

Answering Competency- Based Questions

Career Skills

Team FME

www.free-management-ebooks.com

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	2
Visit Our Website.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Competency-Based Questions.....	7
STAR Method.....	10
SOARA Method.....	16
Summary.....	22
Other Free Resources.....	23
References.....	24

Preface

This eBook explains how to answer competency-based interview questions. These are behavioral questions, in which the interviewer will ask you to describe a situation that demonstrates your abilities that will be integral to the role you're applying for.

You will learn:

- How to recognize competency-based questions and how to relate them to an organization's competency framework.
- How to use the STAR method, which describes: the Situation, the Task required as a result, the Action taken, and the Result of that action.
- How to use the SOARA method, which describes: Situation, Objective, Action, Results, and Aftermath.
- How to pre-plan answers that ensure you give the best possible example of a particular behavior.
- How to formulate a narrative that works well as an answer to a competency-based question.

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Introduction

Your success in an interview relies on your ability to understand what you have been asked and then to ensure your answer demonstrates you have the right level of the 3C's—Capability, Commitment, and Compatibility—to perform the role effectively.



Your answers need to demonstrate that you have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate for the role, including things like motivation, self-confidence, and ethics. Finally, the way that you describe these qualities should match the language that the organization itself uses.

It is impossible to say exactly what questions you will be asked in an interview but it is possible to predict the areas that the questions will cover based on the job description. However, there is one type of question that is very common in management interviews—these are known as competency-based questions.

Competency-based questions are behavioral questions, in which the interviewer will ask you to describe a situation which demonstrates your abilities that will be integral to the role you're applying for.

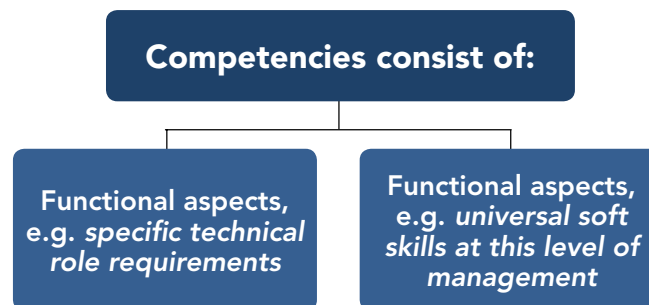
Giving the 'best' answer to a competency-based question is something that requires a structured approach and takes both time and effort ahead of the interview. To understand why this is the case you first need to appreciate what competencies are and why organizations see them as important predictors of job performance.

A competency is:

A set of defined behaviors that provide a structured guide enabling the identification, evaluation, and development of the behaviors in individual employees.

There are two parts to a competency:

- Functional aspects—the technical components specific to each individual role.
- Behavioral aspects—the soft skills demonstrated by someone who is successfully performing the role and operating at a certain level within an organization.



The competencies associated with a role are concerned with how someone delivers and attains their goals rather than what these goals are. This is the purpose behind competency-based questions, and they usually form the bulk of questions you will be asked in a management-level interview.

All organizations have their own competency framework that reflects the competencies and associated behaviors that are required at each level of management. Whilst these are specific to individual organizations there is usually a great deal of commonality between them.

Our free [Management Competency Framework](#) template defines twelve competencies and associated management behaviors. This is the framework that is used in our worked examples.

ANSWERING COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS



It is essential that you understand the behaviors that constitute each of the above competencies. Without this level of knowledge your answers will not reflect your ability to behave at the required level. You also need to know the core competencies that reflect the organization's culture as well as those specific to the role.

In addition, matching the words you use in your answers to those used in the ad, job descriptions, and specification is one of the keys to giving a good answer to these questions. This is illustrated in the worked examples later in this eBook.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Your answers to interview questions should demonstrate that you have the capability and commitment to do the job and that you will fit in to the organization.
- ✓ Your answers also need to demonstrate that you have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate for the role.
- ✓ Competency-based questions are behavioral questions, in which the interviewer will ask you to describe a situation which demonstrates your abilities that will be integral to the role you're applying for.
- ✓ Organizations use a competency framework that reflects the competencies and associated behaviors that are required at each level of management.

