, but with some practice you will get the hang of it. Record verbatim answers to questions and use descriptions of behavior; avoid judgmental language.
- Check information before making a decision: review your notes and all of the available information before you make a decision.
- Judge impartially: avoid bias. We all have preferences and prejudices; filter yours and recognize how they might impact your final decision.
- Summarize at regular intervals; during the interview make sure you summarize periodically to secure understanding of the interviewee’s statements and presentation.
- Conclude on a positive note by stating what action if any will be taken and by when: if you have planned your interview you will know what will transpire after the end of the interview. To present yourself and your organization in the most positive light, tell the person what the next steps are and when to expect the event.

Follow up

Check that proposed action has been taken and that desired results have been achieved, either by further interview or informal discussion.

Skills of Interviewing

A good interviewer will control an interview without doing all the talking. He/She will use a variety of skills to draw out the information needed. The main 'tools' for achieving a successful interview are questions, statements, summaries, listening and observing.

Types of Questions

A good interviewer will alternate questions of different types. Most interviewers need to discover both facts and feelings - a combination of open and specific questions -although the balance may alter.

TYPE OF QUESTION		EXAMPLE		USAGE
OPEN (Cannot be answered yes or no)		'Why did you decide to join your local squash club' OR 'Tell me about your local squash club'		To get the interviewee talking about ideas and feelings as well as facts. A good question in a non- directive situation.
CLOSED (Should be answered yes or no)		'I understand from what you say that you don't like the squash club, am I right?'		To summarize. To bring back to the subject at hand if the conversation has wandered. To check if you have understood correctly.
SPECIFIC (Fact Finding)		'On what date did you join the local squash club?'		To find out the facts. A good directive approach. Good for the talkative interviewee.
REFLECTING (avoids bias; keeps talking)		'You aren't too happy with the squash club then?'		Reverses a statement of question by

			rephrasing and sending it back to the interviewee. Keeps the interviewee talking. Avoids personal involvement or bias showing. Encourages interviewee to expand the subject further.
LEADING (test reaction)		'I think it's disgraceful that the squash club is closed don't you?'	The answer is given in the question Dangerous if used inadvertently. Good for testing reaction, or relaxing a nervous person initially.
HYPOTHETICAL (obtains general views)		'If the squash club were to close what would you do?'	Good for selection -testing possible reaction to certain situations.

Statements

It is necessary for the interviewer to have the facts to be able to feed information into the interview for two reasons:

- To clarify misunderstandings
- To give information where it is needed to give understanding

SUMMARIES

Interim

- To keep control of the interview
- To point out clearly how the interview has progressed

Final

- To give a positive finish. To make the final position clear
- To sum up what has been achieved during the interview
- To make sure the interviewee is clear about future action that was decided

LISTENING

Obvious but essential. The interviewer has to provide the "triggers" and listen and learn from the responses. It is not an opportunity for the interviewer to show off his/her knowledge or expertise. Concentrating throughout and analyzing what is said and not said and its significance:

- Picking up points for later expansion.
- Noticing discrepancies.
- Listening for generalization that may need to be questioned more specifically.

Being **seen** to be listening - an important part of establishing and maintaining rapport. Eye-contact is very important here -remember under 30 per cent there will be not enough contact -over 60 per cent becomes uncomfortable.

The Pregnant Pause - useful for probing. Don't afraid of silence; use it.

How Do You Show You Are Listening?

- Asking relevant questions
- Eye contact - 30 to 60%
- Body language
- Summaries
- Nodding
- Paralinguistics - Paralinguistics are vocalized indications of attention: e.g. grunts, "uh hmm", "uh huh", "oh yes", "really", etc.
- Aim for 80/20 – interviewee/interviewer talking

HINTS ON GOOD LISTENING

- Stop talking
- Listen for emotion as well as fact
- Put own issues aside
- Put talker at ease
- Look and act interested
- Remove distractions
- Try to put yourself in the talkers place
- Allow plenty of time
- Keep control of your temper
- Do not argue or criticize
- Ask questions to clarify points
- Listen for what is said as well as what is not said
- Ask searching but objective questions

- Reflect on meaning and summarize
- Stop talking!

OBSERVING

Like listening. Important clues can be gained by watching expression and body language. These cannot be interpreted in a vacuum, but depend on the person and the situation.

