

Keep your mouth shut. For at least two seconds!

Text Annabelle (name changed) surprised me during a job interview training session: she structured her answers so clearly that I could almost see her line of reasoning take shape in front of me – like an argumentation tree in which each point logically built on the previous one. I let myself be guided through her account with ease. And it took a while before I became aware of how she managed to do all this.

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A lack of structure is a persistent shortcoming among candidates in job interviews. When arguments do not build cleanly on one another or are not presented in a logical or chronological order, I, as the interviewer, am forced to piece the puzzle together myself – and in doing so, I end up doing the candidate's work.

The reasons for this communicative jumble are manifold. One key factor is inadequate preparation – even though targeted communication lives precisely from preparation, as I described in my article “The three most important success factors in a job interview are ...”.

Let your brain take the lead

Anyone who has ever given a presentation or written a paper on a complex topic knows this: a clear structure makes understanding considerably easier – even if developing it is often laborious.

In addition, many candidates answer questions far too quickly. Our brain may be fast, but not as fast as our mouth when we let it run before we have thought things through properly. The brain is then constantly busy clearing up the mess caused by our uncontrolled communication organ (see the article: “How to talk your head off in a job interview”).

Instead, I recommend a small trick: after the question has been asked, pause briefly before answering. This puts the brain in the lead; the mouth follows and communicates what thinking has produced. In short: think first, then speak.

That is exactly how Annabelle proceeded. But this alone did not yet explain her extraordinarily structured communication. So, what, then, was the decisive factor?

Questions are more important than answers

After about an hour, her secret became clear to me. We had an engaging collaboration and laughed a lot. And the more relaxed and confident she became in the conversation, the more she did explicitly what she had probably been doing implicitly before: she repeated my questions. When I asked, “What is important to you in a work environment?”, she slowly repeated: “What is important to me in a work environment?” Her eyes moved as if she were searching for the answer internally.

She took her time and then responded vividly, drawing on concrete experiences. This paraphrasing served two purposes at once: it gave her brain time to take the lead. More importantly, however, it activated her thinking by explicitly questioning it and allowing it the time to find the answer.

The secret to success therefore lies in deploying our energy correctly: when we consciously ask ourselves the right questions, the appropriate answers tend to follow almost by themselves.

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