Behavioral Interview Question Bank

Past-behavior interview questions by competency, each with what to listen for and the probes that get past a vague first answer.

A question about the past asks for evidence. A question about a hypothetical asks for imagination, and imagination is cheap, especially now that candidates can rehearse with an AI coach. Every question here asks what someone actually did.

Pick two or three questions per competency on your scorecard. Ask the same ones of every candidate. Ten well-chosen questions beat thirty improvised ones.

How to use a question

Each entry has three parts: the question, what a strong answer contains, and the probes that get you there when an answer stays vague. Most first answers are vague. The probes are where the evidence is.

If a candidate describes what "we" did, ask what they personally did. The gap between the two is often the whole interview.

Accountability

Tell me about a commitment you missed. What happened?

Listen for: a specific commitment, their own part in missing it, what they told the people affected and when, what changed afterward.

Probes: Who found out first, and how? What did you say to them? What would you do differently now?

Weak answers blame circumstances entirely, or produce a missed deadline that turns out to be someone else's fault.

Describe something you owned end to end that nobody was checking on.

Listen for: how they kept themselves on track without supervision, and what they did when it slipped.

Probes: How did you know you were on track? What did you do when you weren't?

Tell me about a project where the goal was unclear when you started. What did you do in the first week?

Listen for: specific moves to reduce the ambiguity, such as who they talked to, what they wrote down and what they decided to try, rather than waiting for clarity to arrive.

Probes: Who did you go to first? What did you do when you still weren't sure? What did you decide without permission?

Describe a time you had to make a decision without the information you wanted.

Listen for: how they judged what was enough, and whether they revisited the decision as more became known.

Probes: What information were you missing? How did you decide not to wait?

Collaboration and influence

Tell me about a time you needed something from a team that didn't report to you.

Listen for: understanding of the other team's priorities, a concrete approach, and what they did when the first approach failed.

Probes: What mattered to them? What did you try when that didn't work? How is that relationship now?

Describe a disagreement with a colleague about how to do something.

Listen for: the substance of the disagreement, genuine engagement with the other view, and how it resolved.

Probes: What was their argument? What did you do when you couldn't agree? Would they describe it the same way?

Watch for answers where the candidate was simply right and the other person came around. Real disagreements are messier.

Precision and follow-through

Tell me about a time you found an error after work had been signed off.

Listen for: whether they raised it, how quickly, and what they changed so it wouldn't recur.

Probes: Who did you tell? What was the cost of raising it? What did you put in place afterward?

What's the most repetitive work you've been responsible for, and how did you keep the quality up?

Listen for: an honest answer about the boredom and a real mechanism: a check, a system, a rhythm.

Learning and adaptability

Tell me about something you were wrong about at work.

Listen for: a real belief they held, what changed their mind, and what they did differently. Deflections like "I underestimated how long it would take" are not answers.

Probes: What made you change your mind? What did you do about it?

Describe the last time you had to learn something difficult quickly.

Listen for: method, not aptitude. How they went about it, where they got stuck, how they knew they'd got it.

Pace and prioritization

Tell me about a week when you had more to do than was possible.

Listen for: an actual decision about what not to do, and who they told.

Probes: What did you drop? Who did you tell? What happened to the thing you dropped?

Be wary of "I just worked longer hours." That describes effort, not prioritization.

Leading others

Tell me about someone you managed who wasn't performing.

Listen for: how early they addressed it, what they said, and how it resolved either way.

Probes: How long between noticing and saying something? What exactly did you say? Where is that person now?

Describe a decision you made that your team disagreed with.

Listen for: how they handled the disagreement and whether they changed their mind when they should have.

Creating clarity and accountability

The section above asks whether someone keeps their own commitments. This one asks something harder: whether they can make ownership clear between other people. Most teams don't fail from laziness. They fail because three people each assumed one of the others had it.

Tell me about a piece of work that stalled because nobody was sure who owned it.

Listen for: what they did to make ownership explicit, and whether it held. Watch for the candidate who simply absorbed the work themselves. That clears the task and leaves the ambiguity exactly where it was.

Behavioral Interview Guide Easy to view and share.

Probes: Who did you talk to? What did you actually say, or write down? Did the same confusion come back later?

Describe a time someone delivered something quite different from what you expected.

Listen for: whether they look at their own part in the gap, and what mechanism they changed afterward. "They should have asked" is an answer that tells you a lot.

Probes: Looking back, where did the two of you diverge? What do you do differently at the start now?

Working alone

Tell me about the longest stretch you've worked with very little contact with your team.

Listen for: an honest account of what it cost them and what they set up to stay effective. "I loved it" and "I found it hard" are both fine. What matters is whether they noticed and adjusted.

Probes: What did you miss? How did you know what everyone else was doing? What would you set up differently next time?

Describe a decision you made on your own that you'd normally have talked through with someone.

Listen for: judgment about when working alone is fine and when it quietly becomes a risk.

Probes: Why didn't you check? How did it turn out? Where's your line now?

Hierarchy and speaking up

Tell me about a time you disagreed with a decision your manager had made.

Listen for: whether they raised it, in what setting, and what they did once the decision stood anyway. A candidate who has never disagreed with a manager is telling you something, though not always about themselves.

Probes: What did you say, and where? How did they react? What did you do after the decision was final?

Describe a time you saw something going wrong that wasn't yours to fix.

Listen for: whether they said anything, who they went to, and how they weighed the risk of speaking. The reasoning matters more than the outcome.

Probes: Who did you tell? What made you hesitate, if you did? What happened to the person who raised it?

When you join a team, how do you work out what you're allowed to question?

Listen for: conscious attention to the unwritten rules, rather than either obliviousness or total deference.

Learning from failure

Tell me about a mistake on your team that got discussed openly. Now tell me about one that didn't.

Listen for: the contrast, and their read on what caused it. The second half of this question is where the real answer usually is.

Probes: Who spoke first? What happened to them afterward? What was different about the one nobody discussed?

What's something your last team learned the hard way and then actually changed?

Listen for: a change in practice, not a document. Many teams run a post-mortem and change nothing.

Probes: What's done differently now? Who drove that? Did it stick?

What's the last thing you got wrong that your team knows about?

Listen for: whether disclosure is normal for them or an ordeal. A candidate who cannot name anything recent is either very lucky, very new, or working somewhere it isn't safe to be wrong.

Reading answers about candour

These four areas are harder to score than the rest, because the answers describe two things at once: the candidate and the place they worked.

A candidate who has never challenged a manager, never seen a mistake discussed openly, and cannot name a recent error of their own may be conflict-avoidant. They may also have spent six years somewhere that punished all three. The way to tell is to ask what they expected would happen, and what they saw happen to other people who tried.

Rate what they did with the room they had, not the size of the room. Someone who raised a concern carefully, in private, in an organization where that was genuinely risky, is showing you more than someone who argues freely in a company where arguing costs nothing.

And note which answer you are hoping for. If the role sits in a team where disagreement is rare, a candidate who speaks up readily will either change that or be worn down by it. Both are outcomes worth choosing deliberately rather than discovering.

Questions to avoid

Free to use and share.

- "What's your greatest weakness?" Everyone has a rehearsed answer. No evidence in it.
- "Where do you see yourself in five years?" Tests ambition to please the interviewer, nothing else.
- "What would you do if..." Hypotheticals reward quick thinking, not track record.
- Anything about their personal life, family plans or age. Not relevant, and in most places not lawful.