

# Interviewer Traps

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Managers of volunteer resources are human and can fall into common traps during the interview process. The following describes the most prevalent traps.

## **Halo Effect**

As managers of volunteer resources know, current volunteers often bring in their friends to volunteer. Sometimes a prospective volunteer may have something in common with the interviewer. The caution here is not to become trapped in the "halo effect." This effect means putting talents, expectations, and skills of the prospective volunteer based on who they know or what they have in common with you. It is transferring information that is not based on fact to the interviewee. A good interviewer will be sure to interview each person based on their own unique talents, expectations, and skills.

Another aspect of the halo effect is noting a favorable or unfavorable trait, habit, or word to influence the entire interview. Remember you are looking beyond those traits that may be caused by nerves on the part of the prospective volunteer and discover what skills, talents, and motivation the individual can bring to the organization.

## **Stereotyping**

If we are honest, we all stereotype. Interviewers cannot allow their own individual prejudices or filters to impact the interview they are conducting. One way of limiting this all too human error is to be sure the interview is thoroughly planned and based upon identical criteria and questions. (This aspect of interviewing will be discussed later.) The hard part is ensuring that the human factor is not removed during the interview. It is vital to listen to each individual.

Stereotyping impacts many aspects of the interviewing process. Physical appearance is one that relates back to the 30-second first impression. The tendency to judge an individual based on their physical appearance (clothes, hair, clean fingernails, tattoos, piercing, etc.) is virtually universal. This also falls into the area of pre-judging an individual before they have an opportunity to answer any questions. Being aware that this may happen without the interviewer even realizing it, is key to striving toward a good interview based on what the prospective volunteer has to offer. This aspect of stereotyping does not mean anything goes. If the appearance of the volunteer is one that would frighten clients or otherwise inhibit the volunteer's effectiveness, appearance can be discussed in terms of dress codes and expectations. This can be part of the interview process if the agency or organization has a written dress code policy. For example, tattooing, body piercing, pastel colored hair, etc.

As stated earlier, first impressions are formed in less than 30 seconds. Often when people are being interviewed, they are very nervous and anxious. Consequently, they may not present a good first

impression. As the interview progresses, most people will relax and be more at ease with the interview. This is the reason interviewers sometimes fall into a trap of negative information, especially during the first 30 seconds. The key to avoiding this trap is to not allow those first 30 seconds to cloud the entire interview. Listening throughout the interview and then developing a conclusion is a key skill of an effective interviewer. A good tip to prevent this is to ask several very easy questions to start. For example, verify a phone number or address.

## Language

Another common interviewing trap involves language on the part of the interviewer and the interviewee. For example, how someone speaks, phrases their sentences, or the words they use are often a pitfall for the interviewer. If the interviewer uses their internal criteria or yardstick to evaluate if someone speaks well, they can miss the opportunity of having a good volunteer or pick the wrong volunteer because they are verbally affluent. Also, if the interviewer does not ask good questions or uses too much "agency jargon", then the outcomes of the answers may not be satisfactory. A good tip here is to have the prospective volunteer talk about direct experience versus what they would do in a hypothetical situation.

## Time

Interviews that are hastily put together or squeezed in between other activities are often found lacking. Taking time to ensure that you have a thorough knowledge of all the opportunities that are available and the skills needed to be a volunteer is paramount. Listening more and talking less may take more time but it will ensure a better fit between the organization and the prospective volunteer. Making a decision too early in the interview because time is short can mean more time in the long run because a good match was not made. Not taking the time to follow up on the match of volunteer and tasks will never allow the opportunity to discover where the interview went right or wrong.

A successful interviewer takes the time to conduct the interview to decrease the chances of falling into one of the many traps that await them. This is a serious undertaking and cannot be taken lightly.

Excerpted from *A Conversation with A Purpose*, by Kathleen McCleskey and Cheryle N. Yallen.

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