



1. What were your most creative contributions to promoting rapport among your colleagues?
2. Every department has its own "dysfunctionality quotient." In your last position, what were the quirks and how did you deal with them?
3. In what areas do you typically have the least amount of patience in working with your fellow faculty members?
4. If we were to ask your colleagues to describe your strengths and weaknesses in communicating with other faculty members, students, and management what would they say?
5. Tell us about a conflict you had with a colleague in the past that, looking back, you would have handled differently.
6. All of us have core principles, values or beliefs that we view as non-negotiable: what issues would cause you to "go to the mat?"
7. Which of the following three factors would play the most significant role in your decision to accept the offer from this institution: (1) the university, (2) the position you are applying for, or (3) the people you would be working with?

Why Ask These Questions?

Question 1: What were your most creative contributions to promoting rapport among your colleagues?

This question assumes that the candidate's last faculty appointment was beset with lack of respect and collegiality among peers. Most faculty members typically identify their achievements via their ability to teach in a classroom, conduct and publish research, pursue scholarly activities, and provide service to the department, university and community (as opposed to getting along with their peers).

Analysis: This question is critical if your goal is to identify if the candidate came from a non-collegial department, and the relative importance s/he places on getting along in a collegial department. Regardless of whether (or to what degree) your department espouses the ability to get along, finding people who look beyond their immediate functional areas to reduce conflict will have a direct impact on the climate within the department.


Creativity in this case has nothing to do with "artsy" stuff, research publications, or candidates' need for aesthetic satisfaction at work. Instead, it centers on coming up with unique solutions to existing challenges that fact departments every day. Individuals with penchants for reframing problems and customizing solutions deserve a special place in your department.

Analysis: This question should not disintegrate into a "bragging" session whereas the interviewee feels compelled to list point-by-point what they have accomplished in answering this question. Rather, it is a very good opening to discern to what extent the candidate values collegiality and the ability to get along with colleagues.

Question 2: Every department has its own "dysfunctionality quotient". In your last position, what were the quirks and how did you deal with them?

Tolerance for a department's shortcomings and inconsistencies is definitely an area that calls for compatible personality styles. Signs of dysfunction within a department include an overactive grapevine, jealousy, a deterioration of department ethics, courses being taught, attaining resources (e.g., travel to conferences, graduate assistants, et al.), and cynicism. Every department shares these characteristics at any given time – only the *degree* of dysfunctionality varies. Engaging a candidate to objectively address these department weaknesses demands that the individual ride a fine line between outright, subjective criticism and an objective, evaluative critique of organizational shortcomings.

This question enables the search committee to assess the candidate's insights into the problems s/he's faced battling bureaucracy as well as the solutions s/he's provided in attempting to overcome those departmental flaws. If a candidate places himself in a victim posture by identifying weaknesses that negatively affected his performance, then



beware of this person's capacity for dealing with adversity. As long as there are people in a department within a university, there will be personality conflicts, power plays, weak leaders, jealous peers, and apathetic subordinates. Placing blame of the department for not controlling these universally human issues spells weakness on the candidate's part.

Question 3: In what areas do you typically have the least amount of patience in working with your fellow faculty members?

This personal question is important in view of the fact that few relationships are as intimate as the collegial alliance between and among faculty members – tenured as well as non-tenured.

Typically, candidates will shy away from addressing situations that try their patience because there is simply nothing to gain by offering a truthful response. After all, they are supposed to be patient with their chairs, deans, students and peers all the time. Period. Many candidates will speak solely about their impatience with their own performance, thereby avoiding placing blame on anyone else. Others will raise acceptable issues regarding their impatience with co-workers who feel entitled to a job or entitled to job security just because they show up at the university every day.

A strategy for getting more mileage out of this question is to ask follow-up questions, for example:

“What is it like working with you? What should we expect on a day-to-day basis?”

“What would your response be if a senior, tenured faculty member in our department seems to be against everything you try to do and accomplish?”

Question 4: If we were to ask your colleagues to describe your strengths and weaknesses in communicating with other faculty members, students, and management what would they say?

Communication skills are very important in enhancing the climate of any work environment. This is especially true in universities where some people in a department are tenured and some are not. The search committee can further assess this by speaking with a candidate's former employer.

