The job interview is an unusual situation: You're put in a room you've never been in, with a person you've never met, to talk about a company you don't work at, in order to persuade somebody that you'll be excellent at a job you don't have. No wonder it feels awkward, artificial and anxious.

But a lot of the "mystery" around great job interviewing comes from the fact that we don't do it that often. Every few years, we're supposed to magically dust off our interview skills and go out there and shine. Well, I talk to a lot of job-seekers, hiring managers, and recruiters, and the "secrets" behind great interviews aren't really that mysterious after all. So here's what you need to know for making your job interviews a lot less nerve-wracking and a lot more effective.

**Pick three points and stick to them.**

Ever watched the politicians on TV? When the host asks them a real zinger of a question, you'll notice they rarely get flustered. Instead, they reply right off the top of their heads with an answer that seems to be completely coherent and well-crafted. No matter what the question is, and no matter how impertinently put, the politician has an answer and doesn't get distracted by the host's badgering. I can't say whether that's good for us voters, but I can tell you it's deadly effective for giving a great interview. It's called "staying on message" and the politicians don't do it by accident. Before they go on TV, they write down (or have written down for them) "talking points" that make the key arguments they want to make. And whatever else happens, they make sure to get their talking points across.

So in order to ace your interviews, you'll want to have your own talking points.

And here's the truly amazing thing — you don't even need to come up with these on your own. Unlike the fickle electorate, your target audience will tell you exactly what you need to say! All you have to do is ask them. When you are setting up the interview, ask the recruiter or HR person: What are the three key things you're looking for in this position? And why are they important to the company? (If you're not able to get this question in beforehand, you can still ask it right at the start of the interview.)

They might say this position is for a new initiative, or this role is critical for the implementation of the strategy, or the boss needs an expert to help assist them in this area. Whatever the three key needs for the role are, write down beforehand how you can accomplish those needs. Don't over-practice, just make sure that you know their three needs by heart, and you've got a reasonable argument for why you can help them.

Then during the interview, if conversation gets steered away to upcoming spring training or the snow this winter, or Tiger's apology on Friday, you just make sure that you steer it back to how you can contribute on the three key needs. Stay on message and when you walk out, your message will still be behind with your future boss.

**It's not about you**

If you think about the interview from your future boss' point of view, the interview is not about you. It's about how well you fit into his or her needs. If you stick to your talking points above, you'll avoid one of the most common errors people make in job interviews: talking about themselves without a real purpose. Yes, you need to discuss your career goals, but only in the context of how they match up with what your boss is looking for. And, yes, you need to discuss your prior performance and successes, but only to the extent that it supports how you match the three key needs the company has for the open position. A job interview is a sales call — it's about selling you and your experiences and skills and talent for the role. It's not an A&E Biography about YOU, it's a discussion about the company, their needs, the role, and how well you do, or don't, fit into the plans.

And it is most especially not a chance for you to get distracted on extraneous topics that may be very important to you, but
have absolutely nothing to do with how well you can do the job. Because these topics are very important to you and you've been thinking about them a lot, you'll need to make an extra-special effort to avoid dwelling on them in the interview:

- How difficult the job search is (ok, yes it is, how is talking about this going to help you shorten your job search?)
- What your perfect career would be (we're not here to talk about your perfect career, we're here to talk about this job and who we should hire for it)
- The wrong decisions made by your previous boss / company / colleagues (how is this helping you get your next job? It's not. Avoid.)

If I can be slightly tongue-in-cheek, the rule for job interviews is: "He who talks the least, wins." If you can get your interviewer talking about their needs, their hopes, and their viewpoints, you'll be collecting a lot more information about what it takes to get the job. Making your key points can take as little as 10 minutes if you're strictly on message. Use the rest of your time to find out what else you need to know to make your case.

**Have good questions**

Even though I'm usually the final person to meet a candidate here at TheLadders, I'm always surprised when people I'm interviewing say they don't have any questions for me. Sure, you've already met four of my colleagues and they've answered a lot of the open questions you had about TheLadders, but, really? You have absolutely no good questions for me? And that's because asking questions is only 50% about addressing your needs, explaining the role to you, and satisfying your curiosity. The other 50% of asking questions is showing your capability to think critically about the company, the industry, and the role. Use that time to show off your good noodle by asking (brief) insightful questions.

And because I like you, here are ten questions that are good for almost any interview, plus a bonus question that will really make you stand out:

1. What's the biggest change your group has gone through in the last year?
2. One year from now, if I get the job, what will earn me a "gold star"? What are the key accomplishments you'd like to see in this role over the next year?
3. What's your (or my future boss') leadership style?
4. About which competitor are you most worried?
5. How do your sales / marketing / technology / operations work here?
6. What type of people are successful here? What type of people are not?
7. What's one thing that's key to your success that somebody from outside the company wouldn't know about?
8. How did you get your start in this industry? Why do you stay?
9. What are your best and worst working relationships with other groups in the company?
10. What keeps you up at night? What's your biggest worry?

And here's the bonus, my favorite, and the best way to really demonstrate how much value you're going to add to your boss' career:

How do you (Mr. or Ms. Future Boss) get a gold star / big bonus / your boss' recognition & thanks at the end of the year? How can I best help you do that?

Why is this question so good? It shows you're thinking about others, not just yourself. It shows that you want to be helpful and help the boss and the team achieve. And it gets your future boss thinking about how beneficial it is going to be to have somebody like you on the team helping them achieve their goals.

OK, Readers, that's how you ace the interview. Good luck this week!