Competency-Based Questions

You will be able to recognize competency-based questions by the way they are phrased. For example:

Tell me about a time when...

Describe a situation where you had to ...

Give me an example of how you ...

For example, a candidate may be asked the following question:

Tell us about an occasion where you have shown leadership.

Their response to this primary question will determine which secondary questions they are asked. These secondary questions usually ask for more detail in the area that the interviewer finds the most 'interesting.' For example:

Interviewer: Tell us about an occasion where you have shown leadership.

Candidate: I was captain of the university basketball team and my responsibilities included organizing the weekly training sessions. This was actually the toughest part of being team captain: once the game actually started everyone was sufficiently self-motivated to give their best performance, but persuading people to turn out to the weekly training sessions, so that we could win, was the most difficult part.

Interviewer: Go on...

Candidate: I found that the best way to motivate players to train was to agree with the coach which particular skill each individual player needed to work on most—we would discuss this after each game. I'd then approach the players individually and 'sell' the training session based on that. I found that when players believed that the training session was going to address their own needs, rather than being just general training, they were much more motivated to show up.

Interviewer: Interesting. can you give me an example of how you would 'sell' a training session? What type of thing would you say to a player?

As you can see from the example, the interviewer has used a subsequent question to elicit more information about a particular aspect of the 'leadership' competency that was demonstrated in the first answer.

This illustrates the fact that answers to these type of questions need to be based on real experiences because it is impossible to 'make up' convincing answers on the spot. When people are talking about things that have actually happened and things they have done, their delivery tends to be relaxed with few hesitations. An experienced interviewer can tell when a candidate is lying or exaggerating because their body language will reflect this and there will be unnatural pauses in their answers while they think about what to say next.

The diagram shows three approaches you can adopt when answering competency-based interview questions.



1) Answer Spontaneously

This is a risky strategy and is not suited to competency-based interviews (CBI's). In CBI's each question is targeted to assess a particular competency. In your reply you need to give a specific example that illustrates this competency. Under pressure and without prior planning most people just use the first example they can think of, which as they continue with their explanation they realize it is not the best or most appropriate one. By the time they recognize this they are too committed to change and this has two effects:

- It undermines their own self-confidence.
- It results in a low score for that competency.

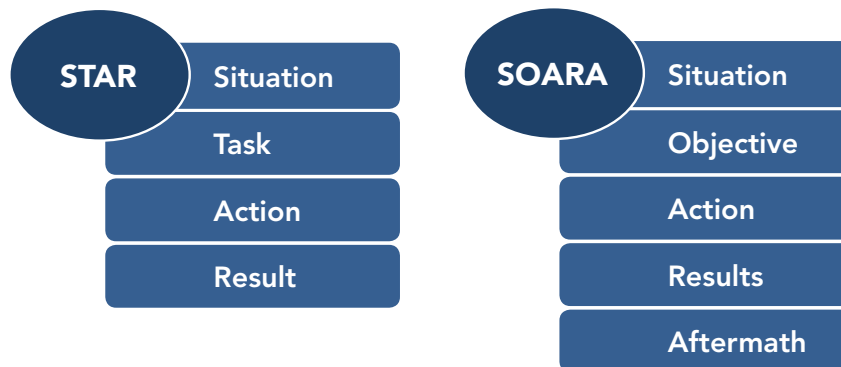
2) Use Model Answers

This sounds tempting and there are plenty of publications offering you 'Brilliant Answers to 1001 Interview Questions' or something along those lines. The problem with this

approach is that it simply does not work for competency-based questions, which rely on you providing specific examples that are supported by your personal history. Remember, everything you say must be supported by your resume or portfolio, which is obviously not going to be the case with a model answer.

3) Use the STAR or SOARA method

These techniques have been designed to help you identify the most convincing and evidenced example you have to demonstrate a specific competency. Using either of these methods, your answers will be meaningful, evidenced-based, and unique, allowing you to communicate your capabilities clearly and easily to any interviewer.



