

Both Sides of the Table

13 interview questions, and what a good answer actually looks like

The same thirteen questions, read twice. Once by the person deciding, once by the person being decided about. If you are hiring, the left column tells you what to listen for. If you are interviewing, the right column tells you what a strong answer must contain — and the trap most people fall into.

Why this exists

A hiring manager gave me feedback on a candidate recently and used the wrong name. Twice. He had spent an hour with her.

This is not about attention. He is a capable leader running a stretched function. And rejecting someone after an interview is completely fine — that is what interviews are for.

But an hour is an hour. For that candidate it was the longest, closest look she will ever get at that organisation. She took leave to attend. She will describe those sixty minutes to her peers for years.

Forgettable candidates are usually not a candidate problem. They are a symptom of an undirected interview. With no structure, every conversation drifts somewhere different — nothing is comparable, so nothing is memorable, and six pleasant chats blur into one. Ask everyone the same well-built questions and each person becomes a distinct set of answers instead.

That is the whole idea behind this document. Better questions make better decisions, and they also make the hour worth something to the person who gave it to you.

HOW TO USE IT

If you are hiring

Pick four or five questions, not thirteen. Ask the same ones to every candidate for a role, and ask two follow-ups on each — the follow-ups are where the real answer lives. Most people have a rehearsed first answer and very little behind it. Score within thirty minutes of the interview ending, independently, before the panel discusses.

If you are being interviewed

Do not memorise answers. Learn the shape of a strong one and bring real examples that fit it. Rehearsed answers are obvious within two follow-ups and they cost you more than the gap ever would. Work out your four best stories and know the numbers inside them well enough to go three questions deep.

QUESTIONS, OR WANT THE SCORECARD?

Write to hello@savannah.com. We'll send the editable scorecard that pairs with this framework, and we answer questions about live searches at no charge.

A NOTE ON THE OPPOSITE PAGES

You may notice the two columns are not symmetrical. That is deliberate. Interviewers need to know what to listen for; candidates need to know what to build. Nobody is being handed a script — a scripted candidate is exactly what the left column is designed to detect.

Judgement *Can they think, or only recite?*

01 “Here’s something we’re actually stuck on this quarter. How would you approach it?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Applied thinking, and how someone operates before they have all the facts.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Asks two or three clarifying questions before answering. States assumptions out loud. Offers an approach with a first step, not a finished verdict. Names what would change their mind.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Solves instantly from a generic playbook. Never asks what has already been tried. Presents one option with total certainty.

What it means for the decision. Someone who cannot reason without complete information will escalate every decision back to you.

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- Clarifying questions before any answer
- Your assumptions, said out loud
- A first step — not a finished solution
- What would make you change course

The trap. Rushing to look decisive. You are not being scored on the right answer. They already know the problem is hard — that is why they still have it.

Sounds like: “Before I answer — is the constraint the budget, or that the skill doesn’t exist in-house? Assuming it’s skill, I’d start by...”

02 “Walk me through how you’d spend your first 60 days here.”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Whether they have understood the role, or only the title.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Sequenced — listen, diagnose, then act. Names who they’d meet in week one. Says clearly what they would not do yet.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** A recited 30-60-90 template. Promises visible wins by week two. No mention of learning the context first.

What it means for the decision. Over-promising early impact usually means they will break something and then blame the organisation for it.

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- A sequence: learn, diagnose, act
- The people and functions you’d meet first
- Something you would deliberately not touch yet
- One thing you’d expect to be wrong about

The trap. Promising a visible win in week two. It reads as someone who will act before understanding — which is the most expensive kind of senior hire.

Sounds like: “I wouldn’t change the reporting structure in the first two months, even if it looks wrong to me on day three.”

Ownership *What did they actually do?*

03 “Tell me about something you shipped that you’re proud of. What was your specific part in it?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Real contribution, as distinct from proximity to someone else’s success.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Separates the team outcome from their own contribution cleanly. Names collaborators. Detail holds up three follow-ups deep.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Stays at “we” throughout. Detail thins under the second follow-up. Credit is ambient rather than owned.

What it means for the decision. If specificity evaporates on the second follow-up, quietly discount the claim. Don’t argue about it — just note it.

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- The team’s outcome and your part, kept separate
- Named collaborators — it costs you nothing
- Numbers you can defend two questions deeper
- What you’d do differently if you ran it again

The trap. Living entirely at “we”. It sounds gracious and lands as evasive. The opposite trap is claiming “I” for work six people did.

Sounds like: “The team took defect escape rate from 40% to 92% clean. My part was the escalation model and the vendor renegotiation — Priya owned the tooling.”

