

# The Surprising Strategy for Acing a Job Interview

Don't try to figure out what the interviewer is looking for. It will only backfire.



Art imitates life: Research supports the accuracy of a scene in "The Devil Wears Prada" in which a young woman gets the job she wants by being herself.

Photo: 20th Century Fox/Everett Collection

By Francesca Gino

The conventional wisdom for acing a job interview is pretty simple: Figure out what the interviewers want and give it to them.

Sounds reasonable. But it's likely to backfire.

In fact, studies that I and others have done show that catering to an interviewer's expectations is less effective than being authentic—willing and courageous enough to express your own views, opinions, and preferences, no matter how unpopular they may be.

Catering hurts our chances for two reasons. When we cater, we are intentionally choosing to minimize our own interests and preferences in favor of those of the person we are trying to impress. This requires an effort to hide who we really are—a cognitively and emotionally draining process. What's more, we can't be certain about the other person's preferences and expectations, no matter how much research we've done on them. This further raises our anxiety and hurts our performance.

We demonstrated this in [one study](#) with 379 working adults. We asked them to imagine applying for a job (which we described to them) and to prepare a two- to three-minute video in which they spoke about themselves and the job. They then answered a few questions. As they were told, a research assistant with hiring expertise would watch and then score the videos and decide, based on the results, how likely she would be to hire them. Those with the highest scores would receive a financial bonus.

We randomly assigned participants to one of three buckets: catering, authenticity and a control group. We asked the caterers to position their statements for what they believed to be the expectations or interests of the person reviewing the videos. For those in the authenticity bucket, we asked them to “be yourself”- that is, to be genuine and authentic. The control group wasn’t told to either cater or be authentic. They were just reminded that a person would watch the video to review applicants.

After participants uploaded their videos, they all answered questions about the level of anxiety and strategic intent they experienced as they recorded their video.

As we expected, participants who catered felt more anxious and strategic than participants who were simply being themselves on video or than those in the control group. The emotional state of those who catered, in turn, hindered their performance in the job interview. Those who behaved authentically were 26% more likely to be hired than those who catered, and those in the control group were 15% more likely to be hired than those who catered (and 9% less likely to be hired as compared with those who acted authentically).

We found the same results in another [study](#) where we asked people to take the role of a person interviewing for a job we described to them in detail, or of the person conducting the interview and evaluating candidates. Those who played the role of the interviewee were asked to either be authentic or cater to the expectation of the interviewer, without the interviewer knowing they had been asked to follow one of these two approaches. Authenticity helped participants land the job more frequently than catering did.

A scene in the movie “The Devil Wears Prada” does a good job of illustrating these concepts, as was first observed in a research [paper](#) co-written by Celia Moore, now a professor of organizational behavior at Imperial College Business School in London.

When one of the film’s main characters, Andy Sachs, applies for an assistant position at an elite fashion magazine, she goes through several successful lower-level interviews. But in her interview with the editor in chief, after seeing that the editor is not impressed, instead of catering to what she thinks the editor wants, Andy decides to be her authentic self. She says she is not skinny or glamorous and that she doesn’t fit in with the other magazine workers, and even confesses to not knowing much about fashion. But she is smart and hardworking, she says. Andy’s strategy, to the audience, doesn’t seem so smart. But, impressed by Andy’s honest self-appraisal—and presumably her intelligence—the editor gives her the job.

In this case, Hollywood had it right, even if it struck some viewers as unlikely.