How to Tell a STAR Story

Masters Career Center

Introduction

The **STAR** (**S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction, **R**esult) story format is widely and successfully used by MBA students to develop convincing responses to **Behavioral Interview Questions**.

Most recruiters emphasize **Behavioral Interview Questions** because they believe that the best predictor of how you will handle a particular situation in the future is how you handled it in the past.

William Larimer Mellon, Founder

Sample Behavioral Questions

"Tell me about a time when you were given an assignment with an impossible deadline."

"Tell me about an example of your leadership or project management experience."

"Describe a time in which you were able to use your analytical skills to solve a business problem."

"Have you ever had to work with a difficult colleague?" *

"Do you have any experience with solving a complex problem for a client?" *

*(Hint: the recruiter is not expecting a Yes/No answer to questions like these. This is an invitation for you to sell yourself by telling a story. If your prior role was not client facing, consider drawing an analogy that compares an internal constituency that you served to an outside client, and then explain how you met that constituency's needs by solving their problem(s)).

Correct Form of Response to Behavioral Interview Questions

- Use the **STAR** story format
  - **S**—Situation (20%)
  - **T**—task (10%)
  - **A**—Action (60%)
  - **R**—Result (10%)
- Be brief (typically around 2 minutes….not more than 3 minutes)
- Focus on YOUR actions (but remember that companies that emphasize teamwork, may want you to touch on some team-related points, as well in answering some behavioral questions)
- Clearly identify the results

STAR Components

Situation

- Set the stage for the story
- Provide relevant background
- Ideally 2-3 sentences

Task

- Your mission
- Bridge between story and interviewer question

Action (not necessarily all of these)

- Steps YOU* took. For example:
  - Establishing Team Responsibilities + Project Timeline
  - Collecting Data + Analytics
  - Drawing Conclusions
  - Communicating
  - Gaining Buy-in
  - Implementing Solutions

* Again, focus on your actions but use your judgment with respect to identifying the subset of companies and questions that are also seeking insight into your ability to work in teams.

Result

- What you accomplished
- How it relates to the interviewer's question
- Is your result quantifiable?
- Re-emphasize your skillset. Why? Because, like it or not, you are required to sell yourself at every point in an interview.

Work on Your Stories

- Develop 6-10 **written** STAR stories (and practice delivering them in 2-3 minutes) on topics including:

  - Problem Solving
  - Leadership
  - Teamwork
  - Technical Project/Challenge
  - Difficult Situation
  - Project Management

- Depending on your experience, your personal style of communication and the components of each story, you may want to write/tell specific STAR stories in either a:

  - **Highly Structured** format, which labels each part of the story by its respective STAR component (e.g. "The Situation was…" and "First, I analyzed…"); or

  - **Conversational** style, which follows the same pattern, but does not rigidly label and/or number each component part of the story.

  - An example of each version of STAR story is presented on the following page

Examples of Good STAR stories

	Describe a time when you had to use your analytical skills to solve a complex problem:	Describe a time you had to use your leadership skills unexpectedly:
Situation 10%	The situation began when my company's new COO suspected that our inventory system was inefficient, so she put me in charge of proposing a new system.	During my first year with the company, I was given the project manager role for a critical client account after the long-term project manager suddenly became ill.
Task 20%	My task was to thoroughly assess the company's current processes as well as its existing and prospective needs, currently available solutions and finally to gain buy-in on a solution across multiple business units. So I basically had to apply my analytical skills across a range of variables to complete this complex task.	My first priority was to win the confidence of both my team and the client by creating a roadmap that we could all follow to the successful completion of the project. Once agreed, I needed to make sure that everyone followed the specified steps required to meet the client's objectives.
Action 60%	First, I looked at the situation to identify the issues and options, such as: What are the company needs? What are the key features that are missing/needed? Are the processes and needs similar across business units and geographies? What is the budget? What are current industry best practices and what are the currently available solutions (or do we have to develop something from scratch)? Which options are flexible?	I began by calling a team meeting to develop a list of project deliverables along with a time and responsibility schedule. I identified, reviewed and assigned each task to a responsible team member to ensure accountability. These steps gained broad team buy-in and ensured that we had the right people and resources needed/allocated to meet each milestone
	Second, I organized and analysed the issues and related data; drafted our required specifications, met with vendors; and then drew up detailed comparisons and preliminary conclusions. Specifically, I compared data points of key features, licensing agreements, costs, fit with existing company technology, procedures, etc.	Next, I reviewed my proposed plan of action with my manager. Following his approval, I met with the client to make sure that were addressing all of his concerns. I returned to my team where we made some final adjustments based on client feedback.
	Third, I knew my recommendation would affect a lot of people so I presented my analysis to key stakeholders in order to incorporate their feedback into my proposed solution. I solicited input from Ops team leaders throughout the company as well as from the Finance team, and IT Working with this team of key stakeholders made the difference between delivering a good result and a great one, because I was able to use their advice to adjust and finalize my conclusions, including detailed system requirements and my proposed solution .	All of this took place within one week of my taking the lead on the project. We quickly launched the execution of the project and moved forward. Throughout the 3 month execution phase, I held weakly meetings with team members to keep everyone focused and motivated and to further adjust resources if needed. These meetings were complemented by bi-weekly client meetings to assure his ongoing satisfaction.
	Fourth, I gained buy-in among the key functional business unit leaders and then made the final recommendation to the COO who later approved my entire plan.	In the end, the project was delivered on time and the client was completely satisfied.
Result 10%	As a result of applying my analytical skills to this complex task, I was able to identify existing system shortcomings and to resolve them by recommending a comprehensive solution capable of being delivered quickly and 20% below budget.	So, because of my leadership skills, I was able to step into a challenging situation and lead my team to a final result that met the high standards of both my company and our key client.

