

Are You Ready for These Bone-Chilling Questions?

By John Kador

Trying to find the next super star for your organization is getting tougher as talent wars continue to heat up in North America. One way to know who the superstar candidates are is by the questions they ask. And some of them are asking questions that are not for the faint of heart.

These are questions that take no prisoners. They are tough, specific, and leave interviewers little wiggle room. I call them "bone-chilling questions" because a number of the recruiters who first encountered them reported getting chills up their spines.

"Superstars can interview the company with some very tough questions to make sure they select the best opportunity offered them," says Dr. John Sullivan, ERE author and head of Human Resource Management at San Francisco State University. "Candidates need an accurate job preview, and it sometimes takes hard questions to get it. The hiring manager's ability and willingness to answer these tough questions should be a major factor in any candidate's decision to accept an offer."

If you expect to land the superstars, you can prepare for these bone-chilling questions by stretching yourself in three dimensions:

- Answer the question with facts, not spin or sound bites. The superstars probably know the facts better than you do.
- Be honest. The facts are friendly. They may not always be convenient, but they are always preferable to pretense.
- Know your stuff. That means knowing the players, the business, the industry, and the competition. Most bone-chilling questions seek to put the opportunity into a wider context.

These are 25 of the toughest questions recruiters have ever been asked. How would you answer them?

1. What would I see if I stood outside the front door at 5 o'clock? Would everyone be smiling? Staying late or leaving early? Would they be taking work home?
2. What is your "learning plan" for me for my first six months?
3. What competencies do you propose I will develop that I don't currently have?
4. Which individual in the department can I learn the most from?
5. What can he or she teach me? Can I meet them?
6. Does the company have a specific program to advance my career?
7. What are some examples of the decisions I could make in this job without any approvals? Show me the degree of autonomy and control I will have in this position.
8. How many hours a week do you expect the average person on your team to work? How many hours does the average person in fact work? Are there work/life programs in place to promote a healthy work/life balance?
9. How will my performance be evaluated? What are the top criteria you use? What percent of my compensation is based on my performance? Is there a process where the employees get to assess their supervisor?
10. If I do a great/bad job in the first 90 days, how specifically will you let me know? What are the steps you would take to help me improve?
11. What is the first assignment you intend to give me? Where does that assignment rank in the department's priorities?
12. What makes this assignment a great opportunity for me at this particular point in my career?

13. How many hours of your time can I expect to get each week for the first six months on the job? How often will we have scheduled meetings?
14. If I were frustrated about my job what specific steps would you take to help me overcome that frustration? How about if you were frustrated with me?
15. Can you show me examples of what you have done for others in your group in the past year to overcome any frustration?
16. What are the "wows!" of this job? What are the worst parts? And what will you do to maximize the former and minimize the latter?
17. If I asked the incumbent what stinks about the job, what would he or she say? Can I talk to him or her?
18. What are the biggest problems facing this department in the next six months and one year?
19. What key competencies have you identified that I will need to develop in the next six months to be successful?
20. What makes this company a great place to work? What outside evidence (rankings or awards) do you have to prove this is a great place to work? What is the company going to do in the next year to make it better?
21. What is the best/toughest question I could ask you to find out about the worst aspects of this job? How would you answer it?
22. If you were my best friend, what would you tell me about this job that we haven't already discussed?
23. Can you give me some examples of the best and worst aspects of the company's culture? When top performers leave the company why do they leave and where do they usually go?
24. When was the last significant layoff? What criteria were used to select those to stay? What packages were offered to those that were let go?
25. Does the company have a program to significantly reward individuals that develop patents/ great products? Is there a program to help individuals "start" their own firms or subsidiary? Will I be required to fill out non-compete agreements?

Candidates don't expect you to have all the answers to these questions at your fingertips. They know these are tough questions. But they do expect you to take your best shot and then to get back to them with additional details. Just as candidates come back to second and third interviews with new information on topics that came up in the first interview, you may need to do some homework, as well.

These questions are tough, no doubt about it. But having ready answers to them serve your company at least as much as it serves the candidates.

John Kador is an independent business writer, journalist, and author of numerous books on careers and the Internet.