04 “Tell me about a decision you got wrong.”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Honesty, capacity to learn, and the size of the ego.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Names the decision, what it cost, what they'd do differently, and what actually changed afterwards.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** A disguised strength (“I cared too much”). Blames constraints or a predecessor. Never states a cost.

What it means for the decision. At fifteen years' experience, an inability to name a real error is a maturity flag — not a clean record.

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- The actual decision, stated plainly
- What it cost — money, time or people
- What you'd do differently now
- What changed in how you work afterwards

The trap. The disguised strength. “I trusted my team too much” is heard as evasion every single time. Interviewers have heard it that week.

Sounds like: “I hired for pedigree over hunger on a key role. It cost two quarters and I had to exit him. I now run a work sample on every senior hire.”

Trade-offs *Can they choose?*

05 “Six weeks. You can ship X or fix Y, not both. Which do you pick?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Prioritisation, and willingness to decide on incomplete information.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Picks one. Names what is being given up and how they'd mitigate it. Asks what the business is optimising for.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** “It depends”, with no follow-through. Attempts to do both. Defers to “whatever leadership decides.”

What it means for the decision. A senior hire who will not choose is a senior hire who pushes every decision upward. Score this one hard.

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- An actual choice
- What you're giving up, named
- How you'd soften the cost of not doing the other
- One question about what the business is optimising for

The trap. “It depends” and then stopping. It is a fine opening — it is a terrible answer. Say what it depends on, then decide anyway.

Sounds like: “I'd ship X, and tell the Y stakeholders exactly when it lands so they can plan. If we're optimising for renewal risk rather than new logos, I'd flip that.”

06 “When did you last push back on your manager or a senior stakeholder? What happened?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Spine — and whether they can disagree without leaving damage behind.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** A specific instance. Represents the other side's case fairly. Includes the outcome, even where they lost.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** No example comes to mind. Or a story in which they were heroically right and everyone else was foolish.

What it means for the decision. No example means either they don't push back, or they don't notice how they do it. Both are worth knowing before you hire.

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- A specific instance, with roles named
- The other side's case, put fairly
- What you actually said
- The outcome — including when you lost

The trap. Only telling stories where you turned out to be right. It reads as someone who cannot be corrected, which is disqualifying at senior levels.

Sounds like: “I lost that one. In hindsight the CFO had context on the funding timeline that I simply didn't have.”

07 “Tell me about someone you managed who wasn't performing. What did you do?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Managerial courage, process discipline, and basic humanity.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Describes the actual first conversation, a timeline, what was documented, and the outcome — including exits handled with dignity.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Straight to PIP or exit with no coaching in between. Or endless patience and no action. Vague about what was actually said.

What it means for the decision. *How a manager treats an underperformer is how your entire team will eventually be treated. This question is not optional.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- What you said in the first conversation
- A timeline, and what you documented
- What you changed on your side
- The outcome — including exits done decently

The trap. Two opposite traps. Jumping straight to PIP reads as cold. Infinite patience reads as avoidance, not kindness — and the rest of the team pays for it.

Sounds like: *“I told him directly in week one what wasn't working, and gave him eight weeks with fortnightly checkpoints. He improved on two of three areas and moved to a role that fit.”*

08 “Who is the best person you've hired — and who did you get wrong?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Talent judgement, and self-awareness about their own hiring.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Both answers are specific. They can articulate exactly what they misread in the second case.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Only the success story arrives. No pattern has been learned from the miss.

What it means for the decision. *A leader who hasn't learned from a bad hire will make the same bad hire inside your team, on your budget.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- Both answers, equally specific
- What you misread the second time
- What you now do differently in interviews
- No blame on the person you got wrong

The trap. Offering only the success. Everyone who has hired more than ten people has got some wrong. Claiming otherwise means you weren't paying attention.

Sounds like: *“I mistook confidence for competence. Now I ask for one thing they've actually built, and I go three questions deep on it.”*

Ambiguity *Recovery beats perfection*

09 “Tell me about a time the goalposts moved mid-project.”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Adaptability, and how they handle ordinary organisational reality.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Describes the re-plan, what they told the team, and what they consciously dropped.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Frames it purely as a leadership failure above them. No account of their own response.

What it means for the decision. *Goalposts will move at your organisation too. This is a preview of that conversation.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- What changed, stated without grievance
- How you re-planned
- What you told the team
- What you consciously dropped

The trap. Blaming leadership entirely. Every organisation moves goalposts. What's being tested is your response, not their planning.

