How to Answer Difficult Situational Interview Questions
by Vault Careers | August 13, 2014

The following is an excerpt from the new Vault Career Guide to Accounting.

A situational interview features questions about how you handled or would handle a job challenge. These types of questions aim to assess your problem-solving and critical-thinking skills and see how you think on your feet under stress. Situational interview questions can be difficult to answer because they can be about almost anything and you might never have encountered some of the challenges. Here are some sample situational interview questions and suggested answers:

Question: The work quality of one of your staff has dropped off precipitously. What would you do to address the situation?

Suggested Answer: I gained a lot of experience leading teams and groups in college and in my past job, and I’ve encountered this situation a few times. The key first step to dealing with an underperforming colleague is honest communication. In one of my past experiences, I met with the worker privately, explained my concerns about the quality of his work, and asked him to explain the cause of the problem. You’d be surprised at what a little honest one-to-one conversation can do. My employee said he knew that his work had been subpar lately, but was afraid to address the issue with me. He told me that he simply felt overwhelmed by the project and that his concentration might also be affected by the fact that he had just become a new father and was only getting three hours of sleep a night. (In other situations, employees have told me that they didn’t understand the assigned tasks or that they were having trouble with a difficult colleague who was a key member of the project team.)

Once the channels of communication were open, I then devised a solution to address the issue. In this instance, I reviewed the project with the employee and asked him to identify any problem areas. I also allowed him to work a
flexible schedule that better fit with his new role as a father. I then revisited the project with the entire team to ensure that all aspects were understood, the deadlines were realistic, and work duties were fairly allotted among the staff. The project was completed on time, and my "problem employee" prospered as a result of the more open lines of communication and the adjustment of his work schedule.

**Question:** What would you do if you heard a rumor from a reputable source that a coworker was disclosing confidential information that should not be divulged?

**Suggested Answer:** My answer depends on if you have hard proof or if it’s just an unsubstantiated allegation. If I had hard proof, I’d immediately go to my supervisor with evidence of my colleague’s unethical activities. Ethics are extremely important in the accounting industry, and if I didn’t report my colleague’s unethical activities, I’d be guilty of withholding information that could negatively affect my company in the eyes of shareholders and government regulators.

If I didn’t have hard evidence, I’d approach the coworker with my concerns and respectfully point out that if the allegations were true, his actions were unethical and illegal and could negatively affect the company and his personal life. If these rumors didn’t stop, and I discovered proof of the illegal activities, I’d be forced to take my concerns to my superior.

**Question:** You’re working on a time-sensitive project, but your work comes to a standstill because your coworkers and supervisor are unavailable to answer a few important questions. How do you handle the situation?

**Suggested Answer:** This is a challenging situation, which I encountered and addressed successfully in a past job. First of all, I tried to contact my colleagues and boss to follow-up on the project. I was unable to reach them, so I continued working on segments of the project that weren’t time sensitive, and I contacted clients and other parties involved in the project to gather additional information that would help me complete the project on time. They provided useful information, and I was able to keep working on the time-sensitive aspects of the project. I also reached out to a mentor and a trusted manager in another department for their advice on addressing the issue. I stayed calm and kept working to move the project forward and put it in the best position possible for when I was able to get back in touch with my manager and colleagues. My boss eventually contacted me to answer my questions (he had been called out of the office for an emergency at home), and because I kept working on the project and remained calm, I was able to meet the deadline. My boss really appreciated my efforts.

*To read more about interviewing in the accounting industry, as well as how to find and apply for accounting jobs (and much more), check out the [Vault Career Guide to Accounting](http://www.vault.com).*

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