

Winning That Job – How to Prepare for an Interview That Sets You Apart

An interview with Tim Crowden, Executive Coach and Founder of Coaching and Leadership

You've submitted your application, been shortlisted and received an invitation to interview.

Congratulations. You've already demonstrated that you have the qualifications, experience and potential to be considered for the role.

But now comes the next challenge – convincing the employer that you're the right person for the position.

For many people, interviews can be uncomfortable. Even highly experienced executives can find themselves struggling to communicate their achievements, becoming overly focused on answering questions correctly or leaving the room wishing they'd said something differently.

Yet a successful interview isn't about memorising answers or delivering a polished performance.

It's about helping the employer understand who you are, how you think, what you've achieved and the contribution you could make.

We spoke with Tim Crowden, executive coach, former senior public servant and founder of Coaching and Leadership, about what makes an effective interview, how to prepare with confidence and why the best interviews are often conversations rather than interrogations.

Tim, what's the most important thing people should understand about job interviews?

I think we need to stop treating interviews as examinations.

They're not simply tests of knowledge, memory or eloquence. And they're certainly not about providing formulaic answers to a series of questions.

An interview is an opportunity for the employer to develop a better understanding of you – your values, capabilities, achievements, judgement, leadership approach and potential.

It's also an opportunity for you to learn more about the role, the organisation and the people you might be working with.

I often remind clients that employers are looking for much more than someone who can perform the duties of a vacant position.

They want someone who can deliver good outcomes, respond to future challenges, contribute positively to the team and demonstrate leadership potential.

And leadership isn't confined to management positions.

Whether you're applying for an entry-level role, a team leader position or a senior executive appointment, employers want people who can exercise sound judgement, work effectively with others and take responsibility for their contribution.

A successful interview isn't about giving the perfect answer. It's about helping the employer understand the value you could bring to their organisation.

How do you help people prepare?

I encourage clients to think about an interview in three parts.

The beginning – how you prepare, arrive and establish yourself.

The middle – how you listen, understand questions and communicate your experience and capabilities.

The end – how you conclude the conversation, ask thoughtful questions and leave a positive final impression.

All three matter.

But interestingly, when I'm coaching someone for an interview, we often start with the middle.

That's where we explore the questions they might encounter, what employers are really trying to understand and how to communicate their experience effectively.

Once people become clearer about what they want to say, their confidence in the entire interview process usually improves.

Part One – Understanding the Questions and Telling Your Leadership Story

Can people really prepare for questions when they don't know what they'll be asked?

Absolutely, although I don't encourage people to memorise answers to dozens of possible questions. In fact, I think that is the least successful way to prepare.

Instead, I help them recognise that many interview questions fall into a relatively small number of themes or clusters.

The wording may change, but the underlying purpose is often similar.

Understanding that purpose makes it easier to respond authentically rather than trying to recall a prepared script.

For example, I often encourage clients to prepare for six broad areas.

1. Motivation and organisational fit

Why do you want this job? Why this organisation? What interests you about its purpose and direction?

These questions help the employer understand your motivation, values and whether you've thought seriously about the opportunity.

2. Strengths and development

What are your strengths? What do you find challenging? What feedback have you received? How have you developed professionally?

These questions explore self-awareness, honesty and your willingness to learn.

3. Leadership and management

How do you lead people? How do you build effective teams? How do you respond to conflict, underperformance or competing priorities?

These questions explore how you work with others and the impact of your leadership.

4. Strategic thinking and future challenges

What are the major challenges facing the organisation or sector? How might those challenges evolve? What opportunities do you see?

These questions assess your understanding of the broader environment and your ability to think beyond immediate operational responsibilities.

5. Priorities and contribution

If you were successful, what would you focus on in your first three to six months?

This helps the employer understand how you approach a new role, establish priorities, build relationships and translate your thinking into action.

6. Experience, achievements and learning

Tell us about a time when you led change, managed a difficult situation, influenced a decision or delivered an important outcome.

These questions allow you to demonstrate your capabilities through real examples.

The key is not to predict every question.

It's to understand what the employer is trying to learn about you and prepare the evidence that will help them make that assessment.

You've spoken and written about developing a professional and leadership story. How does that apply to interviews?

