

Preparing for the Interview Q&A

BY PETER KIENLE, FSMPS, CPSM, MBA, AND JUDY KIENLE, MPH, CPSM

Interview Q&A is usually the last priority for a team preparing for an interview with a selection committee. However, it often is the critical differentiator in winning a project—and a client.

The selection process is a qualifying exercise that usually begins with a review of proposals from design firms, using selection criteria that vary from owner to owner. The process normally ends with a short list of three to five firms being interviewed by the selection committee.

A typical selection committee interview allocates 30 to 40 minutes for presentation and 20 to 30 minutes for questions and answers. During an interview, the selection committee is trying to qualify and eliminate firms from the short list. The answers offered during Q&A can help persuade the committee to choose one firm over another, so it's important that your team members are comfortable working in the Q&A format.

Firms may spend 99 percent of their preparation time on practicing for the presentation and only 1 percent on discussing the answers to potential questions the selection committee may propose. A better balance of practice will yield better results.

Here are some tips to increase your team's chances of success in the Q&A portion of the interview.

- **Appoint an interview leader—ideally the project manager.**

In this role, the selection team sees the project manager's leadership and management skills firsthand. In most cases,

the project manager has authored the project approach in the proposal response and knows the project's main issues. If he has met with the owner before the interview, the project manager will be in a great position to field questions based on the interests of each selection committee member.

- **Before the interview, brainstorm and prepare answers to questions the selection committee might ask.** Many firms record the questions asked during interviews and keep an ongoing list to refer to when they practice for future interviews. These questions are good for review, but remember, each project and interview are unique with different challenges, selection team members, and questions. Be prepared for the unexpected.
- **Offer clean, clear, short responses.** Listening skills are essential during the interview. Respondents often answer based on their interpretation of the questions rather than what the selection committee members want to know. Team members need to focus intensely on understanding the question before giving an answer. Pausing before answering allows the respondent to think clearly about what he wants to say. Remember to answer from the owner's perspective, not your firm's.
- **Have only one team member answer any one question.** Sometimes a team member may be tempted to add to the response a colleague has given to a question. Instruct team members to avoid this temptation. Owners typically do not want too much information; they are looking for clear, short answers. It is best if the project manager, on hearing an incomplete answer, steps in and clarifies the response and then moves on by asking for the next question. Avoid letting another team member add superfluous information. When the project manager is not sure who should field a particular question, he needs to look at his team members to see who wants to take it.
- **Be ready for the money questions.** Selection committees may ask about costs or budget. One question that can sink a team faster than anything is, "Do we have enough money budgeted to do the project?" Prepare a positive answer based on experience rather than saying no.



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■ **Do your homework.** Knowing the committee members well helps to frame solid answers to questions. Visit or talk with committee members before the interview, if it is permitted. Try to figure out what question each committee member might have. Expect a contract administrator or purchasing agent to ask about cost or schedule, a campus planner to ask about planning, an operations representative to ask about how a similar building worked for its tenants, a parking manager to be concerned with parking, etc. Respond positively to every question and selection team member; a no vote from any one of them could result in losing the project.

Immediately after the firm is notified it has been shortlisted, team members need to sit down to begin brainstorming about potential questions and answers. An architect once advised me to use the 1,000 percent rule: Come up with many more questions and answers than the selection committee will have, and you may hit directly on one or two questions for which you are prepared—and those answers might win the job. Remember that how you say something is as important as what you say.

The process of going through this exercise will pull your team closer together—an element that won't escape the selection committee's notice and usually is an important factor in its deliberations.

Take the Q&A portion of the interview more seriously and prepare for it just like you practice for the presentation. Waiting until you leave for the interview to discuss answers to questions the selection committee might ask will create more stress during an already high-stress time.

If you prepare for the questions and have good answers ready, you are more in control of the process. Your team members will leave the presentation feeling like they have done their very best for the firm. ■

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