# National Institutes of Health

# GS-1035 Public Affairs

# Behavioral Interview Guide

## Behavioral-Based Interview Overview

Behavioral-based interviews focus on discovering how a candidate performed in specific work related situations. This interview technique seeks to uncover how a potential employee actually did behave in a given situation; not on how he or she might behave in the future. The premise behind this technique is that a good predictor of future performance is how someone performed in the past in a similar situation. Behavioral-based interviews are becoming more common throughout industry and government and many candidates are familiar with this technique and are well prepared for these interviews. Candidates can and should draw on previous work related experiences as well as non-work related experiences (e.g., school projects, community involvement) that are relevant to the interview questions.

### Behavioral Interviewing Suggested Protocol

1. As much as possible, all questions should relate to experiences that have occurred in the last 2-3 years (best for recollection of behavioral details).
2. All behavioral interview questions should focus on what the interviewee did, said, felt or thought in the past. The interviewer should be looking for phrases such as “I did….”, “I said….” etc.
3. Do not ask questions about what the interviewee would do in a given situation or what they would have done differently. The focus is on what the interviewee actually did/said/thought/felt in the past. If the interviewee uses such phrases as “I would,” the interviewer should probe by saying, “What did you actually do at that time?”
4. The interviewee should focus on what he/she did, rather than what “we” did. While working as part of a team is very common and desirable, it is important to understand what the candidate’s individual role was. The interviewer should probe the interviewee if “We” is used in describing actions. For example, if the interviewee says “We implemented the new payroll system by…..”, it is the interviewer’s job to ask the interviewee what his/her role was and what he actually did (as an individual).
5. Prior to delving into the detail of each question, ask the interviewee to provide a brief (30 second) overview of the situation by highlighting the beginning, middle, and end. This helps the interviewer to keep the interview on track. For example, if you feel lost in the discussion, you can pause the conversation by asking the interviewee where you are in the story (beginning, middle, or end).

## Suggested Introduction to the Interview

* This is a behavioral interview, which may be different from interviews you have had in the past. A behavioral interview focuses on what you have done, said, felt and thought in past experiences. Please use the first person as much as possible because I am most interested in what you have done, said, thought and felt in the situations. So if you use the term “we” rather than “I”, I may interrupt you to clarify what you did in the situation versus what others did.
* I am going to ask you specific questions about your experiences and will ask that you try, as best as you can, to only discuss experiences that have occurred within the past 2 or 3 years so that you will be able to recall the details of the situations.
* I will ask follow-up questions to get as many of the details around what you were doing in the situation. Imagine that I am making a movie of what you were doing in the given situation. I am interested in everything you did, said, thought and felt.

NOTE:

The information provided above offers suggestions for conducting behavioral-based interviews. Interviewers should use this information as a tool and tailor the interview to meet the needs of the individual organization.

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| Public Affairs | |
| Competency | Definition |
| Communications Counsel with Senior Leadership | Partners with and advises key senior leadership on strategic communications related matters |
| Data Gathering and Information Briefing | Gathers data and provides relevant information in a summarized format |
| Development of Policies and Standard Operating Procedures | Compiles and analyzes regulations, policies, and procedures in order to provide an organization with a consistent, well-defined infrastructure |
| Message Delivery | Strategically delivers messages by evaluating the most appropriate media channel(s) for the particular needs of the target audience(s) |
| Message Development | Develops messages for various audiences |

## Communications Counsel with Senior Leadership

Partners with and advises key senior leadership on strategic communications related matters

### Key Behaviors:

* Serves as a trusted advisor, providing strategic communication advice to senior leadership regarding media interviews, speaking engagements, and other events
* Supports key leadership by planning and managing the communication of information to relevant constituencies including media, advocacy groups, internal audiences, and the general public
* Coordinates and facilitates speaker’s preparation (e.g., preparation for media interviews, conferences)
* Advises senior leadership on how to handle crises and controversial issues, including providing background materials and talking points to facilitate senior leadership’s communication
* Presents information clearly and concisely to senior leadership avoiding miscommunication and misunderstandings
* Provides and/or facilitates coaching for senior leadership to enhance media interview and public speaking skills
* Provides “resolution-based” information, identifying problems and providing recommended solutions and alternatives

