

10 Tips for Mastering the Executive Interview

by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

You are about to interview for a high-level job and you're wondering what to expect, how to behave. Certain interviewing verities will be at play as with any job: Dress so you look and feel your best, be nice to everyone because you never know who's included in the decision-making; bring information or a portfolio, whatever you might need; ask good questions; write and mail relevant and intelligent thank-you notes afterwards.

But you need more to succeed at an executive job interview:

1. *Pretend it's a board presentation.* This is really all you have to know. If you've presented here, then you know how to dress, how carefully to prepare and rehearse, how sharp your responses have to be, how no-nonsense the business is in that atmosphere.
2. *Look the part.* This goes beyond looking your best. If everyone around you is in a \$5,000 suit, you'd better look like you fit with these peacocks. How you present and carry yourself matters at all times in this rarefied air. It will be part of what they assess about you.
3. *Be prepared.* People at the executive level appreciate data. Organize and know your facts and figures. If you're a woman and you'll be meeting mostly men, bring written materials. Men just have a hard time processing the female voice.
4. *No, really, be prepared.* You have chosen to play the game where the game gets tough. You cannot give a rambling response to a chief executive. Be crisp and clear; say your point first, then give the explanation. You can't waver. Anticipate the questions and your best responses. If you don't know how to do this, you're sunk.
5. *Wipe your mouth.* It matters, at the executive level, that you conduct yourself well socially and have good manners. Know what fork to use, how to wipe your mouth before you sip your water, and how to place the napkin after you've finished the meal they'll surely serve you. They'll watch to see how you comport yourself. That includes your language. Speak well and leave the salty jokes at home.
6. *Be a human being.* Be on your competitive game, but real hearts beat under those business suits. Approach your interviewers as people. Be warm and open, interested in them. Successful executives inspire and motivate followers. Demonstrate you know how.
7. *Tell me a story.* Don't deliver crisp facts in staccato recitation. An interview is both a play and a sales call. Make your listeners want to scoot their chairs closer because you are interesting. Let them see more than the cut-and-dried side of you. You're three-dimensional and persuasive — be it.
8. *Show how you add value.* Know what the company wants and how you add value. Be prepared to talk about the world economy, politics, other industries, and issues that matter to the company.

If you can't learn the company's goals, describe the ones you would set, the benefits of having you as an executive, and the results you can produce.

9. *Assume nothing.* As with the board meeting, leave nothing to chance. Don't assume you're a shoo-in, that you'll figure it out when you get there or that mere charm will carry the day. Study and study and study before you go.

10. *Be yourself.* I had lunch recently with an EVP of Human Resources for a major company. He was recounting how he'd brought a plant employee from Texas to talk to the board about worker participation. As she trembled in the green room before making her presentation, he clapped her on the shoulder and said, "Be yourself." She was, and she dazzled them. You have the ability to play the game at this level. You are intelligent, experienced, savvy, tough-minded, politically adroit, results oriented, facile with people. Be all the things that got you here. Don't try on a new persona. What you are, at this very moment, is more than enough. Be it.

Good luck with your interview!