BARRIERS TO THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Here are some barriers to communication and the interview. During your planning you should consider these barriers and eliminate as many as possible.

PHYSICAL

- The room - its size, warmth, comfort, untidiness. The layout of the furniture - large desk, small chair etc.
- Bad positioning of applicant - sun in eyes.
- Interruptions - secretary, telephone.
- Distractions - glass office, road works outside.
- Distracting mannerisms – gum chewing, foot tapping.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL

- Lack of understanding.
- Misunderstanding.
- Bias.
- Status.
- Lack of confidence.

SPEECH PROBLEMS

- Use of Jargon.
- Talking too much by interviewer.
- Foreign interviewee.
- Speaking down to interviewee.
- Talking above applicant's head.
- Not establishing rapport.

General Interviewing Checklist

OBJECTIVE

- What am I to achieve by the end of the interview?

PREPARATION

- What can I do before the interview?
- Mental
- Environment
- Material

SKILLS

- What can I do during the interview to stimulate communication and retain control?

QUESTIONING EFFICIENCY

- Listening and observing
- Making statement when necessary
- Using summaries
- Establishing and maintaining control

FOLLOW UP

- Do I need to take action?
- If so - when?

Mental and Environment

Mental

- What is the objective?
- How long should it last?
- What do I know about the interviewee?
- What approach should I take?

Environment

- What sort of room? Is there a choice?
- How should we sit?
- Are there any distraction?
For example: sun in eyes, wobbly chairs, no table for coffee or water, noise, etc.
- Interesting view out of the window
- Interruptions
- Telephone
- People

Material and Conduct

- **Material:** What information do I need?
For example: Company policies, Reports; Personnel file, Applicant form, Relevant statistics, Names of specialists, Job description, etc.
- Establish rapport
- Explain purpose
- Encourage interviewee
- Be interested

The following will give you guidelines for each specific category of interview. Use these guidelines to formulate your interview process and integrate them into your own style.

SELECTION INTERVIEW

Purpose

To select the best available candidate to do the job and work for the company. That is, to determine if the applicant is right for the job and the organization and if the job and organization is right for the applicant.

Preparation

The first question you should ask your self is: Is the job really necessary?
It is always useful to go through the process of analyzing if the job is necessary; has it changed? Do we need to alter the job description to encompass these changes?
Why did the last person leave?

The implications if we get this wrong are obvious:- it can lead to aggravation and upset, waste of resources, waste of money and time; or, if we haven't made clear what the job entails, the person may get bored and won't stay.

The second questions we should ask: What is the job? We must be perfectly clear about what the job needs is all about and what the performance standards are expected. See the section on Job Descriptions for more information.

Draw up an interview plan - decide on the main areas of consideration; use an assessment system to compare candidates in these areas. Check all essential background information, write-up if necessary:

- Job description (written picture of the job) – see Job Description section below
- Person specification (written picture of the person able to do the job)
- Who will the person have to work with - large team, or small etc
- Application form (look for clues, omissions, note further detail needed; questions).
- Internal file if applicant is an employee of the company
- Know the conditions of employment, salary etc.
- Allow adequate time, ensure privacy and if possible prevent interruptions
- Arrange reception and order tea/coffee

Conduct

- Establish rapport, be friendly and enthusiastic (try not to keep candidate waiting)
- Encourage candidate to talk freely about their job and themselves
- Use open-ended questions for expansion - probe for facts
- Test knowledge and reaction (e.g. quick thinking) by hypothetical questions
- **LISTEN AND OBSERVE**
- Write brief notes of important facts, but maintain eye contact regularly - do not make note-taking distracting
- Check that all information needed to make an assessment has been collected

(check interview plan)

- Give details of job and company
- Ask candidates if they have any questions
- Finish positively - shake hands, thank them for coming and state when you will be contacting them regarding the outcome
- Settle any expenses incurred

Follow Up

- Write up notes more fully
- Assess candidate against needs in the main areas of consideration decided on earlier
- Compare with other candidates
- Make the decision
- Follow up with references
- Inform all candidates of the decision by letter within the time given to them at their interview
- Prepare training program for new member of staff

Selection Interview Questions

Typically, a wide variety of questions can be used to help gain information about a candidate's job skills. Use these questions as guides to help you develop questions which focus on a specific job's skill requirements. The questions that follow are considered behavioral because they are focused on the person's behavior in prior and related situations.