### Interview questions:

1. **Based on your experience, what are the key contributors to successfully communicating with senior leadership?** Please share a few examples of your communications with senior leadership.
2. Tell me about a time when you served as a trusted advisor, providing strategic communication advice to senior leadership.
3. In this role, you will have to advise senior leadership on how to handle crises and controversial issues. Discuss a time when you had to counsel a manager through a tough issue that involved communicating with an external group.
4. **Think of a successful relationship you have built with a leader.** How did you build the relationship? How did you build rapport and obtain his/her trust? How did this relationship benefit the organization?
5. **Discuss a time when you had to prepare someone for a major interview or news conference.** How did you go about getting him/her ready for this event? What was the result?
6. **Discuss a communication event that did not go well for someone you helped prepare for the event.** Why did it not go well? What did you learn from this incident? What would you do differently?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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| **Summarize the situation, behaviors demonstrated and outcomes. Then provide an overall proficiency rating for the competency as defined in the Administrative Officer competency model.** |
| Situation: |
| Behaviors: |
| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 |

## Data Gathering and Information Briefing

Gathers data and provides relevant information in a summarized format

### Key Behaviors:

* Researches issues, histories, previous treatment, media and all other pertinent data to establish a planning baseline
* Maintains competency in fact finding (e.g. PubMed searches)
* Researches and prepares a variety of communications including news releases, feature articles and/or public statements Represents the organization at public meetings and hearings on a wide range of controversial and highly visible issues
* Provides media with wide ranging background briefings and follow up information on all routine and sensitive facets of the organization prior to these interviews and/or in story-line preparations
* Understands when a briefing is required to communicate a summarized message or status update
* Prepares briefing reports, either verbally or in writing, to update personnel of key developments
* Provides impromptu briefings as spontaneous or unexpected developments occur, or time sensitive issues arise
* Prepares background material for interviews, including issue statements and position papers (e.g., Congressional and organization positions) and recommends subject treatment
* Establishes credibility and/or rapport with audiences and utilizes presentation techniques and strategies for engaging and maintaining audience interest

### Interview questions:

1. **Discuss a time when you had to research an issue and prepare a summary report.** How did you go about this task? What format did you follow? What was the result?
2. **Tell me about the most effective presentation you have made.** What made it successful?
3. **In this role, you will be required to provide impromptu briefings on unexpected developments or sensitive issues. Discuss a time when you had to work or present under pressure.** What was the outcome?
4. **Share an example of a challenging research assignment.** What made it challenging? How did you work through the difficulties to successfully complete your assignment?
5. **Discuss a challenging briefing you had to give (e.g. tough audience, difficult topic).** How did you handle it? What did you learn?
6. **What tools have you used in the past to research information?** Are there sources that are more accurate than others? If so, which?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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| --- |
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| Behaviors: |
| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 |

## Development of Policies and Standard Operating Procedures

Compiles and analyzes regulations, policies, and procedures in order to provide an organization with a consistent, well-defined infrastructure

### Key Behaviors:

* Develops, coordinates and releases policy/position statements on controversial issues for Institute leadership
* Analyzes and evaluates all available information (media reports and public statements), and applies judgment in recommending the organization’s position
* Documents long range policies, plans and programs designed to encourage support for, and /or active involvement, in the organization
* Researches current standards/policies/procedures, utilizing all available resources
* Monitors relevant issues that impact the organization
* Writes and edits standards/policies/procedures documents and manuals
* Analyzes and implements standards/policies/procedures

### Interview questions:

1. **Discuss a controversial policy or position statement you developed.** How did you develop it? What did you consider when recommending what the organization’s position should be? How was it received?
2. **Provide examples of policies or procedures you have analyzed and implemented for an organization.** How are they best documented to provide an organization with well-defined direction?
3. **How do you stay abreast of issues that impact the organization?** What resources do you use?
4. **Tell me about a policy document or manual you developed.** What was your approach?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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| --- |
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| Behaviors: |
| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 |

## Message Delivery

Strategically delivers messages by evaluating the most appropriate media channel(s) for the particular needs of the target audience(s)

### Key Behaviors:

* Anticipates audience needs and interests and actively seeks the most appropriate avenue for informing others (e.g., national and local media forums, internal NIH publications)
* Establishes partnerships with internal and/or external organizations (e.g., radio, television, newspaper, magazine, internal publications) to facilitate the most efficient means for disseminating information
* Identifies specific materials (e.g., documents, articles, formal papers, brochures, photos, press releases, on-line etc.) that need to be processed and distributed
* Cultivates and maintains contacts with internal and/or external centers of influence, such as institutions, government officials, community organizations, and/or industry to improve the public’s understanding and awareness of organizational activities
* Selects appropriate target audiences for information dissemination, seeking input from others as necessary and disseminates information to appropriate internal and/or external parties
* Prepares, and approves the release of all information (e.g., news releases, written publications)
* Articulates organization’s position orally and/or in writing via appropriate channels (e.g., national and local media, federal and state government agencies)
* Follows up as necessary with recipients and/or target audiences to ensure receipt of information/materials in desired timeframe and/or need for additional information/materials
* Ensures recipients understand legal issues regarding use of information/materials (e.g., use of reprints, photos, quotes)

