



Robert A. Milligan, Ph.D., is professor emeritus from Cornell University and senior consultant with Madison, Wis.-based Dairy Strategies. He can be reached at 651-647-0495 or rmilligan@trsmith.com.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The following are Peter Spring's thoughts after completing an interview for the mechanic position at Hills and Valleys Golf Course:

"Wow! That wasn't what I expected.

When George (the golf course superintendent) invited me to the interview, he said to come to the course at 10 a.m. I arrived a few minutes early, but no one was at the clubhouse. By the time I found the maintenance facility, I was late. George was understanding, but I was more nervous. We made small talk about George knowing my father from regional church work. He asked if I belonged to the same church as my father.

"Then George said we should start.

Recalling my two previous interviews, I was expecting a formal, structured meeting. Instead, George started: "I made some notes for the interview. Let me see if I can find them." Then the phone rang, and he talked on the phone for a few minutes. Then we talked about the job for about 15 minutes. George asked a couple general questions but never found his notes. It felt more like an unstructured discussion than an interview. As the interview was ending, I had to interject to ask my questions.

"I realized I didn't find out or ask about what I should expect next. I have no idea if or when I'll hear anything or whether I should take the position if it were offered."

Although the above is fiction, I've heard each component from employees interviewing for jobs at golf courses. Spring's thoughts can be used to address three key interviewing issues: (1) The superintendent's preparation for the interview is crucial; (2) thoughtful, structured interview questions are necessary; and (3) be aware of legal issues when interviewing.

I can relate to George's initial problem. When visiting superintendents, I've often spent much time locating maintenance facilities or their offices. Making certain a candidate knows exactly where to be and what to expect is the first step of preparation.

Before proceeding, reflect on the interview. Think about your interview experiences. I suspect they were stressful, you were nervous, the outcome would have a major impact on your career, and you wanted as much clarity as possible in an uncertain process. The candidates you interview are in the same situation. Here are ideas to ensure you're prepared for an interview:

- Recognize this is an important, stressful event and formality is needed.
- Construct a schedule for the interview including time to establish rapport, sell the position and course, ask interview questions, respond to the candidate's questions, tour the maintenance facility and course, and meet other course personnel.
- Make certain candidates understand what to expect – anything they should bring or prepare; interview time (beginning and end), location, schedule and format; and appropriate dress.
- Greet candidates upon arrival and devote your undivided attention during the interview – you only have one chance to make a first impression. Make a great impression. You don't want the candidate you choose to turn you down. Answering the phone call in the scenario above was inappropriate.
- Make certain candidates know what to expect when they leave the interview. What is the next step, and when will it come?

A prepared set of questions to be asked of all candidates is recommended by all interviewing experts and practitioners. The only point of dispute is the advisability of asking follow-up questions to pursue points raised in the answer. I suggest limiting follow-up questions. The best way to reduce the need for follow-up questions is a well-designed set of questions. Consider the following points:

1. An essential starting point is to identify what will enable success in the position. This means identifying competencies needed to succeed. Then write questions for each competency.
2. Many have a tendency to ask ques-

tions that begin with, "What would you do if ...?" Experience shows better questions begin with, "Tell me about the last time this happened" Instead of asking "What would you do if you were going to be late for work?" ask "What did you do the last time you knew you were going to be late for work?" These are behavioral questions.

Equal employment opportunity laws bar any business or organization from making human resource decisions based on race, color, gender, religion, national origin, physical and mental handicap, pregnancy, age or military veteran status. Here are three points to guide you:

1. A general guideline is to ask only about things unquestionably related to the job and the applicant's ability to succeed in it. If the interview questions concern work experience, knowledge and skills required for the position, and attitudes and behaviors required to succeed in the position, illegal questions won't be needed or useful.

2. Avoiding illegal questions is difficult when writing questions about attitudes. The key is to identify the desired attitude rather than attributes that are positively correlated with the attribute.

3. Information about equal opportunity issues should be limited to formal interview questions. During the interview cited above, George asked Peter if he belonged to the same church as his father. This is an illegal question. Interviews require time to relax and build rapport with the applicant, but no part of the interview can include informal talk completely.

The following are questions that are or could be illegal:

- "What organizations, clubs or societies do you belong to?"
- "Can you provide a photograph of yourself?"
- "What arrangements have you made for childcare?"
- "Have you ever been arrested?"

Successful interviewing is a simple formula: Preparation plus structured questions minus illegal questions. Remember this whenever you're hiring, and you'll be better off. **GCI**