These methods are independent of each other and which one you use is a matter of personal choice. The STAR method is the simpler of the two and is recommended for recent graduates or people who don't have a lot of management experience.

Both of these methods require significant time and effort to implement but the good news is that you don't need to repeat all of the stages before each interview. When you have done it once you only need to spend a limited amount of time to keep the information up to date in preparation for each subsequent interview.

The following sections provide a worked example of how each method is used. The first uses the STAR method to show how Ricardo, a recent university graduate with no management experience, can plan his answers to competency-based questions by drawing on his university, sporting, and part-time job experiences.

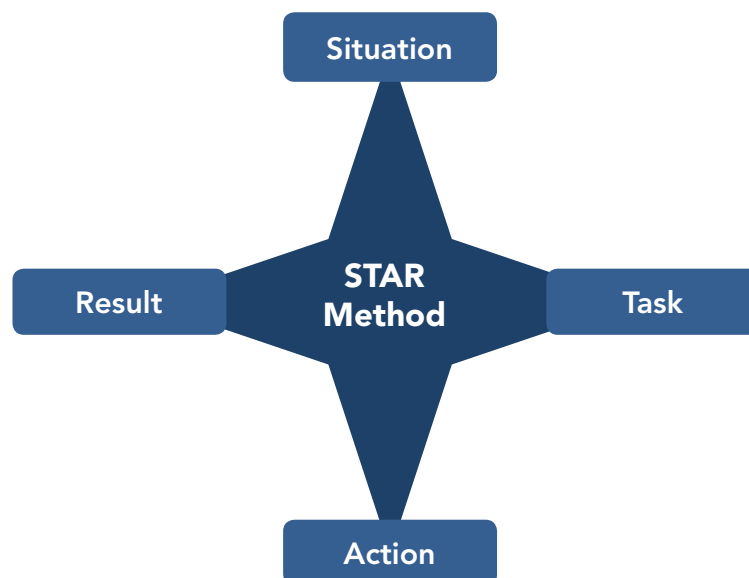
The SOARA method is illustrated using the example of Helena, a project consultant with twelve years' experience, who has far more relevant work experience to draw on.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Competency-based questions begin with something like 'Tell me about a time when...,' or 'Describe a situation where you had to ...'
- ✓ Your answer must be supported by your resume and work experience, so using 'off-the-shelf' answers is not an option.
- ✓ You can use either the STAR or SOARA method to pre-plan answers to competency-based questions, ensuring that you give the best possible example a particular behavior.

STAR Method

The STAR method is a simple four-stage process that is ideal for those just starting out in a career or those who are switching careers. STAR enables an individual to quickly identify situations or events that allow them to demonstrate the required competencies.



ANSWERING COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS

STAR is technique that you can use once you have identified the key competencies of the role. The letters stand for:

1. *Situation*—select a recent situation or challenge that will demonstrate the asked-for competency.
2. *Task*—describe what it is you had to achieve.
3. *Action*—give a concise and structured description of what you did, your reasons for these actions, and what alternatives you considered and rejected.
4. *Results*—what did you achieve and was it the desired outcome? Would you alter your actions if faced with the situation again and, if so, why?

In this example, Ricardo, a university graduate with no full-time work experience, needs to prepare for a graduate management assessment.

The first part of his preparation involves creating a 'situational mind map.' Because he does not have appropriate work experience he will need to use the competencies he has gained whilst at university, in part-time and charity work, field trips, and as a member of sports and social clubs.



ANSWERING COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS

Each item represents something he has been involved with over the last three years. (Prior experiences are inappropriate because they will not show the right level of each competency for a management graduate.)

