

Don McNea Fire School
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Below are some firefighter oral interview strategies by the number one oral expert in the country, Capt. Bob. You can find more information on Capt Bob's *Conquering the Job Interview* – the number one selling oral interview prep in the country! - by going to our Oral Interview Preparation webpage.

CAPT. BOB'S ORAL BOARDS 101 STRATEGY

I marvel at how many candidates put so much into acquiring great credentials and yet can't present them at the oral board. Then they wonder why they don't get high enough on the list to get hired.

Here is a simple oral board question that stumps most candidates: Why do you want to be a firefighter?

If you answered this question with it's public service, I like to help others, it's different every day, not behind a desk, giving back to the community, I'm a people person, or team player, etc., those are "Clone" answers. "Clone" answers will doom your oral board. How long do you think you have to present yourself to the oral board before you put them to sleep? 32 seconds. That's right! If you open with a clone answer you will see the glaze come over the boards eyes like a deer caught in the headlights or a child in front of a TV. They will go away and not come back.

You have just scored yourself. Believe me. I've been on over 175 oral boards. If you opened with a personalized story (your signature story) about you that the board has never heard, you grab their attention in that first 32 seconds and it's Show Time!

I was coaching a candidate one day and he was giving me those clone answers why he wanted to be a firefighter. I stopped him and had him rewind the videotape of his life to where he first got the spark to be a firefighter.

He said, "Oh, I'm from South America. When I was growing up, we lived with my grandfather who was the Fire Chief of the city. I got to go with him and be exposed to the whole department." I asked if he had ever told that story in any of his oral board interviews. He said, "No". Why not?

I will bet you big money you are a clone candidate right now. But, I bet you also have some personal signature stories that could instantly change your interview scores. Practice those stories, condense them down to a minute or less. Don't go on a journey. The oral board is not packed for the trip. Once you answer an oral board with a signature story, you can marry the rest of your answer with those clone answers you have been using.

Try it and see the amazing difference. You won't have time and it's not appropriate to use a signature story for every answer. Tell the story, make the point.

ORAL BOARDS 102

I marvel at firefighter candidates who have great credentials. Degrees, certificates, experience and some are paramedics. They have all this great stuff and don't realize that if you can pass the oral board, you don't get the job! Period! They wait until the last minute and think they can wing it. Luck is generally given to the prepared.

The oral board is where the rubber meets the road. Like any other training, you have to learn this process and practice what you have learned.

A tape recorder is the best tool you can use. One practice session on a tape recorder is worth 10 speaking out loud. Write out every question you can think of on 3x5 cards. After you review your taped answer turn the card over and put anything you don't like on the back. The next time you go after that question turn the card over first so you will know what you don't want to say. Practice makes perfect.

USING A TAPE RECORDER

I received a call this morning from one of my candidates. He has made it to a few oral boards and one chief's oral without success. In just a few moments I was aware of something critical. Then I asked him if he were using a tape recorder to practice? Like most people, he hemmed and hawed and finally said, "Well, no. But, I'm thinking about it."

Even though he bought the audio/video tape program that hammers and hammers the point home that you have to use a tape recorder and hear how you sound. He still didn't get the message. His answers were garbage. I don't get it. You folks want this job so bad you say you will do almost anything ethically and morally to get it. I guess that doesn't include using a tape recorder to get your timing, inflection, volume, where to cut out material, and find out if you really sound like Donald Duck. You need to get married to your hand-held tape recorder. You need to hear what the oral board is going to hear from you. It's the closest distance between you and the badge you're looking for!

This is usually a guy thing. Guys think about their answers in their head and write them down. Then they think their answers are going to come out of their mouths like magic in the oral. Trust me, after being on over 100 oral boards, they don't!

Let me tell you how critical this really is. If you're not using a tape recorder to practice, practice, practice, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse and over learn your material until it becomes second nature to you, **YOU MIGHT AS WELL NOT SHOW UP FOR THE INTERVIEW. YOU ARE WASTING THE ORAL BOARDS AND YOUR TIME!** Seek out another career. Understand you still have to interview there too. The above San Diego candidate has already lost some great opportunities. Had he been faithfully using a tape recorder to prepare for his oral boards, he probably could have had a badge already.