1. Describe a time in any job you've held when you were faced with problems or pressures which tested your ability to cope. What did you do?
2. Give an example of a time when you had to refrain from speaking or you were unable to finish a task because you did not have enough information to go on. Be specific.
3. Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
4. Tell me about a time when you had to use your spoken communication skills in order to get a point across that was important to you.
5. Can you tell me about a job experience in which you had to speak up in order to be sure that other people knew what you thought or felt?
6. Give me an example of a time when you feel you were able to motivate your colleagues or subordinates.

7. What do you do when one of your people is performing badly, just not getting the job done? Give an example.
8. When you had to do a job that was particularly uninteresting, how did you deal with it?
9. Give me an example of a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.
10. Describe a situation in which you felt it necessary to be very attentive to your environment.
11. Give an example of a time when you had to use your fact-finding skills to gain information in order to solve a problem - then tell me how you analyzed the information to come to a decision.
12. Give me an example of an important goal which you have set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
13. Describe the most significant written document/report/presentation which you have had to complete.
14. Give me an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
15. Give me an example of a time when you were able to communicate with another person, even though that individual may not have liked you personally.
16. Describe a situation in which you were able effectively to 'read' another person and tailor your actions according to your understanding of their individual needs or values.
17. What did you do in your last job in order to be effective with your organization and planning? Be specific.
18. Describe a situation in your job when you could structure your own work schedule. What did you do?
19. Describe the most creative work-related project which you have carried out.
20. Describe a time when you felt it was necessary to modify or change your actions in order to respond to the needs of another person?

21. What experience have you had with a misunderstanding with a customer or fellow employee? How did you solve the problem?
22. What did you do in your last job to contribute towards teamwork? Be specific.
23. Give me an example of a problem which you faced on any job you have had and tell me how you went about solving it.
24. Describe a situation in which you were able to influence positively the actions of others in a desired direction.

Source: Adapted from More Than A Gut Feeling III

Counseling Interview

The purpose of a counseling interview is to help a person or to come to terms with a problem which is affecting his or her work. To discuss and advise on problems affecting a person's work with the object of solving or alleviating the problem, bearing in mind the needs of both the employer and the individual.

Counseling Interview Guidelines

Clarify purpose of the interview:

- Advice vs. Counseling
- Presenting vs. Underlying problem

There are many reasons for deteriorating or poor job performance. Consider these as clarify the need and your approach for a counseling interview:

- Wrong person in the job (poor selection procedures)
- Poor induction procedures; the person doesn't know where they fit in or precisely what they are meant to be doing.
- Job has changed; new skills needed
- Low morale; uncertainty about the organization, people in the dark about progress, Not involved/informed/consulted
- Not valued/appreciated (or no-one remembers to tell them that they are valued)
- Don't know if what they are doing is right
- Job too vague - too much to do - overwhelming
- Poor Job Description
- Being asked to do too little (!)
- Boring/repetitive work - no new challenges under-achieving
- Antagonism - personality conflicts
- Stress and emotional problems (flight/fight)
- Environment
- Incompetent management
- Unprofessional management (sexist/racist)
- Threatening management
- Politics (who you know is more important than how you are doing).
- Mental illness (1 man in 7 and 1 woman in 4 suffer from some mental illness during their lives)
- Alcoholism
- Drug/substance abuse
- Medical disorders

Preparation

- Plan approach according to individual
- Ensure privacy

- Allow adequate time
- Check details
- If applicable, addresses of specialists who could help:
- Check file on individual

Conduct

- Interview in private
- Put at ease
- Establish rapport
- Show understanding not sympathy
- Establish problem clearly
- Guide interviewee to finding out solution
- Get them to identify courses of action
- Use open, reverse, and reflecting questions
- Listen carefully
- Be sincere and show you wish to help
- Be sensitive and understanding
- Maintain confidentiality if possible
- Come to a positive conclusion with positive ideas and points for action

Follow Up

- Arrange for future interview to check developments
- Carry out any action promised

Grievance or Employee Complaint Interview

Dealing with complaints can be tricky. If you keep these guidelines in mind it will help:

- Don't overreact
- Don't confuse opinions with facts
- Respect confidences
- Don't criticize
- Don't criticize others
- Don't assume
- Listen – don't promise what you can't deliver

Purpose

- To enable the individual to air the complaint.
- To discover and remove causes of dissatisfaction if possible.