- Ecuador trip—climbing Antizana peak with a group of climbers he'd never met before. He needed to assess the other members and form a team. Competencies include communication, planning & organizing, resource management, coaching, and decision-making.
- University—his role as course representative and treasurer of the debating society shows leadership and stakeholder management plus customer-focused competencies. Additional competencies such as change agent and strategic thinking are illustrated by his dissertation research and viva.
- Part-time jobs—his roles in McDonald's and Hextel Telesales required him to adapt to hierarchical and highly structured environments. Competencies included being customer focused, communicating with co-workers, and being self-motivated.
- Sports—each of these activities and his track record show his ability to work comfortably as a member of a team or on his own. Representing the following competencies: continual improvement, interpersonal communications, leadership, decision-making, mentoring, and coaching.
- Briar Rose Dementia Home—volunteer work and fundraising at the home for two years. Competencies shown are interpersonal communications, customer focused, organization, continual improvement, and personal development.

Having identified each item that contributes to one or more competencies in the free template [management competency framework](#), he is now ready to produce a mind map for each of the twelve management competencies, demonstrating their associated behaviors.

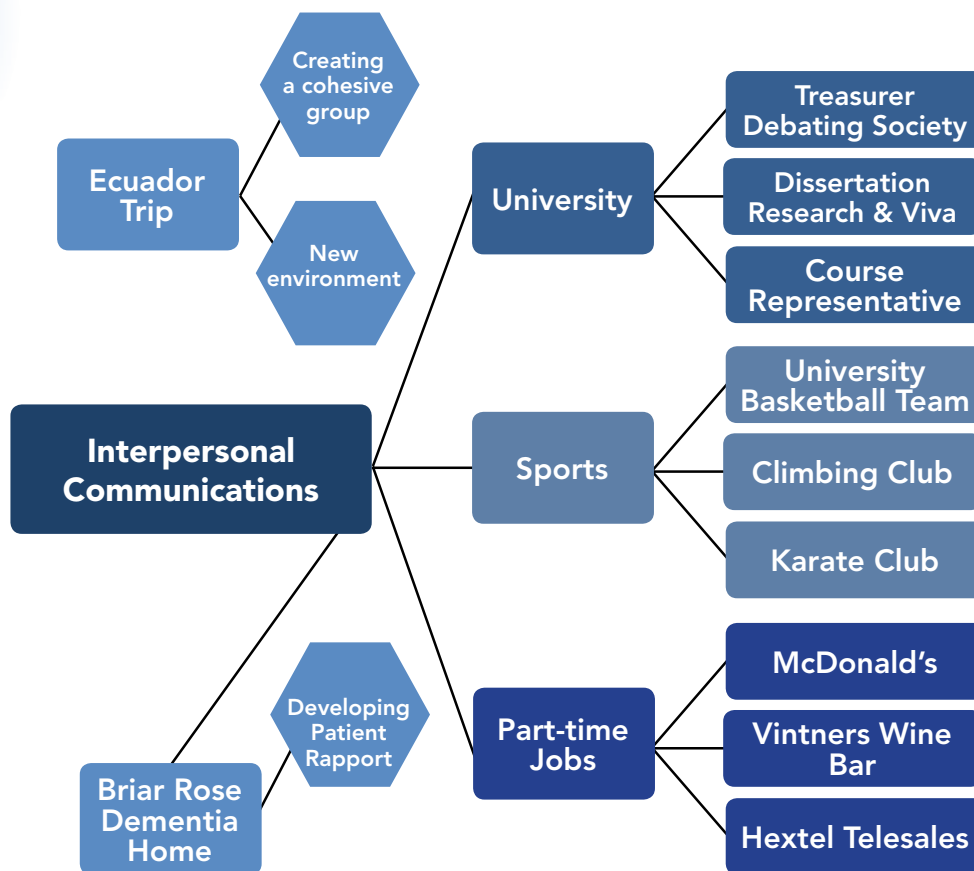
From the documents he has been sent and his own research he has discovered that 'interpersonal communications' is an essential competency for the role. It is defined as:

Builds and maintains good working relationships throughout the organization and externally.

Develops a sound understanding of others and their needs to ensure a good working relationship.

A detailed description of how to determine the key competencies of a role is provided in our free eBook [‘Interview Preparation’](#).