Some will say, "Well, if I practice it too much it will sound canned." NO it won't! It sure will be planned though. Practice makes permanent. "Luck is where preparation meeting opportunity." One practice session with a tape recorder is worth 10 speaking out louds. After practicing, you will get to a point where your answers will get into your subconscious. That's where the magic begins. You can't be fooled.

Everyone has butterflies in an oral board. The trick is getting all the butterflies to fly in the same formation that can make the difference. Practicing will remove up to 75% of the butterflies. You want the other 25% to carry you through the interview.

Be advised that your competition knows the value of using a tape recorder. They are catapulting past you if you're not using one too.

FIVE "NUGGETS" FOR SUCCESSFUL JOB INTERVIEWS **Simple Tools to Uncomplicate the Process**

1. The job interview is like auditioning for a play. Do you meet the minimum requirements? You must know your lines for the part.
2. To learn your part, make an outline why you want this position, what you have done to prepare, why do you want to work for this agency, etc. It must be about you; not a clone of someone else.
3. The outline will become your script to audition for the part. Practice, rehearse, and over learn the part with a tape recorder until it becomes second nature to you. This will help prevent stage fright.
4. With tremendous enthusiasm, use your new role to capture the first 32 seconds of your audition. This creates its own energy. Use the six steps in answering the questions.

5. Don't reiterate in your closing. Use only the key points not already covered in your script. Without being boring, tell the interviewers how you really want the job and with your qualifications hope to be considered for the position. Make a cordial ending. Then, shut up and get out the building.

Basic Oral Board Questions

I believe there are only about 30 oral board questions, plus or minus a couple. But these 30 can be disguised into hundreds of different questions. Here is a simple way to break a disguised question down. Dissect the question down to its simplest term, one word, that says what the question is really about. Once you have removed the disguise, you can place it in one of the 30 plus oral board questions you already have answers for. This is one of the simple tools we have to uncomplicated the oral board process.

Here is the list of the "Thirty Plus Oral Board Questions"

1. Tell us about yourself.
2. Why do you want to be a firefighter? When did you decide on this career?
3. What is the job of a firefighter? Are you qualified?
4. What have you done to prepare for this position?
5. What are you bringing to the job?
6. Why do you want to work for this city or agency?
7. What do you know about this city or agency?
8. What do you like to do? What are your hobbies?
9. What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
10. What would your employer say about you?
11. What are the attributes of a firefighter? What is the most important one to you?

How would you handle the following scenarios?

12. Drinking or drugs on the job?
13. Stealing on the job?
14. Conflict with another employee?
15. Irate citizen?
16. An employee crisis at an emergency?
17. Sexual harassment?
18. Racial situation?
19. Conflicting orders at an emergency?
20. An order that could place you in great danger or be morally wrong?
21. What do you say when you don't know an answer to a question?
22. Are you on any other hiring lists? What would you do if another city called you?
23. When can you start if we offered you the job?
24. How far do you want to go in the fire service? Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
25. What are the quality traits of a firefighter? Which one is the most important to you?
26. Have you ever been in an emergency situation? Tell us what you did.
27. What word would best describe you in a positive way? A negative way?
28. How do you handle conflict?
29. Why would we select you over the other candidates?
30. Do you have anything to add?

In reference to the above, several candidates have called me about the following question: You're a firefighter and the guys in the station want to you to participate with them to play a joke on the female firefighter. What do you do? Many candidates have said, "Well these kinds of jokes are part of being a firefighter, or we are a family; it's expected, or depending how bad the joke is, or I've played jokes on others before, etc."

Let's go back to the original formula on this page. Dissect the question down to its simplest form to one or two words. What is the core purpose of this question? Take off the disguise and you will have one of the questions from the 30 plus oral board list above.

Have you got it?

It's SEXUAL HARASSMENT!

Many of the candidates screamed out loud when they finally figured out the real purpose of the question. Too many gave a poor answer.

Now what's your answer?

This is a simple tool to uncomplicate the process. There are only about 30 oral board questions. They can be disguised in hundreds of different ways. It's your job to take off the disguise and find the real question and have a "Nugget" answer to satisfy the oral board, get your best score on the answer and cause the board to go onto the next question.

