

What Are Your Greatest Strengths and Weaknesses?

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Marie is about to interview two candidates for the customer service manager position. Her candidates are Francine and William. As always, she plans to ask about their strengths and weaknesses.

Francine answers the question, "What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?" with, "My strength is that I'm a hard worker. My weakness is that I get stressed when I miss a deadline because someone else dropped the ball."

This answer is unimaginative. Most people think of themselves as hard workers.

William has difficulty with the question. "I really can't think of a weakness," he begins. "Maybe I could be more focused. My strength is probably my ability to deal with people. I am pretty easygoing. I usually don't get upset easily."

This answer leads with a negative, and then moves to vague words: maybe, probably, pretty and usually.

So what is the best way to answer this question?

Assessing Your Strengths

Assess your skills, and you will identify your strengths. This is an exercise worth doing before any interview. Make a list of your skills, dividing them into three categories:

- 1. Knowledge-based skills:** Acquired from education and experience (e.g., computer skills, languages, degrees, training and technical ability).
- 2. Transferable skills:** Your portable skills that you take from job to job (e.g., communication and people skills, analytical problem solving and planning skills).
- 3. Personal traits:** Your unique qualities (e.g., dependable, flexible, friendly, hard working, expressive, formal, punctual and being a team player).

When you complete this list, choose three to five of those strengths that match what the employer is seeking in the job posting. Make sure you can give specific examples to demonstrate why you say that is your strength if probed further.

Assessing Your Weaknesses

Probably the most dreaded part of the question. Everyone has weaknesses, but who wants to admit to them, especially in an interview?

The best way to handle this question is to minimize the trait and emphasize the positive. Select a trait and come up with a solution to overcome your weakness. Stay away from personal qualities and concentrate more on professional traits. For example:

"I pride myself on being a 'big picture' guy. I have to admit I sometimes miss small details, but I always make sure I have someone who is detail-oriented on my team."

Scripting Your Answers

Write a positive statement you can say with confidence:

"My strength is my flexibility to handle change. As customer service manager at my last job, I was able to turn around a negative working environment and develop a very supportive team. As far as weaknesses, I feel that my management skills could be stronger, and I am constantly working to improve them."

When confronted with this question, remember the interviewer is looking for a fit. She is forming a picture of you based on your answers. A single answer will probably not keep you from getting the job, unless of course it is something blatant. Put your energy into your strengths statement -- what you have to offer. Then let the interviewer know that although you may not be perfect, you are working on any shortcomings you have.