Sounds like: *“We lost a third of the budget in month two. I cut scope to the two features that drove renewal and told the team exactly what we were dropping and why.”*

10 One question deliberately just outside their stated depth.

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Recovery — the single most transferable senior trait.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** “I don't know. Here's how I'd find out” — or the nearest adjacent thing they have genuinely done.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Bluffing. Vague generalities. Quietly changing the subject.

What it means for the decision. *You are not scoring the gap. Comfort with not knowing is close to a proxy for seniority itself.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- “I don't know” — said plainly and early
- How you would find out
- The nearest adjacent thing you have actually done
- No apology, no padding

The trap. Bluffing. Assume the question was asked deliberately and that they already know the answer. Bluffing costs more than the gap ever would.

Sounds like: *“I haven't run that at scale. The closest is a 40-node migration I led last year — here's what I'd expect to transfer and what I'd want help with.”*

Motivation *Ask these in round one, not at offer stage*

11 “Which part of this role would drain you?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Honesty, and whether they have actually understood the job.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Names something real and specific. Explains how they'd manage it rather than pretending it away.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** “Nothing, I'd enjoy all of it.” That answer means they have not understood the role.

What it means for the decision. *The best single predictor of twelve-month retention I know of. Take the honest answer seriously — including when it disqualifies them.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- Something real and specific
- Why it drains you — briefly
- How you've managed it before
- No performance of enthusiasm

The trap. “Nothing, I'd love all of it.” It is the safest-sounding answer and the most damaging. It tells the interviewer you haven't read the job properly.

Sounds like: *“The volume of stakeholder updates. I've handled it by moving to one written weekly note instead of five separate calls.”*

12 “When you resign, what will your current employer do — and what will you do then?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Seriousness of intent, and buyback risk.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Has clearly thought about it. Specific about what would and would not move them.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Has not considered it at all. Or insists money is not a factor in any way.

What it means for the decision. *Counter-offers are the most common reason a closed senior hire evaporates. Asking this at offer stage is asking three weeks too late.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- Evidence you've actually thought it through
- What your employer will likely offer
- What would and wouldn't move you
- Your real notice period, and what you've already done about it

The trap. “Money isn't a factor at all.” Almost never believed. A specific, honest answer builds far more trust than a noble one.

Sounds like: *“They'll counter with a title change and about 20%. I've been passed over twice on scope, so a number alone won't move me.”*

13 “Why this role, and why now?”

IF YOU ARE INTERVIEWING

What it tests. Whether they are running toward something or away from something.

▲ **A strong answer contains.** Connects their trajectory to something specific about your problem, your team, or your stage.

▼ **A weak answer contains.** Generic growth language. Or an answer entirely about escaping the current job.

What it means for the decision. *“Running from” candidates churn measurably faster than “running toward” candidates. Both can be hired — price the risk differently.*

IF YOU ARE BEING INTERVIEWED

Your answer must contain:

- Something specific about their problem or stage
- How it connects to what you've been building
- What you want to be true in three years
- At most one line on why you're leaving

The trap. Spending the whole answer on what's wrong with your current job. Even when it's justified, it tells them what you'll say about them later.

Sounds like: *“You're moving from services to product. I did that transition at my last org and the part I got wrong is the part I'd most like to do properly.”*

The part everyone skips: scoring

- **Score within thirty minutes**, before the next candidate walks in. Memory decays faster than anyone believes — which is how you end up using the wrong name a week later.
- **In a panel, score independently first, then compare.** Discuss first and you have simply recorded the opinion of the most senior person in the room.
- **Use a four-point scale with no midpoint.** A middle option lets people avoid making a call, which is the entire purpose of the exercise.
- **Write one sentence of evidence per score** — something they actually said. “Good communication” is not evidence. “Reframed my badly-worded question before answering it” is.
- **Close the loop within a week with every candidate**, including rejections. Your employer brand is built almost entirely by the people you did not hire.

And if you are the candidate: close properly

- **Close on what they revealed**, not what you prepared. Sixty seconds, before you stand up, on how you'd help with the specific problem they described.
- **Say the difficult number out loud** — notice period, location, the gap you know they noticed. Name it, then close it. Surprises at offer stage are what get strong candidates quietly dropped.
- **Follow up within twenty-four hours.** Three sentences to the hiring manager. Most candidates send nothing, which is exactly why the ones who send something get re-read.
- **A rejection is a warm lead.** Reply once, stay interested, check back in six weeks. Plenty of hires don't survive their first two months.

ABOUT SAVANNA HR

We are a leadership hiring specialist working with organisations across India since 2014. We build interview processes that produce decisions people can defend — and candidate experiences worth remembering. If you'd like the editable interview scorecard that goes with this document, or help structuring a live search, write to us at hello@savannah.com — we read every one.