### Interview questions:

1. **Part of your role in this position will be to develop relationships with internal and external parties to improve the public’s understanding and awareness of organizational activities.** Give an example of how you have built and leveraged a relationship with members of an organization in order to facilitate awareness and understanding of your organization.
2. **Discuss your experience working with the press (national and local media).** Give an example of when you were the most effective in delivering an organization’s message through the media. What made it successful?
3. **How do you determine the most effective channel (e.g. media forums, internal publications) for delivering a message to a particular audience?** Provide examples of the various channels you have used and why.
4. **Provide an example of a time when you delivered the same message via different channels in order to accommodate two or more different groups.** What were the factors you considered when deciding the channel for each group?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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| Behaviors: |
| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 0 1 2 3 4 5 |

## Message Development

Develops messages for various audiences

### Key Behaviors:

* Provides background materials and talking points to prepare speakers (e.g., scientists) for the communication of information, especially in regard to controversial issues and/or crises
* Understands and outlines the goals and primary messages to be conveyed to target audiences
* Researches the subject matter and audience to anticipate questions and the reception of messages
* Ensures all quotes, citations and information sources are accurate
* Writes and/or edits content for communications
* Ensures plain language is used and identifies and eliminates superfluous words so that information is communicated as concisely as possible
* Ensures content is appropriate for targeted audiences (e.g. technical terms that will not be understood are either removed or explained further)

### Interview questions:

1. **Describe your writing style.** What steps are necessary to ensure that information is communicated as clearly and concisely as possible? What communications methodology do you follow?
2. **Provide an example of a time when you developed and tailored the same core message to two or more different audiences.** What steps did you take to ensure the content was appropriate for each audience?
3. **What is the best approach when writing about controversial issues and targeting a large audience?** Tell me about talking points you have prepared for speakers delivering such messages.
4. **What is the most challenging document you have written?** Why was it challenging? How did you address the challenges and complete your assignment?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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## NIH Competency Proficiency Scale

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Score | Proficiency Level | Description |
| N/A | ***Not Applicable*** | You are not required to apply or demonstrate this competency. This competency is not applicable to your position. |
| 0 | ***Not Demonstrated*** | You have not demonstrated this competency and likely have not had related training or experience. |
| 1 | ***Baseline***  (theoretical knowledge) | Shows basic knowledge and understanding sufficient to handle routine tasks. Focus is on learning.   * You are training or on-the-job training; beginning to develop this competency and have completed formal * You understand and can discuss terminology, concepts, principles, and issues related to this competency; * You utilize the full range of reference and resource materials in this competency. |
| 2 | ***Progressing***  (limited practical application and experience) | Has depth/breadth of knowledge to handle non-routine situations. Begins to take initiative. Focus is on applying and enhancing knowledge or skill.   * You have applied this competency in occasional situations and still require minimal guidance to perform successfully; * You understand and can discuss the application and implications of changes to processes, policies, and procedures in this area. |
| 3 | ***Proficient***  (practical application and experience) | An expert who can handle broad organizational/professional issues; works independently; has long-term perspective; coaches, guides and empowers others.   * You have consistently provided practical/relevant ideas and perspectives on process or practice improvements which may easily be implemented; * You are capable of coaching others in the application of this competency by translating complex nuances relating to this competency into easy to understand terms; * You participate in senior level discussions regarding this competency; * You assist in the development of reference and resource materials in this competency. |
| 4 | ***Master***  (recognized thought leader)  All criteria must apply | An expert whose advice is sought out by others, from both within the NIH and from the Department or other organizations; Shapes the organization/profession; is visionary; focus is strategic; copes with the unknown.   * You have demonstrated consistent excellence in applying this competency across multiple projects and/or organizations; * You are considered the “go to” person in this area from within NIH and/or outside the OPDIV; * You create new applications for and/or lead the development of reference and resource materials for this competency; * You are able to diagram or explain the relevant process elements and issues in relation to organizational issues and trends in sufficient detail during discussions and presentations, to foster a greater understanding among internal and external colleagues and constituents. |