It's fundamental.

I regularly collaborate with people who understand the recruitment process, know the relevant leadership frameworks and have considerable professional experience.

In the Australian Public Service, for example, applicants may be familiar with the APS Values and the Integrated Leadership System.

But understanding those frameworks and being able to demonstrate your leadership capabilities authentically are two different things.

The challenge is bringing together your experience, achievements, strengths, leadership approach and aspirations into a coherent story.

And that story needs to reflect the level of the position you're seeking.

For more senior roles, employers increasingly want to understand not only what you've achieved, but how you think.

How do you make sense of complexity? How do you respond when there isn't an obvious answer? How do you balance competing priorities? How do you engage with different perspectives?

And importantly, how have your experiences changed the way you lead?

These are often the qualities that distinguish someone who is highly competent in their current role from someone who is ready for greater responsibility.

A strong leadership story demonstrates not just what you've done, but who you've become through those experiences.

What's your advice for answering interview questions effectively?

One of the simplest techniques I teach is to **answer the question first, then provide the supporting detail.**

It sounds obvious, but it's surprising how often people do the opposite.

They begin with background information, explain the circumstances, describe a series of events and eventually arrive at their answer.

By that stage, the selection panel may have lost the thread.

I sometimes use the analogy of a bridge and a valley.

You want to help the panel walk across the bridge with you – following a clear, logical path from the question to your answer and supporting evidence.

You don't want to take them down into a valley of unnecessary detail, where everyone becomes lost in the explanation.

For example, if you're asked to identify the three major challenges facing an organisation, begin by identifying and stating those challenges.

Then explain each one, drawing on your knowledge and experience.

If you're asked about your leadership strengths, identify them clearly before providing examples that demonstrate them.

This approach makes it easier for the panel to follow your thinking and assess your capabilities.

It also helps you manage your time.

And importantly, it creates a more natural conversation.

What about behavioural questions and the STAR method?

Frameworks such as STAR – Situation, Task, Action and Result – can be useful.

They help people structure examples and avoid overlooking important information.

But they should be a guide, not a script.

I've seen people become so focused on following a particular formula that their answers lose clarity, relevance and authenticity.

The panel doesn't need a lengthy explanation of every detail surrounding a situation.

They need to understand the challenge, your contribution, the decisions you made and the outcomes achieved.

I often encourage clients to think about four elements:

Context – Action – Outcome – Impact

What was the challenge? What did you do? What was achieved? And what difference did it make?

For leadership positions, I'd add another dimension – what did you learn, and how did that experience influence your subsequent leadership?

That final reflection can be particularly revealing.

It demonstrates your ability to learn from experience, adapt your approach and continue developing as a leader.

Why do you place so much emphasis on outcomes and impact?

Because there's a significant difference between delivering an activity and achieving something meaningful.

For example, imagine someone describing their leadership of a major hospital construction project.

They might say the hospital was completed on time and within budget.

That's certainly important.

But what if they could also explain that the project improved access to healthcare, reduced patient travel times, increased operating efficiency or enabled additional resources to be directed towards clinical services?

Suddenly, the example becomes much more compelling.

The panel can see the connection between the person's work and the broader purpose of the organisation.

The same principle applies to almost every profession.

If you've led a team, what improved?

If you've introduced a new process, what difference did it make to the citizens or community that is ultimately impacted by your work ?

If you've managed a difficult stakeholder relationship, what changed and to what overall benefit?

If you've delivered a program, what outcomes did it achieve?

Not every achievement can be quantified, but every strong example should help the employer understand why your contribution mattered.

And what if someone is asked about a weakness or a difficult professional experience?

I'd encourage them to be authentic.

Employers aren't necessarily expecting candidates to be perfect.

In fact, someone who claims to have no weaknesses or development needs may raise more concerns than someone who demonstrates genuine self-awareness.

The important thing is to show that you understand your strengths, recognise areas for development and take responsibility for your professional growth.

The same applies when discussing setbacks or difficult experiences.

What did you learn? What would you do differently? How has that experience changed your approach?

I think this is particularly important for leaders.

As we progress through our careers, we encounter increasingly complex situations where there may be competing interests, uncertainty and no perfect solution.