A common response may be that a candidate will respond: “I get along well with others, and I am very well liked and respected by my peers.” The job of the search committee will be to add some concrete critical mass to this issue by further probing:

“Tell me about the last time you became “unwound” while dealing with coworkers. What tried your patience or caused your anger?”

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“Have you ever found it necessary to show your anger and not back down in a confrontation with other faculty members, students, or management?”

“Give me an example of the most irrational, rude, and intimidating peer faculty member you had to deal with at your last position. How did you handle the situation? In retrospect, how could you have handled it differently?”

Question 5: Tell us about a conflict you had with a colleague in the past that, looking back, you would have handled differently.

Confronting problem colleagues is daunting for even the most confident faculty members. Some take a direct, unequivocal approach in delivering constructive criticism. Others provide a light and tactful touch and couch criticism in a context of warranted praise for work well done.

Recognize that very few people will describe her primary means of dealing with conflict as an avoidance of confrontation (no backbone) or their hot-headed tendencies (perceived as reckless, undisciplined, and tactless). The ability to “look back”, with hindsight being 20-20, will offer more balanced insight into this touchy but critical issue. Candidates should be afforded an opportunity to paint a picture of the circumstances and explain the necessity for taking a strong course of action. The word “conflict” should be carefully critiqued. A candidate is asked to indicate a specific situation that brought about conflict, analyze the circumstances surrounding the conflict, and think through how it could have been handled differently. Even the best of candidates would opt to change history if given the chance. The search committee should look for solutions in the candidate’s response that show creativity and ingenuity in reframing the problem issue and their outcomes.

It is very important that the candidate not perseverate and blame peers and students for any discomfort in relations at their last position. Also, if there were interpersonal problems the two key areas to look for in candidate responses focus on (1) what the candidate learned from the incident, and (2) how willing the person was to accept responsibility for her actions. Both are earmarks of a person’s maturity and reflect well on a candidate’s objective self-evaluation skills.

Question 6: All of us have core principles, values or beliefs that we view as non-negotiable: what issues would cause you to “go to the mat?”

Differences in opinion are inevitable, conflict is optional. You want faculty members who stand up for themselves. But you do not want someone who is too eager to draw lines in the sand and prepare for battle over “every little thing.” If the instincts of the search committee are that you are getting less than the whole story, probe further regarding specific instances where the candidate stuck to her guns, no matter what.

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Candidates may feel challenged by this inquiry because respondents are forced to defend their actions unilaterally and pit themselves against the people to whom they work with. Still, this question will surface extreme issues at the margin of that person's work history: namely, disagreement and disharmony with a colleague.. Although we hope that such conflict is rare, it will inevitably face a department one day if you hire this person, so it is useful to find out how s/he dealt with it in the past.

If the true nature of the faculty member-faculty member relationship lies in complementing each others' strengths and supporting each others' weaknesses, then the search committee will want to find a faculty member who wants to keep the peace and who is able to maintain an objective perspective even in view of an all-out victory.

Hiring a peacemaker makes a great deal of sense when your goal of the department is to maintain positive interpersonal relations with the staff. People who are at ease with themselves and keep an objective distance from the action will offer a rational sounding board to their faculty peers even when emotions are high. In the final analysis, it's not who's right or wrong: It is how the inevitable conflict gets resolved. The fewer the emotional battles and histrionics, the better. Long-standing feuds over who "won" and who "lost" can render a department dysfunctional!

Question 7 : Which of the following three factors would play the most significant role in your decision to accept the offer from this institution: (1) the university, (2) the position you are applying for, or (3) the people you would be working with?

It is important to ask candidates to confirm why joining your department makes sense for them from a career or personal standpoint. It is critical to invite the candidate to redefine the benefits of joining your university/department – both for you and the candidate. The answer will allow search committee to determine the "homework" the person has done concerning the university (e.g., its culture, mission, et al), the specific faculty position (e.g., teaching load, research and publication expectations, et al.), and the other faculty members in the department (e.g., reputation of colleagues, expertise of faculty members, et al.).

The following resource was used in determining the above: Paul Falcone. *96 Great Interview Questions To Ask Before You Hire*. AMACOM, a division of American Management Association, 1601 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10019.