HIGHLY STRUCTURED

CONVERSATIONAL

Example of BAD STAR Story
(with adjacent better version)

	Describe a time when you had to use your leadership skills unexpectedly:	Describe a time you had to use your leadership skills unexpectedly:
Situation 10%	About a year ago I got the opportunity to lead a project after my manager became ill. I was not technically a "manager" yet, so this was a pretty big deal that I took very seriously.	During my first year with the company, I was given the project manager role for a critical client account after the long-term project manager suddenly became ill.
Task 20%	I had to quickly take charge in order to make sure that everyone pulled their weight on the project. Meeting this deadline was important because the guy we had to deal with on the client side had a reputation for being difficult to work with.	My first priority was to win the confidence of both my team and the client by creating a roadmap that we could all follow to the successful completion of the project. Once agreed, I needed to make sure that everyone followed the specified steps required to meet the client's objectives.

Action 60%	First, I looked at the situation and decided to split the work evenly among the team members. This was difficult because some of the team members were technically pretty weak and like, I would have to stay on top of them to make sure that they met their deliverables.	I began by calling a team meeting to develop a list of project deliverables along with a time and responsibility schedule.
		    I identified, reviewed and assigned each task to a responsible team member to ensure accountability
		    These steps gained broad team buy-in and ensured that we had the right people and resources needed/allocated to meet each milestone

	Then, I tried to get approval from my manager and the client. It took a while to explain the situation to my manager because he was not very technical, but he had confidence in my abilities and eventually got on board. Unfortunately, the client had additional requests. I was not able to convince the client that his changes would delay project completion, so I had to return to my office and give everyone on the project their revised work orders.	Next, I reviewed my proposed plan of action with my manager. Following his approval, I met with the client to make sure that were addressing all of his concerns. I returned to my team where we made some final adjustments based on client feedback.
	Third, despite the client's continued requests and changes, I was successfully moving things forward. I personally worked late nights and weekends to pick up the slack of some of my less motivated team members. Through these exceptional efforts, I actually met the deadline after 3 months of hard work.	All of this took place within one week of my taking the lead on the project. We quickly launched the execution of the project and moved forward. Throughout the 3 month execution phase, I held weakly meetings with team members to keep everyone focused and motivated and to further adjust resources if needed. These meetings were complemented by bi-weekly client meetings to assure his ongoing satisfaction.
.	.	In the end, the project was delivered on time and the client was completely satisfied.
Result 10%	So because of my leadership skills, this important project was completed. **BAD**	So, because of my leadership skills, I was able to step into a challenging situation and lead my team to a final result that drove revenues 10% higher and met the high standards of both my company and our key client. **BETTER**

Example of Bad STAR Story
(with adjacent list of flaws)

	Describe a time when you had to use your leadership skills unexpectedly:	⮕ SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS SECTION?
Situation 10%	About a year ago I got the opportunity to lead a project after my manager became ill. I was not technically a "manager" yet, so this was a pretty big deal that I took very seriously.	1) Informal/bad grammar ("got"). 2) 2) Focus on your roles and accomplishments, NOT your title.
Task 20%	I had to quickly take charge in order to make sure that everyone pulled their weight on the project. Meeting this deadline was important because the guy we had to deal with on the client side had a reputation for being difficult to work with.	1) Be careful about criticizing a client. This is not a "tell me about a difficult client" question. Describing the client as being "demanding" and/or "having high expectations" would be more constructive without raising red flags regarding how you work with and view others.
Action 60%	First, I looked at the situation and decided to split the work evenly among the team members. This was difficult because some of the team members were technically pretty weak and like, I would have to stay on top of them to make sure that they met their deliverables.	1) This description of splitting the work does not recognize/address relative strengths among your team members and shows immaturity as a leader. 2) Describing colleagues as "pretty weak" is pretty lame. More nuanced language (e.g. "some of my team members were less experienced") is more constructive and also affirms your relative seniority in this specific situation. 3) Informal/bad grammar ("like") 4) Additional detail (more specific steps taken) would enhance the story.
	Then, I tried to get approval from my manager and the client. It took a while to explain the situation to my manager because he was not very technical, but he had confidence in my abilities and eventually got on board. Unfortunately, the client had additional requests. I was not able to convince the client that his changes would delay project completion, so I had to return to my office and give everyone on the project their revised work orders.	1) If you must use the structured approach to STAR stories, stick with it (don't jump from "First" to "Third"). 2) Be careful about how you describe your manager (potential red flag) 3) The overall tone of this section (and the next) suggests that you have an aversion to challenges. Re-word to make it clear that, in the end, you are up for (and excited to tackle) any challenge.
	Third, despite the client's continued requests and changes, I was successfully moving things forward. I personally worked late nights and weekends to pick up the slack of some of my less motivated team members. Through these exceptional efforts, I actually met the deadline after 3 months of hard work.	1) "I, I, I (or me, me, me)" What does this really say about your leadership (and/or teamwork) skills? 2) You criticized your client and teammates earlier in this story, definitely do not do it again. Criticism is occasionally acceptable (to provide context for certain stories), but you rarely need to repeat it.
Result 10%	So because of my leadership skills, this important project was completed.	1) That's it?????? Was the client satisfied? Was your manager happy? Did you get a glowing review or promotion? Can you quantify results? 2) Your concluding remarks should specifically reference the target behavior (leadership).

STAR Story Template

Template	STAR questions often start with: Describe a time ...; Give me an example of a time...; Can you think of an example of ...
Situation 10%	
Task 20%	
Action 60%	
Result 10%	