

«Psycho» for the job interview

I learn a lot about communication from good films. The film I cite most often in job interview training is «Psycho» by Alfred Hitchcock. What do you think: Which scene do I describe as an example of successful communication? No, it's not the shower scene or the scene in which the private detective falls backwards down the stairs and is murdered with several knife stabs. Instead, it's a scene that probably very few people remember.

Peter Näf

When I asked my client to describe his last job to me, he gave me a rather chaotic account of his day-to-day work. He described a challenging project that he was responsible for. For me to be able to follow the story to some extent, he kept sprinkling in additional information about the environment and his role. Overall, by the end of his account, I had gathered the most important information from which I could have reconstructed his professional experience.

Listeners need a clear structure

And so, I did what I should never do as an interviewer: I worked. I tried to build up a picture from the pieces of the puzzle he described - without success. This is a common mistake made by applicants in job interviews: They tell their stories in an unstructured way and give too little context.

At this point, I always describe the implied scene from «Psycho» - it is the beginning of the film. We see the skyline of a city. A banner informs us: «Phoenix Arizona, Friday, 11 December, 2.45 pm». Then the camera slowly moves towards a group of tower blocks and focuses on a

building; it is presumably a hotel. The camera approaches a particular window, slips through the open gap and we see a woman in her underwear lying on the bed; a man in a tank top is standing next to her. There is a sandwich wrapped in paper on the bedside table.

Good communication is discreet

The camera shot, which lasts just under a minute, reveals the whole context to us: a discreet little shepherd's tale in the hour hotel during the lunch break. We then eavesdrop on the couple and can follow them without any problems, as we have been given all the information we need.

I suggest this zooming in from a distance to my clients when describing their professional experiences. It allows them to take me into their world. First, they describe the company to me, then the business unit or department and finally the function. This gives me the context I need to understand the subsequent description of their activities, provided they use again a meaningful structure.

Applicants often neglect the context because it is not the important thing. But the important things only become understandable in context.

And what else does the scene from «Psycho» convey to us? It's like having dinner in a restaurant or listening to a concert: if everything runs smoothly, we also don't consciously perceive good communication.

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