

Experiencing Experience

The good interview

"I have an interview tomorrow with an agent I would love to sign with, and I'm so nervous. I never do well in these interviews. Help!" Or, "Four months ago I had a general meeting with a top casting director, and I thought it went well, but she has never called me in for an audition. What am I doing wrong?"

I've repeatedly heard these pleas for help. Many actors on the way up are not successful in these kinds of meetings because they present themselves inadequately. Lacking self-awareness and authenticity, actors frequently conduct themselves as victims or manipulators, which leads to them being seen as undesirable working partners, regardless of their acting abilities and credits.

Problems common to actors include thinking that if they are polite and answer the questions with a few prepared riffs about themselves, they will do well; feeling apprehension or fear because they don't believe in their own résumés and would be surprised if someone important showed interest; and seeing these meetings as an opportunity to show off and impress. Regardless of an actor's talent, technique, or potential, all of these anticipations and approaches usually lead to the actor not getting what he or she wants.

The most important aspect of self-presentation is whether or not the actor "creates an experience" with the interviewer. An experience is the effect people have on one another when they come together as equals with spontaneity and authenticity. An experience requires self-respect and respect for the other person, and happens in the present tense—i.e., in the moment.

Victimless Times

The most common obstacles to having an experience include presenting yourself as a victim or as someone who is inauthentic, or creating isolation. In adopting the victim stance, a person carries a body experience of being "done to," of not being in control of situations. When you play the part of a victim, the interviewer gets the sense that you have to be taken care of. Agents and casting directors conduct themselves like professionals; the victim acts like a helpless weakling—not someone they could recommend to a producer or director. The victim stance can show up in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity.

A common example of being a victim is waiting for the interviewer to ask questions. With your résumé in front of him or her, the agent, manager, or casting director does not want to know anything about you that you could provide by answering questions. The only thing an interviewer wants from you in a general interview is to be shown who you are as a person, not told who you think you are. Casting directors and agents want to have an experience with you, one in which you delight, intrigue, fascinate, or compel them. If they have that kind of experience with you, they have found out all they need to know; a quick glance at your résumé clues them



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in to your professional status.

Sometimes you go to an interview with prepared answers that you readily provide when you get an anticipated question. But there are no good prepared answers. There are also no good questions. When a casting director asks you a question, you're in trouble. The only reason casting directors or agents ask questions is that your victim stance has made them feel as if they have to be hosts of the meeting.

Questions and answers keep the ball rolling and get you talking about something, or you'd both be sitting in silence. Without questions and answers, what does that make the interview? Conversation.

From here on, start thinking of an interview as a conversation or a meeting between equals. By thinking of it as an interview, you are making yourself a supplicant and emphasizing that you want something from that person. At that point you are no longer equals, and no experience is possible.

In the successful interview, the agent or casting director doesn't read your résumé. It takes the interviewer 10–30 seconds to look at your résumé and assess your professional status. Aside from those few seconds, if the casting director or agent spends most of your interview perusing your résumé or asking you questions about it, it means there's no experience going on between you, and you are not holding his or her interest. The casting director or agent is bored and has nothing to do but read your résumé. When he or she talks to you about what's on your résumé, that person is reaching to come up with conversation; you've made them take care of you again.

Talking about your personal and career problems is another sure sign of being a victim. Actors who do this may have noble intentions but will have disastrous results. They think that by talking about their problems, they are sincerely communicating how much they want to be successful actors and how hard they will work if given the opportunity.

Agents, managers, and casting people know how tough it is to get ahead as an actor and don't need you to tell them. They also assume that every actor they meet will work hard—unless the interview reveals otherwise. A professional actor wouldn't even consider "working hard" to be an issue, much less talk about it. Instead of respecting you for sharing your problems, the interviewer may consider you a loser. Besides, how can anyone have a positive experience with you when you bring all your problems to the party?

The Real, Whole You

Other self-defeating situations actors unconsciously create are inauthenticity and isolation. Inauthenticity occurs whenever the actor lies. The most common forms of lying are "lying up" and "lying down." Lying up is inventing credits or making a credit or opportunity seem to be more than

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it is. Lying down is making a credit or opportunity seem to be less than it is.

The lying-down perpetrator is less aware of lying than is the actor who lies up, because the lying-down actor thinks he or she is displaying humility, which is of course a good trait. Wrong! Lying down is inauthentic because it is a charade and a form of manipulation. Interviewers are not impressed with an actor's humility and don't like feeling manipulated.

Forms of inauthenticity that turn off interviewers include compliments, flattery, flirtation, seduction, and asking unnecessary questions. Forget what someone told you about asking questions to show how interested you are. This is a phony performance, and the interviewer knows what you are doing and resents the manipulation and wasted time.

Isolation frequently occurs when actors prepare riffs to use in an interview. They think these riffs accomplish a performance of how interesting they are (inauthentic). They have prepared the riffs to make sure they have something interesting to say (victim). Most prepared riffs are stories about the actor on a particular job or from his or her personal life. When actors talk about something from the past, be it an

acting job or a teacher who inspired them, no one is going to have an experience, because the interviewer wasn't present at the past activity.

The actor is making the interviewer an audience to his or her story. Audiences are traditionally anonymous and replaceable. While you are telling your story, the interviewer, isolated, is free to think thoughts that may have nothing to do with your story—what to have for lunch, for example, or sitting back and judging you. On the other hand, when the actor and interviewer are in an experience together, the interviewer is not isolated.

This article is designed to get your attention and get you to examine your own behavior at interviews. You may be puzzled and frustrated because I have suggested you stop doing what you have always done. But don't worry: It is fairly easy to change your interview behavior. Once you learn to use the tools for creating an experience, you could be heading into those job opportunities that were once so elusive.

Stephen Book is the author of "The Actor Takes a Meeting: How to Interview Successfully With Agents, Managers, Producers, and Casting Directors" and "Book on Acting: Improvisation Technique for the Professional Actor in Film, Theater, and Television." He heads a professional acting workshop in Hollywood. His website is www.stephenbook.com.