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HIRING AUTHORITY ASKS: “WHAT WOULD YOU DO?” HOW WILL YOU RESPOND?

On October 13, 1992 Vice President Dan Quayle went on television to debate Bill Clinton’s Vice Presidential candidate Al Gore and a third party Vice Presidential candidate, Retired Admiral James Stockdale. Quayle was given this specific question, “Suppose President George H.W. Bush died in office? You are the Vice President. What would you do?”

Quayle began by saying he would fall to his knees and begin praying for the President’s soul. And then he froze, a look of confusion on his face: Quayle had no idea what he would do next.

Quayle’s response did not help.

Bush and Quayle lost that election to Clinton and Gore.

In his honor, we call “what would you do?” questions in job interviews “Dan Quayle Questions.”

There are three ways to respond to Dan Quayle Questions: (1) answer the question, (2) provide the data required for you to give an appropriate answer, or (3) reframe the question and answer a similar question from your past.

Answer the Question:

As Dan Quayle discovered, answering “What Would You Do?” questions is a losing proposition: you will quickly expose yourself as lacking substance. A proper response requires more context than interviewers have the time to provide you.

Do not be like Dan Quayle.

Ask for The Data Required to Answer the Question.

There are two reasons job interviewers ask “Dan Quayle Questions.” One reason is to obtain free consultation from experienced job candidates. While that rationale is unethical, it can happen.

A more common reason to ask Dan Quayle Questions is to evaluate the quality of the candidate’s thinking by focusing on a specific problem.

To achieve the real objectives behind Dan Quayle questions, do not provide an answer.

Talk about key data that would be required in order to provide a viable response.

In the case of VP Dan Quayle, an appropriate answer might have been:

“How I would react to President Bush’s death would depend upon a number of variables: (1) is the death sudden or anticipated? (2) what are our relationships with key superpowers such as Russia and China? (3) Are we at war or peace? I am sure there are more questions but these are the basic ones. If I had the answers, I could begin formulating a response.

"And in a real situation, I would have the answers to these questions."

A Business Example of a Dan Quayle Question.

A client has an interview to become VP, Strategy for a Fortune 500 company in the financial services sector. A recruiter asks, "What companies should we seek to acquire over the next three years?" Answering with the names of specific companies would be a Dan Quayle response.

Below is the alternative we recommend:

"If the purpose of the question is to understand how I think, I can explain what variables I would need to understand before I begin to respond to this question: (1) what is the strategy of the company and why is that strategy focused on buying companies versus building capability from within? (2) what are top three services the company wishes to have three years from today that it currently does not have or is not pleased with? (3) what geographical areas does it wish to compete in three years from now or geographical areas it wishes to withdraw from (4) what is the acquisition history of the company regarding letting companies be independent of the parent company versus integration of operations and culture

"If you could give me the answer to all these questions, then I could begin to conduct research to respond. In a real situation, this is what I would be doing. I hope this response gives you a sense for how I approach problems."

Reframe the Question:

If the objective of the question is to understand your pattern of logic, the interviewer will accept your reframe of the question as long as it achieves the intended objective.

A typical reframe would be to answer a related question from your work history.

Below is an example:

"I don't think I can answer that question because there is too much critical information not available. But if the reason for your question is to understand my approach to acquisitions, I can describe a situation I had when I was Vice President of ABC Rollup. This was a private equity funded rollup of companies in the financial technology sector. Our strategy was....."

Time to Politely Say “Can I Submit a Proposal?”

Of course the interviewer could always respond with, “Very nice response. But I want you to give me the names of three companies I should look to acquire in the next six months.”

At this point, we recommend that you politely inquire if you could submit a proposal. You came here for a job interview and not to provide free consultation.

You probably won't be offered the job: would that be such a bad thing?

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