The diagram below shows you how Ricardo has created a situational mind map for the competency ‘interpersonal communications.’ For each box he has an event or situation that enables him to demonstrate the appropriate level of this competency.



Then from the competency framework template and the listed behaviors for this competency he is able to write potential questions he will face in a CBI as part of his graduate assessment. The table below shows how to translate the behavior statements into a CBI question.

ANSWERING COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS

Interpersonal Communications Competency	
Behaviors	Likely CBI Questions
Respects and acknowledges other people's and organization's values and ethos.	Describe a situation where you needed to respect and acknowledge other people's or an organization's values and ethos?
Puts forward recommendations and makes decisions based on agreement and commitment from the other parties.	Tell me about a situation where you needed to put forward recommendations and make decisions based on agreement and commitment from the other parties.
Is a careful listener to others' standpoints and concerns and on understanding this communication will respond accordingly.	Describe a time when your ability to listen has played a key part in building rapport with others.
Is a persuasive and clear communicator.	Can you tell me about a time when you had to persuade others to achieve a goal?
Has an understanding of the reasoning of other people's actions and decisions.	Describe a situation where your understanding of another's viewpoint was essential to making a decision.
Welcomes others' feedback on issues and their own performance in a constructive way.	Tell me how you respond to feedback from colleagues and management.
Treats all those in the organization with respect and acknowledges all their contributions.	Give me an example of how you treat others & the contributions they make.
Encourages free expression of ideas, feelings, and opinions.	How do you encourage others to express their ideas and insights?
Welcomes with enthusiasm the challenge of overcoming obstacles.	Describe an event where you overcame a significant obstacle & how you accomplished this.
Continually encourages self and others to overachieve and exceed targets.	Tell me how you motivate yourself and those around you.

Having identified potential questions Ricardo now uses the STAR method to help him construct his answers.

Looking at the first question—'Describe a situation where you needed to respect and acknowledge other people's or an organization's values and ethos'—Ricardo looks at his mind map to find the situation that illustrates this competency and its required level to construct his answer. He selects McDonald's because it is a commercial organization

that has a hierarchical and prescriptive culture representing a strong contrast to his usual environment.

Describe a situation where you needed to respect and acknowledge other people's or an organization's values and ethos.	
McDonald's	
Situation	Needed to find work that fitted into lecture & coursework schedule and paid enough to cover my needs. McDonald's fitted the bill.
Task	Become an effective member of the team and fit into the hierarchical & prescriptive culture.
Action	I had to alter my normal behavior, which was generally to take control of a situation and lead those around me. I adapted the skills I had learnt from climbing where you needed to follow certain procedures to ensure your own & others' safety. Also how to control my own emotions from karate competitions to succeed.
Results	Once the procedures were familiar I was able to become a highly productive and adaptable member of the team, quickly earning my stars. I understood why McDonald's operated in that way and the commercial sense of it, as their track record shows. Any suggestion that I made reflected this culture and operational perspective.

This answer demonstrates Ricardo is mature enough to assess his working environment and to adapt his communications accordingly. As you can see, the STAR method provides a structured way of identifying the best scenario to base your answer on. You can then go on to formulate a narrative that works well as an answer to a competency-based question.

This process is time consuming and needs a lot of thought; it is not something that should be done the night before an important interview. Ideally, you should work through it over a period of a few days, tackling one competency at a time and revising previous items as better examples occur to you.

The good news is that you don't usually need to make frequent changes to this information, although you may need to update it following a significant event such as completing a project or taking on a new responsibility.