Preparation

- Try to establish circumstances causing dissatisfaction (particularly attitudes, feelings)
- Consult with people concerned, check previous record/history
- Be aware of grievance procedure which may affect action which can be taken, and
- Your own limits of authority and the company policy.

Conduct

- Put at ease
- State purpose of interview
- Allow individual to state the grievance/problem
- Get feelings as well as facts - feelings are frequently paramount, facts minimal
- Listen attentively
- Do not evade the issue or belittle it
- Probe in depth to ensure all relevant details are known
- Check facts
- Do not commit yourself too quickly
- If possible get individual to suggest solutions
- State proposed course of action:
 - if the grievance has been resolved as a result of the meeting - what is to be done
 - if more information is needed arrange another interview with the person to discuss action
 - if you cannot resolve the grievance, refer the person to the next stage of procedure
 - never say 'leave it with me'

Follow up

- Implement agreed action
- If not passing to the next stage of procedure, check at a later date that grievance has been resolved satisfactorily.

Disciplinary Interview

Any disciplinary action must always be preceded by a well structured and controlled interview. All disciplinary actions must be in strict accord with a written procedure. The objective of a disciplinary interview is to inform an individual of, correct, poor work or unacceptable behavior, by helping the person to improve - thus preventing the situation from arising again and to establish an understanding of the standard required and to give guidance to the person in achieving this standard. Even for the most apparent, blatant gross misconduct, you are encouraged to suspend, with pay, while you carry out a thorough investigation.

If you have good, clear job descriptions with Key Result Areas and Standards Of Accepted Performance (SOAP) clearly laid down, then it makes any disciplinary action you have to take much more straight forward. If you have effective Problem Resolution Policies and Procedures and a good appraisal system, Disciplinary Interviews should seldom be needed.

Most important - three quarters of the process - is to try to get the interviewee to "own" the problem; i.e. to identify the gap or the problem themselves.

Guidelines for Embarking on Disciplinary Action

Remember all your actions and comments may have to be defended at a tribunal, grievance committee or formal hearing, or in court. Even for those who would not be eligible to go to a formal hearing, it is good practice to treat everyone with the same degree of consideration and courtesy.

- Fully understand your responsibilities and authority within the organization's procedures.
- Before giving a formal warning, ensure you have done all you can to improve the situation.
- Inform the shop steward (where appropriate) of your action, provide an opportunity for representation.
- Keep a record of the date of the interview, the name of the staff member, the reason(s), and details of witnesses.
- Ensure the staff member understands the consequences of failure to improve.
- Set a time for review and keep to it.
- If you are not sure - **CHECK**
- Maintain close contact with other management team members to ensure consistency, try and help the staff member improve.
- Employees with limited English – provide a translator
- Where there is collective bargaining agreement – follow the process to notify and liaise with the union representative.
- Any disciplinary action must always be preceded by a well structured and controlled interview. All disciplinary actions must be in strict accord with a

written procedure.

Preparation

- Gather the facts (consult others, records, rules and procedures)
- Do not prejudge the issue
- Plan the approach according to the individual concerned
- Ensure privacy and no interruptions
- Allow adequate time
- Clarify the disciplinary actions available to you
- Notify the time, place and reason for the interview
- Notify others who may be concerned that the employee will be absent from the place of work, especially first line supervision
- **Check** your disciplinary procedure, i.e.
 - should you involve a representative?
 - does the employee know the procedure and appreciate the consequences?
- Advise the individual of the right to be represented by the union and ensure that representation can be available at the agreed time

Conduct

- State the reason for the interview briefly giving those details of behavior or performance which have caused concern
- State the standards which your organization expects in relation to the matter under consideration
- Establish facts promptly
- Obtain witness statements if applicable
- Identify the '**gap**' between standards expected and those achieved
- Ask the interviewee **why** this 'gap' exists. Encourage the employee to talk and to give a full explanation, and if involved allow the representative to comment
- **Listen** closely and make notes of what the employee says in order to establish the cause
- Having listened to the explanation **decide** whether disciplinary action is warranted and what **action** to take, if any, and **inform** the interviewee. At the same time advise the individual and the representative of any rights to appeal which may exist.
- Now switch to the **future**, and get agreement on how to bring performance back to standard by encouraging the interviewee to make suggestions
- Offer **help** where this is possible
- Set an agreed **review date** for the purpose of monitoring progress and state what the consequences of failure to meet standards will be
- Agree a date to review progress/plan - quite useful, especially
- You don't have to say at the end of the interview what you have decided, but you should say when you will let the interviewee know your decision.