This "Nugget" tool is one of several that can separate you from number 40 and below on a list to between 1 and 10 where you get a shot at the badge. You'll know the difference when the call comes in to go to the Chief's oral. It can happen quicker than you can imagine.

One way to help you do this is picture a piece of paper with a line drawn down the center. On the left of the line are issues dealing with ethics, such as stealing, drugs, or drinking. With ethical issues, you ask appropriate questions to determine what you suspect.

If true, you don't deviate . . you go straight up to a supervisor. On the right side of the line is anything to do with getting along with others; you will go to great lengths to work it out before going to a supervisor. If you can decide what side of the line the question belongs, you have a better chance of knowing how to answer the question.

So take off the disguise of that this is your captain. Dissect the question down to its simplest form; one word. What is this about? Right, drinking. What side of the line is this on? Right or left. If it's on the left side of the line what do we do? Drinking is not tolerated. Right again, ask questions to determine if your suspicions are correct (are you drinking?). If so, you go straight up(why don't we go to our supervisor) no matter who or what rank is on the other side of the table; and stick to your answer no matter what. **YOU WILL NEVER BE WRONG! TRUST ME!**

There are only 30 questions. What are your answers? Take the question apart, know the real purpose of the question and deliver your "Nugget" answer. Next question please.

Nothing counts "til you have the badge. Nothing!

In reference to the above I received this question:

I'm not trying to be cheeky, this is a serious reply. Would the Board ever ask the question in reverse? Meaning would they ask a female candidate if they would participate in a joke on a male candidate? If yes, would they be looking for the candidate to reply no, that it would be sexual harassment? Would it be appropriate for either gender to say they would participate, distinguishing that only if the joke would not be of a nature that may be sexual harassment? This issue is very important in my city, because they are on the verge of hiring the first female firefighter. Not only do male candidates want to make it understood that they are able to work with females in this environment, likewise I would not want to appear as if I was concerned about this type of scenario or uncomfortable and oversensitive about the cajoling that goes on.

"Captain Bob's" reply: Subject: Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment questions are the most dangerous of oral board areas. It's a can of worms you don't want to open. If you do, you will never be able to close the can. You need to keep your answers short and simple here. Otherwise, you will tank yourself big time. It has nothing to do with which gender, it's how it's interpreted by the person that is offended.

Fantasyland:

The oral interview is like fantasyland. It is not like the real world. Your answers in the oral board might not be what you would do in real life. Don't fall into the trap. The board understands the rules, you can't fool them. If you try, the board will crank up the music and let you dance your fool head off. Don't try to intellectualize and bring heavy logic to this process. If you do, someone, who understands the rules in fantasyland better will get the badge. So, please follow the yellow brick road rules in fantasyland and don't look behind the curtain.

You don't think so? Well, my Son's captain was on an oral board for five days. One candidate got top scores. When they were finished and completing their comments and scores, this candidate said, "I'm sure glad that's over." They said yea, O.K. He said because they're coming. They look up and said, "Who's coming?" He said, "The Martian's are coming." They chuckled. He got mad. Turns out that this guy was a genuine kook. But he did so well in the oral because he lived in fantasyland and knew the rules. Don't ever forget this! It's a true story!

So in this fantasyland environment, sexual harassment is not tolerated. If you try to draw a line at cajoling, where does it stop? At sarcastic comments, physical contact? You will open a can of worms trying to make everyone happy. You could express how an easygoing person you are, but sexual harassment is not tolerated. Again, the person who is offended determines that. Male or female. It's the LAW! There are personnel rules to protect you.

Understand that if the oral board fires up a question that sounds like drinking on the job, it's going to be about drinking on the job. If it's a question that sounds like taking drugs on the job, it's going to be about taking drugs on the job; it's not going to be aspirin. If the question sounds like it's about stealing on the job, it's going to be about stealing on the job. If they fire up a question that sounds like sexual harassment, that's what it's going to be about, or they wouldn't bring it up.

