

Describe a difficult situation & how you handled it (tips)

When an interviewer asks you to describe a difficult situation and how you handled it, they're looking for a few specific things in your answer.

The reason interviewers ask this question

Interviewers ask about difficult situations and how you handled them in order to learn more about how you respond to challenges and what you can contribute to the company. It seems standard at first, but it provides more insight into who you are as an employee than most realise.

One of the most valuable bits of information interviewers take away from your answer is how you approach complex situations. Every job involves difficult situations and unexpected problems. During those moments, your problem-solving skills are put to the test.

Your response will tell the interviewer more about your ability to tackle problems and how you react in stressful situations. Do you remain calm and approach the problem with a level head? Or do you panic and ignore the issue?

Every response is different, but interviewers can determine how you'll react if a similar unexpected challenge occurs in this position.

Your answer will also tell the employer more about your thought process. It shows whether you take the initiative, how you methodically find a solution to a difficult task, and how well you communicate.

It can also tell them if you own up to your mistakes. Shifting the blame, failing to acknowledge your mistakes, and creating drama are all red flags. Companies want people who are honest, open to communication, and accountable.

Difficult situations come up all the time. Whether you caused that scenario or not, how you respond and take action matters.

How to answer "Describe a difficult situation and how you handled it"

Answering a question like this requires careful thought. It holds more weight than you may realise and giving a lacklustre response could take you out of the running for the job.



Here are a few tips on developing a standout answer that works in your favour.

1. Prepare ahead of time

Coming up with your answer on the spot isn't a good idea. The nature of open-ended questions invites you to tell a short story. Everything from the words you say to how you communicate matters!

Think about a difficult task and how you handled it at a previous workplace. Remember what led to that issue, how you responded, and what you did to overcome it.

Then, create a short list of the points you want to hit. A helpful approach to answering questions like this is to use the star method.

Begin by describing the difficult task and laying the groundwork to provide context. Then, explain the problem. Discuss your job and responsibilities before going into how they relate to the challenge.

Next, detail the steps you took to address the difficult situation before describing the results of your actions. Don't forget that the result or outcome of the situation is one of the most important parts of your story.

This specific formula is a great way to tell a compelling story while hitting all the details your interviewer wants to hear. Develop your response early, know what points you want to make, and get comfortable delivering your answer. You don't need a verbatim script, but you should be able to confidently provide a succinct response.

2. Keep it work-oriented

Our next tip is an important one. Keep your answer work-related!

Difficult situations frequently happen in our personal lives. But your interviewer doesn't want to hear about those scenarios. While they might be important to you, they don't provide a good indication of your ability to handle a difficult situation at work.

Personal stories don't work because interviewers can't apply your experience to the work environment. Focus on professional challenges you've faced in your former jobs.

3. Be detailed but concise

It's easy to provide long-winded responses when talking about a difficult situation you handled. However, rambling on and going too much into detail could work against you. **You should provide relevant details while trying to keep your response concise.**

Leave out all the gory details and focus on what matters, the facts.

Long responses waste valuable interview time and can even make the interviewer believe you're not a great communicator. It doesn't matter what job you're trying to get. Communication is important and rambling about superfluous details shows that you don't know how to communicate effectively.

Keep it short and sweet while providing enough detail for the interview to understand the situation you're describing.

4. Stay professional

Always maintain professional decorum with your responses.

Avoid throwing your old co-workers under the bus or talking badly about your former companies. Badmouthing anyone is not a good look. It doesn't matter if you're going to your old company's direct competitor or entering a brand-new industry.

It paints an ugly picture of your character and may raise a few red flags. Companies don't want to hire those types of people. Who's to say that you won't turn around and badmouth this company if you leave later?

Stay focused on the facts, not your feelings or emotions.

Furthermore, word travels fast. Leaving the wrong impression by talking negatively about others could cost you opportunities in the future.

Never burn bridges! Keep it professional, no matter what you truly feel.



5. End on a high note

Finally, don't forget to end on a high note.

Use this opportunity to showcase your problem-solving skills and detail how you navigated challenges that others might need help managing. Be proud of how you resolved the problem and reassure the interviewer that you can handle anything.

Talking about the positive outcome is a great way to end on a high and prove that you have what it takes to perform well in this new job.

Common mistakes when answering this question

A great answer can greatly improve your chances of getting a job offer. But a handful of mistakes can also pull you from the running.

Here are a few you want to avoid while developing your answer.

Avoid shifting the blame

Blaming someone else is not how to respond to this question. If a problematic situation arose from something you did, own up to it! That's a big deal and shows your professional maturity.

Mistakes happen, and the employer understands that no one is perfect. But owning up to a mistake and taking action is one of the best things you can do. No hiring manager wants to bring someone on who constantly blames others for their shortcomings.

Use this question to show how you've grown and what you've done to ensure you never repeat those mistakes. That displays excellent maturity and growth. However, blaming others will likely raise a few red flags.

Leave out the drama

We get it: handling difficult situations can sometimes lead to workplace drama. But should you talk about that? Absolutely not!

Leave the drama out of the equation. Interviewers don't need to hear about the nasty fallout or water cooler gossip. Focus on the facts and what you can say to highlight your problem-solving skills.

Don't sound pompous

When you develop your answer, you need to have the right balance of pride and humility.

It's great to be proud of how you addressed a difficult task and all the good that came after. Pat yourself on the back and recognise how well you handled a difficult situation. But err on the side of caution and avoid tipping a toe over the line of cockiness.

Pompous attitudes never work in an interview. Have some humility, but don't be afraid to recognise the good you did.

Don't lie

You might feel the temptation to bend the truth about a situation. Maybe you regret how you responded, so you lie and say what you wish you did.

Lying is never a good idea during a job interview. You might not think it matters, but interviewers can easily speak to someone who can corroborate your story.

Nothing will ruin your chances of getting a job faster than lying and getting found out. Honesty is always the best policy.

Avoid the "I'm perfect" response

Some people hear this interview question and think that it's a trap. Instead of being honest and discussing real work experience, they say they've never had a difficult situation because they're so good at their job.

Not only is that unrealistic, but it doesn't do you any favours. A response like that doesn't provide the information interviewers are looking for. Plus, it will likely make the employer question your authenticity.

They may start to wonder what skeletons you're hiding in your closet!

Conclusion

Describing a difficult task and how you addressed it can help you make a great impression in a job interview.

All it takes is understanding what the interviewer is looking for and a little preparation.

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