

The STAR(ce) Method

or How to Ace Your Job Interview

How can you present yourself in the best possible way when you're in a job interview or talking to a potential employer? And how can you do it without exaggerating or stretching the truth on one hand, or feeling like you're boasting on the other? For lots of people, situations that depend on promoting your own accomplishments can be difficult and feel artificial, and that's even before you start worrying about the outcome that you're hoping for! Often the situation giving rise to these feelings is a job interview, or it may be that you're asking a potential patron to give financially, or you may be asking an organisation to partner with you in a project. In any of these contexts the stakes are high! But how do you get through the bit where you have to "sell" yourself, and potentially present yourself as a better candidate than others?

I'll focus mainly on answering job interview questions here, but if you're facing one of those other situations, you'll be able to see pretty easily how these principles will apply in your context.

You may have heard people talking about the **STAR** method of responding to job interview questions. STAR stands for **Situation, Task, Action, Result**. I want to suggest a slight variation to this that lots of people I've worked with have found useful.

I've added two letters to the end of the STAR method, making the STAR(ce) Method. Think of Tony Stark from the Ironman stories. Yes, I know Tony Stark spells his name differently, but this is just to help you remember! In addition to your answer referring to the **Situation, Task, Action, and Result**, we're also going to add **Conclusions** and **Evidence**. The strength of the STAR approach to interview questions is that it uses actual examples to demonstrate your abilities. Even if the interviewer asks hypothetical questions like, "What would you do if you had to break bad news to a colleague?" it's still a really great idea to refer to a specific example in your answer. This allows you to demonstrate that you've got real-world experience in the very kind of scenarios they think are important enough to ask about in the interview.

Here's how the common STAR approach works:

Situation // Describe the situation which was the context for the action or approach you're describing.

Task // Outline the task you were set. This may be a task assigned to you by your manager, or it may be something you concluded needed to happen on your own initiative.

Action // This is where you talk about what you did, the steps you took, changes that you made, etc.

Results // What happened as a result of your efforts or intervention?

To these, let's add:

Conclusion // What conclusions did you arrive at in reflecting on this situation? What lessons did you learn? What would you do differently next time? What did other people say about your work?

Evidence // Show evidence of the Results and Conclusion. Have samples of your work, screenshots of webpages, or copies of documents ready to show the panel. Did a journal or article reference your work? Did your manager email you to say they'd never have thought of your solution themselves? If so, have a copy for the panel to read. Chances are, they won't read it, but they can see that it exists and that you have it, which is a lot better than you simply talking about it and leaving the panel unsure as to whether it really happened.

Let me show what this sounds like when you answer a question:

“Are you someone who initiates projects or are you more comfortable developing what others have started?”

Notice first that the interviewer hasn't asked us to refer to a specific situation, but we're going to anyway, so we can demonstrate that we're an ideal candidate!

Situation “A couple of years after we'd started out church, we'd grown very rapidly. Lots of people had opinions about what should be happening and how decisions should be made. I started to feel that decisions were being made on the basis of anecdotal stories, or the most recent interaction that leaders had had with members of the community, rather than on the basis of what was actually happening in the life of the church. And as it turned out, the leaders didn't really know what was happening across the life of the church. They didn't have a clear sense of the financial situation, how we were going in raising up new leaders, the number of people joining us each Sunday, the proportion of new people who attended each week, where the newcomers were coming from, how many children were in programs, etc.

Task I realised that the leaders needed clear and consistent data to know the current state of those various measures, and to be able to observe the trends in the numbers. If the leaders were going to be making plans for starting new congregations, or increasing staff in children's ministry, they needed accurate information.

Action So, I introduced dashboards for our regular senior leaders meeting. Some of the data was already being recorded, other metrics I only started recording at this point. But each time we met, I made sure we had the most recent data for all these measures, and the historical information for observing the trends.

Result. This meant that leaders felt much more confident to make courageous decisions and to lead boldly, because they weren't just deciding things on gut, nor did they feel pressured by loud voices in the community. When Mrs Smith insisted that her child's group was the

top priority for a paid staff member, leaders were confident to point out that other areas had higher numbers and were growing more rapidly, and so were likely to be a higher priority for resources. It also helped us plan further in advance, since growth trends were obvious, even glaring, and showed that we'd need to multiply congregations soon.

Conclusion This showed me that giving leaders accurate data not only helps them make better decisions, but it's part of the way we care for those who lead, empowering them to do their job. I didn't want to lose the anecdotes and stories that our leaders were hearing, because if that happened, it would probably mean that leaders were losing touch with the wider community, but I came to realise that stories are for sharing with stakeholders, both internal and external, but decisions are made on data. Little Johnny saying youth group is the best 2 hours of his week is a great encouragement to those who support the ministry and give money to make it happen – so make sure those people hear Johnny's story! But a decision about whether to increase staff resourcing of youth ministry needs to be made on the basis of accurate data, not a nice story. Soon other churches around us were rolling out dashboards for their leaders' meetings too, and everyone was in a position to make better decisions.

Evidence Here you can see one of the dashboards I introduced all those years ago. **holds up A4 dashboard with numbers and graphs.* We added more metrics as time went on, and eventually they were produced centrally so that all churches in the network had a standardised dashboard with the same basic information, which we supplemented with additional metrics as we chose."

At nearly four minutes, that's a longish answer. You'd often cover aspects of the STAR(ce) in just a single sentence, but I've gone for more detail here so you can get some idea of what you might say.

So next time you're in an interview, or pitching for collaboration, or asking a patron for support, be entirely honest, and at the same time, do everything you can to demonstrate what a great candidate you are!