The ability to reflect on those experiences, recognise different perspectives and adapt our thinking is an important leadership capability.

Self-awareness isn't about having all the answers. It's about understanding yourself well enough to keep learning and improving.

Part Two – Preparing to Arrive with Confidence

Let's turn to the beginning of the interview. How important are those first few minutes?

They're important, but I think people sometimes place too much pressure on making a perfect first impression.

The objective isn't to perform a particular version of yourself.

It's to arrive prepared, composed and ready to engage in a meaningful conversation.

And that preparation begins well before you walk into the room or join an online meeting.

I encourage clients to think about both their practical preparation and their state of mind.

On the practical side, make sure you know where you're going, how long it will take to get there and what the interview arrangements are.

If it's online, check your technology, camera, microphone, lighting and internet connection.

Have your application, the position description and a few concise notes available.

And allow yourself enough time that you're not rushing into the interview.

These are simple things, but they can make a significant difference.

What about managing nerves?

First, I'd remind people that being nervous is entirely normal.

An interview matters to you, so some nervousness is understandable.

Rather than trying to eliminate it completely, focus on managing it.

I generally encourage people to create some space before the interview.

Avoid spending the final few minutes responding to emails, taking work calls or trying to memorise another ten answers.

Go for a short walk, do some gentle exercise or find somewhere quiet to collect your thoughts.

Slow, comfortable breathing can help settle your attention.

Some people also find it useful to adopt an open, comfortable posture and remind themselves of previous professional achievements.

The important thing is to use whatever helps you feel grounded and focused, rather than relying on a particular pose or ritual to create confidence.

And remember, you've already been shortlisted.

The employer has seen enough in your application to want to learn more about you.

You're not walking into the interview to prove that you deserve to be there. You've already earned the opportunity to have the conversation.

How should someone approach the first question?

Listen carefully.

It sounds simple, but nerves can cause people to start preparing their answer before the interviewer has finished asking the question.

Take a moment to understand what's being asked.

If something isn't clear, it's perfectly reasonable to seek clarification.

And don't feel compelled to fill every silence.

A brief pause to organise your thoughts can demonstrate composure and good judgement.

I also encourage people to remember that communication is more than the words they use.

Make appropriate eye contact, engage with the people in the room, listen actively and be conscious of the pace of your responses.

In an online interview, look towards the camera when speaking, minimise distractions and allow for the slight delays that can occur in virtual conversations.

Above all, be yourself.

The employer is trying to understand what it would be like to work with you.

Part Three – Finishing the Interview Strongly

You've said the end of an interview is often overlooked. Why?

Because many people assume the interview is effectively over once the panel has finished asking its formal questions.

But the final few minutes can be extremely valuable.

The employer will often ask whether you have anything you'd like to add or any questions for the panel.

And I encourage people to see that as an opportunity, rather than simply a signal that it's time to leave.

It may be your chance to clarify something, reinforce an important capability or learn more about the position.

Remember, the interview is a two-way process.

The employer is deciding whether you're right for the role.

But you should also be considering whether the role, the organisation and its expectations are right for you.

What if you feel you've given a poor answer to an earlier question?

If there's an appropriate opportunity at the end, you can ask to revisit it.

For example, you might say:

"On reflection, I don't think I fully addressed one of your earlier questions. Would you mind if I briefly added something to my response?"

That can be a remarkably effective approach.

It demonstrates self-awareness, reflection and a willingness to improve your contribution.

Of course, you need to be mindful of time and the panel's assessment process.

But if you've genuinely overlooked an important point, it's often better to ask than to leave the interview regretting that you didn't.

Sometimes, by the end of the conversation, you've developed a clearer understanding of the panel's interests, the organisation's priorities and the role itself.

That additional context can help you provide a more relevant and considered response.

What questions should candidates ask the panel?

I encourage people to prepare one or two thoughtful questions that demonstrate genuine interest in the role and the organisation.

For example:

- What would be the most important priorities for the successful candidate in their first three to six months?
- What are the major challenges facing the team over the next year?
- What would success look like in this role after 12 months?
- What leadership qualities or capabilities are particularly important for this position?
- How does the organisation support the development of its people and future leaders?

