

Manage Tension in Interviews

by John Hadley

Tension management is a critical element in any influential meeting—job interviews, meetings about a potential promotion or new assignment, career discussions, consultant meetings with potential clients, sales meetings with prospects, etc. Although for this article we will look at how it can play out in the first—the job interview—you should think about how you might then apply the principles I will lay out here to any of those other situations you may encounter.

Candidates tend to come into an interview with a single-minded agenda, “getting the offer.” In the process of working hard to achieve that goal, they often completely miss the subtle changes in tension that can make or break their success in the interview.

The other extreme is the candidate who has virtually no agenda, who simply follows the interviewer’s lead on everything and hopes this will ultimately lead to an offer. While this might seem like following the interviewer’s tension (something I will talk about shortly), it also abdicates any responsibility for the outcome of the interview. This is a recipe for disaster, especially if leadership potential is at all part of the hiring decision.

Let’s look at three levels of tension you (as the candidate) want to manage in the interview.

1. Your own personal tension. Few situations are as tense as a job interview. This is where the rubber hits the road—a make-or-break situation for landing the job that will end what may have been a protracted search.

You need to harness that tension, both reducing it to a manageable level and converting it from high stress to empowerment, confidence and engagement.

With lots of preparation, including several hours of serious role play to hone your interview skills, you should be able to reach the required level of confidence in your abilities. Additional role play on specific areas with which you are uncomfortable, or that haven’t gone well in past interviews, is also valuable.



Visualization exercises immediately prior to a specific interview can help you reach a state of calm that can carry you through the initial stress of walking into unfamiliar territory.

One caveat—don’t over-prepare. If you carefully craft and memorize the “best” answers to interview questions, they cease to even be “good” answers, because they become rehearsed and artificial rather than conversational. Focus more on technique and psychology than the exact words you might use.

In fact, if you find yourself getting a bit cocky about your ability to land this particular opportunity, you might want to think about ways you can raise the bar for yourself—how you could actually raise your own tension level a bit to get you re-engaged and re-energized.

2. Relationship tension. You want to minimize this as quickly as you can. You want me (as the interviewer) to see you as someone I want to be working with every day, someone I will enjoy having on my team, and in whom I have confidence and can always rely on to be watching out for my best interests.



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The little things you do at the start of the interview to build rapport and create a connection are vital—even just walking in smiling and giving a firm handshake. (I'm still shocked at how many people fail even this simple test!)

You need to reduce the relationship tension quickly so that the interviewer can focus on the bigger question of whether you are the person he/she wants to hire. As long as this tension is high, it will be a serious distraction for both of you, and you won't be fully engaged in the critical conversation you need to have.

3. The interviewer's tension. Most candidates fail to recognize this, or to respond properly to it if they do.

A core principle of tension management is that people pay attention to their tension. You want this working in your favor.

You might think at this point that the best approach is to try to reduce the interviewer's tension. Absolutely not!

There are actually two dimensions to interviewer tension that you are trying to manage. You *do* want the interviewer's tension about *whether you can do this job* to be as low as possible, but you want tension relating to the decision to hire you to stay high enough that they want to act right away!

So how do you manage this latter "hiring" tension?

Follow the interviewer's tension (and observe it). When you see the interviewer getting excited about the conversation and showing a lot of passion, you are headed in the right direction. When you sense he/she is backing off and showing less interest, you've made a wrong turn and need to find ways to get back to ripper areas.

To uncover (and accentuate) this positive tension, explore challenges. That is where you are most likely to uncover what is really important to the interviewer and the drivers that will lead to a hiring decision. For more on this, see the two articles here:

<http://www.JHACareers.com/ArticlesChallenges.htm>

Here's a concrete example to illustrate what I'm talking about.

Suppose at some stage in the interview you are asked how you would solve a key problem faced by the company. This may also take the form of asking you to come in prepared to present a marketing plan or to make a presentation on your solutions to that problem.

WHAT DO YOU DO?

Most would tend to do exactly what was requested, and would try to provide as detailed a plan or solution as possible to demonstrate that you can solve their problem. This is a big mistake.

By providing me a detailed road map to solve the problem, you reduce both my tension about your ability to do the job AND my hiring tension. The problem I presented no longer seems so insurmountable, because you have just given me the road map to its solution. Now I can see ways to solve it that don't have to include you.

Instead, you want to show me that a solution exists, that you HAVE or CAN EASILY DEVELOP a road map without actually giving me the critical details that would let me feel I can follow it without you. Navigating the challenge that way will reduce my tension about your ability to do the job while INCREASING my hiring tension. I need to 'buy' you to get the actual solution!

For more on this, see this article on "Interview or Free Consulting" at <http://www.JHACareers.com/FreeConsulting.htm>

So, for your next interview, or meeting with a potential client, I want you to **ask yourself this question: "Am I properly managing the interviewer's tension?"**

If not, and you need support through coaching and role play to master this, maybe we should talk ... just fill out my Career Search Assessment survey, and we'll set up a time to chat:

<http://tinyurl.com/CareerSearch2010> ●