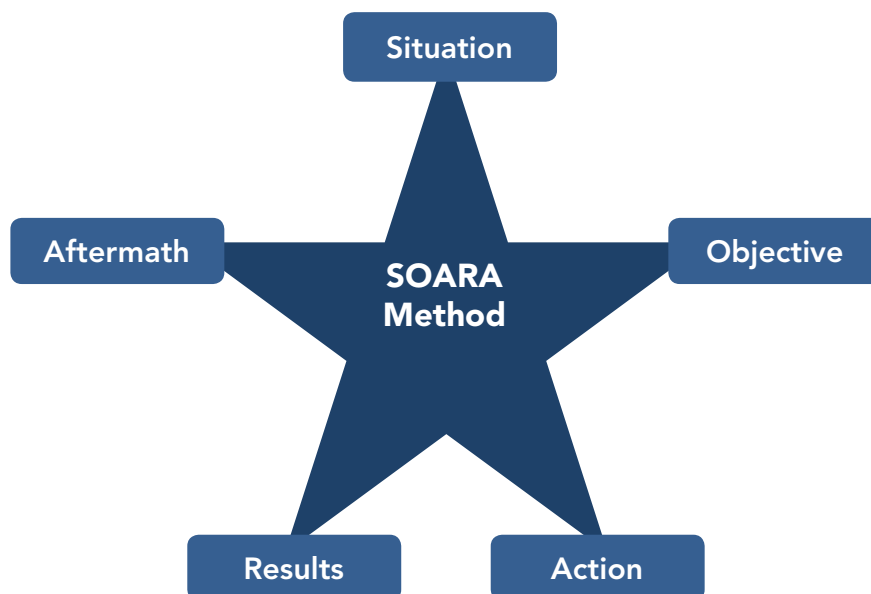
In addition, most of the competencies you will be asked questions about will be the same or similar provided that you are applying for the same type of job in the same industry.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ STAR technique, describes: the Situation, the Task required as a result, the Action taken, and the Result of that action.
- ✓ Create an initial mind map to represent things that you have been involved with over the last three years.
- ✓ Then create situational mind maps for each competency you think you will be asked about.
- ✓ Use a table to write down possible questions based on each behavior that makes up the competency.
- ✓ Work through all of competencies and decide which scenario from your personal history illustrates them best.
- ✓ This will help you to formulate a narrative that works well as an answer to a competency-based question.

SOARA Method

This method is slightly more involved than the STAR method and some people may prefer using it, particularly if they have a lot of management experience from which to draw examples.



The SOARA method:

- First identify a Situation that enables you to illustrate how you behaved in that recent event, giving particular emphasis to describing the required competency the question is aimed at assessing.
- Second, state the Objective you wanted to attain by the conclusion of this situation or event.
- Then describe what Action you took to achieve your objective. Your actions and behaviors must reflect those of someone who is performing the role. This is most easily shown in your reasoning for doing what you did and how you assessed alternatives.
- You must make sure you clearly state the Results of your decisions and actions as well as whether you attained your objective or not.
- It is essential that you conclude your answer with a summary of what you learnt from this situation and how this has influenced you since. This is referred to as the Aftermath.

In this example we show you how Helena, a project consultant with twelve years' experience, including five years in a management role, prepares for a management assessment for the senior position.

From the documents she has been sent and her own research she has discovered that 'strategic thinking' is an essential competency. There are four behavioral aspects to this competency:

Aware of and understands the organization's strategic objectives.

Regularly reviews the 'market place' from a strategic viewpoint and its potential impact on the organization.

Analyzes the strategic stance of competitors.

Educates and leads others in their appreciation and understanding of how they contribute to the organization's objectives.

Using this definition and the list of behaviors from the management competency framework, Helena is able to create the following table. The left column lists each behavior for this competency and in the right column she writes a potential CBI question.

ANSWERING COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS

Some of the questions created may seem a bit contrived and therefore unlikely to be asked in the interview. This is something that can only be judged on a case-by-case basis after reading the job ad, specification, and description for a particular role. It is also true that some competencies are more likely to be assessed using a management exercise or by direct observation, rather than by an interview question.