Note: Do not negotiate on your actions. Make this clear at the outset.

Follow-up

- Record the interview
- Check: future behavior, attitude and performance against time limits on the agreed dates
- Check that help is given where this is either required or has been agreed with the individual
- Encourage and praise improvements
- If the required standard is met over a reasonable period consider removing file notes, and in any case check the steps to be taken within the written procedure
- Look at what you could have done as a manager which would have prevented the breach of discipline

Appraisal Interview

An appraisal is literally, to set a value on something or someone. In this interview situation it is a two way process for the interviewer and the interviewee to indicate how they feel the work is going. The appraisal process addresses the two most important factors in motivation of people at work:- "achievement" and "recognition" for work done.

Purpose

To appraise a person's performance over a given period against set targets in order to:

- Assess performance, building on strengths and identifying weaknesses.
- Identify areas of improvement, ways of overcoming weaknesses and consequent training needs.
- Discuss potential and future prospects.

Preparation

- Give due warning to allow employee to prepare
- Ask employee to think about own performance
- Study job description and targets
- Consult with others who might help assessment of employee
- Allow adequate time and avoid interruptions

Conduct

- Put at ease
- State purpose of interview
- Ask open questions, allowing employee to talk through points raised
- Summarize points as covered
- Re-summarize at end, underlining agreed action
- Set date for discussion of new targets

Follow Up

- Complete appraisal form, show it to employee
- Allow employee to comment in writing, and sign
- Take steps to implement agreed action
- Follow up to ensure action has taken place

Target Setting

What do you need to know to help the interviewee set targets for the next performance period?

- Who is my boss?
- What is my job?
- What standards do I have to achieve?
- How am I getting there?

- Where do I go from here?
- How do I get there?
- What training and development do I need?

Typical Questions for the Appraisal Interview

By using these reactive questions you can cut through generalities and make people answer more specifically. In this way you can more clearly assess what is being said and where the targets lie.

- What was the most interesting task you had to do this year?
- What was the most successful project in the past year?
- In retrospect, how do you feel you handled the re-organisation?
- What areas of your work would you say require more attention?
- What extra help do you need to improve those areas?
- What do you think you need to learn now to develop the job further?
- What have been the most difficult problems that you have faced?
- Where do you see your future with the organisation?
- How do you see this job developing?
- What would you say are the priorities for the next twelve months?
- I'm not quite sure I understand what you are saying. Will you please go over the main points again?

Termination Interview

Purpose

To discover a person's true reasons for leaving the organization with a view to taking any required action to prevent others leaving for the same reasons. Such reasons could be:

- Poor recruitment selection
- Inadequate training
- Company policy
- Salary
- Management/supervision
- Personality clashes

The second reason to conduct a termination or exit interview, is to secure employee's goodwill and company's reputation.

Preparation

- Check resignation letter for reason stated
- Study employee's records and personnel file
- Where necessary check with other appropriate people, e.g. supervisor, etc
- Ensure privacy and no interruptions
- Allow adequate time

Conduct

- Put at ease - thank interviewee for coming
- State the purpose of interview
- Encourage and allow the employee to talk freely about the job, the company and the people
- Ask open ended questions
- Listen and observe; be alert for clues to underlying reason - this often differs from the reason that is stated on letter of resignation
- Thank employee for services rendered and wish them well

Follow Up

Decide if any action is necessary in the light of information gained and implement accordingly.

Improving Your Interviewing

The only way to become a competent interviewer is to practice. To improve your skills you can use this booklet and practice with someone else. To become an accomplished interviewer, it is critical to recognize and filter your own prejudices. A greater degree of self understanding will help you appreciate your biases and understand how they impact the interview situation. Try some impromptu role playing with a colleague or friend. Get some feedback from them and provide them with assessments of their style as well. The purpose of practicing is to enable you to become an interviewer who is aware of both the objectives of the interview and of the skills which you must apply to achieve them.