These questions can provide valuable insights.

They also create an opportunity for a more natural conversation with the panel.

And sometimes, the answer may help you recognise an additional connection between your strengths and the organisation's needs.

For example, if the panel identifies stakeholder engagement as a major priority, you might briefly acknowledge how that aligns with your experience.

But the important thing is to listen genuinely rather than treating every response as another opportunity to sell yourself.

Can a good question at the end really make a difference?

It certainly can.

A thoughtful question can demonstrate curiosity, preparation, strategic awareness and genuine interest.

It can also help the employer visualise you in the position.

But I think the greatest value is that it changes the dynamic of the conversation.

Rather than simply answering questions about your past, you're discussing the organisation's future and the contribution you might make.

That's a vastly different conversation.

And for senior leadership positions, it's particularly relevant.

Employers want people who can ask good questions, understand complex issues and engage constructively with others.

Sometimes the quality of a person's questions reveals as much about their thinking as the answers they've provided.

Should candidates finish with a closing statement?

A brief closing comment can be valuable, provided it feels natural and appropriate.

You don't need a rehearsed speech.

Something as simple as thanking the panel, acknowledging what you've learned about the role and reinforcing your interest can be effective.

For example:

"Thank you for the conversation. I've appreciated learning more about the priorities for the role, particularly the focus on organisational change and team development. Those are areas where I believe my experience would enable me to make a strong contribution, and our discussion has reinforced my interest in the opportunity."

It's clear, professional and connects your capabilities with the employer's needs.

Then thank the panel and conclude the conversation confidently.

Bringing It All Together

How does interview preparation connect with your *Winning That Job* workshops?

Winning That Job is built around the idea that successful recruitment involves much more than preparing a good CV or memorising interview responses.

It's about understanding what employers are looking for, recognising your strengths and achievements, developing a compelling professional and leadership story, and communicating that story effectively throughout the recruitment process.

We partner with people who are seeking promotion, changing careers, moving between sectors or preparing for more senior leadership responsibilities.

Some participants understand recruitment processes very well but struggle to position their experience and capabilities persuasively.

Others have strong professional achievements but need help identifying the examples that best demonstrate their readiness for the next role.

Our approach is practical and highly individualised.

We work with participants on their own career aspirations, experiences and potential opportunities.

That can include reviewing written applications, developing interview examples, exploring leadership capabilities, preparing referees and undertaking realistic interview practice.

We regularly deliver *Winning That Job* workshops at The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra and online, with programs tailored to the needs of participants.

Individual career and interview coaching is also available.

The objective isn't to teach everyone to give the same answers.

It's to help each person communicate their own experience, judgement, leadership capability and potential with clarity, authenticity and confidence.

Finally, what's your most important advice for someone preparing for a job interview?

Don't spend all your preparation time trying to predict the questions.

Spend time understanding yourself.

Reflect on your achievements, your strengths, your leadership approach and what you've learned throughout your career.

Think about the contribution you've made, the challenges you've navigated and the impact you've had on people and organisations.

Understand the employer, its priorities and what it needs from the successful candidate.

And then practise bringing those two things together.

Because ultimately, the best interviews aren't performances.

They're thoughtful, professional conversations in which both parties develop a clearer understanding of what might be possible.

You don't need to be the person who gives the most polished answers. You need to help the employer understand why you're the right person for the role – and why the role is right for you.

About Tim Crowden

Tim Crowden is an Executive Coach, International Coaching Federation Professional Certified Coach (PCC), and founder of Coaching and Leadership.

Following a 32-year public sector career, including 16 years in the Australian Government Senior Executive Service and senior leadership appointments in Australia and internationally, Tim transitioned into executive coaching and leadership development.

With more than 1,700 hours of documented professional coaching experience, he partners with executives, senior leaders, managers and teams across government, business and other organisations.

Tim established The Coaching and Leadership Hub in Canberra at the beginning of 2025.

Through **Coaching and Leadership**, Tim and his colleagues provide executive coaching, career transition support, leadership development and highly individualised *Winning That Job* workshops. These services help participants understand their professional capabilities, prepare for new opportunities and navigate important career decisions with clarity and confidence.

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