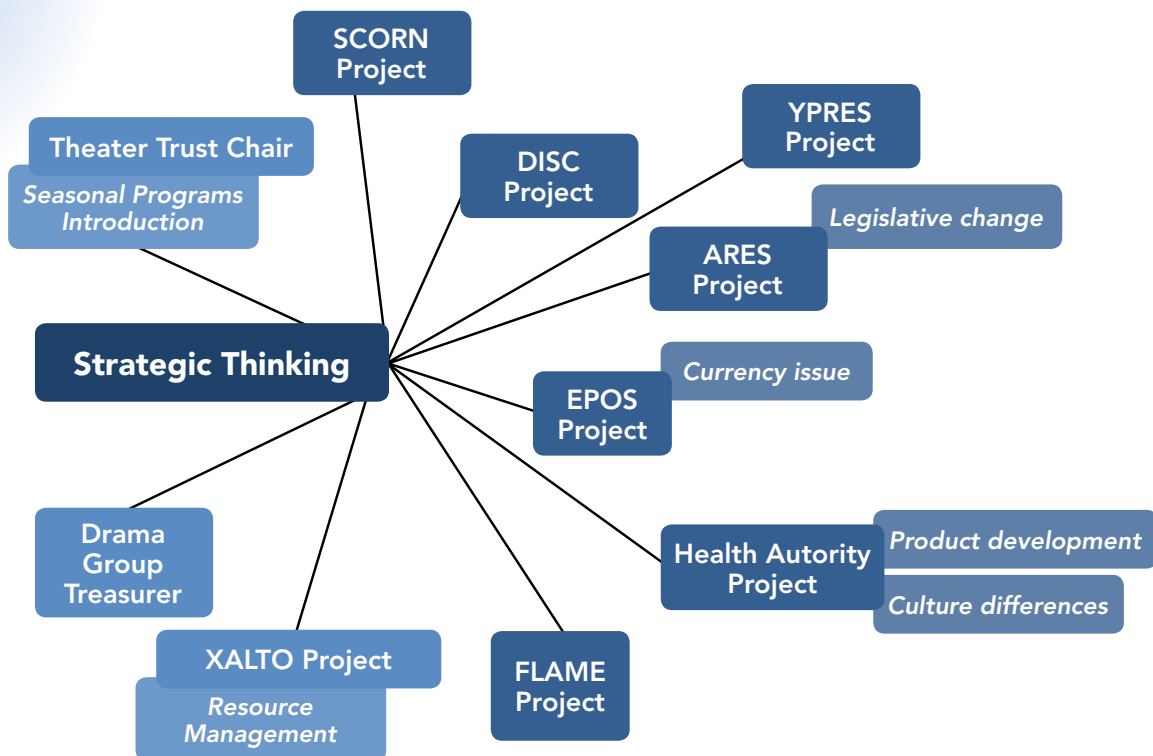
Strategic Thinking Competency	
Behaviors	Likely CBI Questions
Contributes to the strategic objectives of the organization, and division/department.	Tell me a time that you have made a strategic contribution to objectives.
Researches new opportunities that could contribute to the organization's strategic objectives.	Give me an example of when you identified a new strategic contribution.
Approaches short-term operational issues with a long-term perspective.	How do you bring a strategic perspective into your activities?
Regularly feeds back to the board/management any issues or competitor intelligence that may impact the organization's strategic objectives.	Can you tell me about a time your competitor intelligence had a strategic impact?
Concentrates on identifying and resolving any operational aspects that may impact the strategic objectives.	Describe a situation where you have altered an operational procedure for strategic reasons.
Ensures that individuals' and team objectives clearly reflect the organization's strategic objectives.	Tell me how you incorporate strategic objectives into your teams.
Manages the allocation of the division/department resources in a strategic manner.	Describe how you incorporate strategic priorities into your resource management.
Proactively addresses divisional or departmental issues before they impact on the organization's strategic objectives.	Tell me about a time you addressed a project issue before it had strategic implications.

To make it easier to identify the best events and challenges Helena has quickly created a 'situation mind map' from her work experiences and personal achievements. This visual representation of her resume will be copied and completed for each competency required in the role. In this example it is for 'strategic thinking.'

ANSWERING COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS

All CBI questions are looking for recent examples of how you met a challenge or events that illustrate a desired competency, so early work experiences are excluded because their level of any competencies has been superseded.

For Helena this means that she focuses on the projects she has managed over the last five years and non-work activities that could be used to illustrate the management level of a competency.



This mind map shows the five projects that enable her to illustrate strategic thinking. The table below shows how she uses SOARA to prepare an answer to the selected question.

Give me an example of when you identified a new strategic contribution.	
ARES Project—legislative changes	
Situation	Whilst working on a project new legislation came into effect that needed to be incorporated into the ARES project.
Objective	Keep project on schedule & budget.
Action	Liaised with regulator to assess new requirements created by legislation & their impact on project plan & organization. Adjusted project plan—scope & budget. Explained new requirements to stakeholders & gained their support for revised project plan.
Results	Gained agreement & support from ALL stakeholders. Additional costs & resources agreed to because of user benefits & training incorporated in user acceptance. ARES client was able to meet legal requirements on time and without suffering any penalties.
Aftermath	Taking time to understand implications of new legislation enabled me to persuade & sell necessary adjustments to the project plan & deliver project on time & to adjusted budget.

Normally the situation Helena faced in the ARES project would have caused considerable problems at both an operational level with the project team and strategic level with stakeholders. By taking time to understand the differences brought about by the new legislation and their strategic implications for the organization she was able to gain the support and approval of the stakeholders for the necessary amendments to the project plan.

In answering this question she could also cite how it helped her to use knowledge of the market and environment that an organization operated in to gain cultural acceptance of changes to working practices in the Health Authority and the currency issue in the EPOS project.

The next example shows how Helena used a non-work experience to answer another CBI question for this competency. She was able to transform the production decision-making process from an operational one (a responsibility of the production team) to a strategic one regularly discussed by the Trust's Steering Committee (TSC) of which she was Chair.

Describe a situation where you have altered an operational procedure for strategic reasons. Theater Trust—introduce seasonal program	
Situation	The theater's visitors had been steadily declining over several years along with its revenue.
Objective	Reverse this trend to ensure the theater's financial security.
Action	Find out who developed the annual program within the theater. Research the programs of other theaters. Discover how financial viability was calculated for each production. Present findings to Trust's Steering Committee (TSC) & gain acceptance for a more strategic approach to program decisions.
Results	Program development became a key responsibility of the TSC rather than just a production team decision. Financial details became a key factor in deciding which productions to run. This led to the program format reflecting the desires of the market, which was for seasonal programs to be offered instead of an annual one.
Aftermath	Program decisions moved from operational considerations to strategic decisions by the TSC & became regular features of TSC meetings. The financial implications of productions were incorporated into decision making.

This answer illustrates that through knowledge gained from research she was able to persuade the TSC of the strategic importance of production planning and ensure that market desires and financial viability of productions formed a key part of such decisions.

This process is similar to the STAR method explained earlier in that it is time consuming and takes a lot of work. This is best done over a period of a few days, tackling one competency at a time and revising previous items as better examples occur to you.

Because most of the competencies you will be asked questions about will be similar, provided that you are applying for the same type of job you don't usually need to make frequent changes to this information, although you may need to update it following a significant event.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ The SOARA method is slightly more involved than the STAR method.
 - ✓ SOARA stands for: Situation, Objective, Action, Results, and Aftermath.
 - ✓ The process is similar to that of the STAR method explained earlier in that it is time consuming and takes a lot of work.
 - ✓ Both methods provide you with the best examples of competency-specific behaviors that you can use in all of your interviews.
-

Summary

If you are going to succeed in a competency-based interview then your answers must:

- Be specific in their description and detail
- Be concise and highlight your achievements clearly
- Show your actions were structured
- Convey the maximum achievement in the minimum time
- Give a strong and positive impression at the end of your answer
- Show what you learnt from the situation.

Your answers need to convey that you use a variety of competencies to achieve your objectives and draw attention to the key aspects of your resume in relation to the role. You also need to avoid using the same examples again and again.

The mind maps and other documents that you create using the STAR and SOARA methods enable you to do all of these things. This can really help with self-confidence, which is a big factor in interview success, provided that you are being realistic about the role you are applying for.

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