If they fire up these questions, take off the disguise ask questions to verify what you suspect and then take action in fantasyland. Don't be like so many candidates by starting a soap opera.

Example: You go in the locker room and see a fellow firefighter drinking something that looks like alcohol. What do you do? The clone, soap opera answer would be: I would try to get him into the day room, play cards and try to smell his breath; or I would have him go home sick, or have another firefighter come into relieve him. These are all soap opera answers. Don't go on this journey. They are insulting to the oral board. You will loose valuable points here. We are intelligent beings on the other side of the table. Give us credit for that. Don't start a soap opera.

Ask a question that would verify your suspicions and give a direct answer; not a soap opera.

DON'T BE A CLONE CANDIDATE!

It's not the interview questions that are the problem in an interview, it's the answers! Unfortunately many candidates become and give clone answers. And the bigger problem is they don't know it. I hate to say it, but often they are cloned in fire colleges and academies. Clone answers can doom your oral board.

One of our officers was on an oral board for a big city. Several boards interviewed a total of 965 candidates. His board interviewed 350 candidates over 10 days. Imagine you were this officer and it is

the fifth day of interviewing. You have just come back from lunch where the city has wined and dined you. You're tired and you know you have another five days of interviews ahead of you.

The next candidate is called in. The first question you ask is, "What sparked your interest and why do you want to be a firefighter?" He proceeds to give you the same clone answers you have heard from almost every candidate for five days. Public service, helping people, not the same thing every day, blah blah blah. The magic 32 seconds that you need to hook up with the oral board has passed and you didn't hook them into listening to your stuff. You have just scored yourself. Trust me. You can see the glaze come over the board's eyes. It's like a deer caught in the headlights. They are gone and they won't come back.

It's not that you can't use clone answers. You can. But first you need to deliver a signature story about you. Not a clone answer of anyone else. I haven't met a candidate yet that couldn't come up with signature stories. Signature stories demonstrate experience. They also tell that you not only know the answer to a question, you've lived it. Firefighters love firefighter stories. If you open up with a signature story, you instantly separate yourself from the other clone candidates. Stories show the oral board who you really are. You capture the board and take them on a journey with a story they have never heard. Isn't this making sense?

The toughest thing for a candidate to do in an oral is being themselves on purpose. When you are yourself, you become conversational because you are on your own turf. This alone can lower the stress and butterflies. Everyone has butterflies. The trick is to get them to all fly in the same formation.

An oral board member told me they had a candidate who didn't answer all the questions the way they wanted him to do, but he had such great personal life experience in his answers (stories) they hired him anyway. This is human nature. If we like you. If you're our type of guy or gal, we will fill in the gaps with your short falls and make it happen for you. Stories help bridge that gap. Clone answers and clone candidates don't have a chance here.

Many younger candidates don't think they have any personalized experience. They don't think working at Burger King and similar jobs have any value. Well, what did you learn at Burger King? How to be responsible, work hard, customer service, teamwork? Do these things have any parallel to the fire service? You bet! Now, you have the beginning for a story.

Stories are more than facts. If you can create the excitement, emotion and magic of the actual event, you will capture the interest and a top score on that question. A big part of getting this job is convincing the oral board that you can do the job before you get it. Stories are convincing and can demonstrate your experience. Even if they're not fire related.

Some will say, "Captain Bob" how can you help so many candidates without making them clones?" Good question. Simple answer. The real reason is nobody else can tell your story! Nobody! When you start lacing your answers with personalized experiences is where you start to shorten that gap between you and that infamous badge.

Example: I was doing private coaching with a candidate. He was telling a story about being a federal firefighter in Yellowstone in '89 when it burned up. The story was not too exciting the way he was telling it. I had to stop and ask, "It sounds like you were trapped?" They were. Now he tells that story and the hair starts standing up on the back of your neck. You're trapped with him. You can see the embers dropping around you. Does this story make a difference? Please say yes.

So the point here is not the question, but the answer. Start establishing your personalized stories. Use your tape recorder to practice. Condense them down. Don't go on an endless journey. The board is not packed for the trip. Tell the story. Make the point. Move onto the next question.

INSTANT CLONES

Question:

Recently I had the opportunity to participate in mock orals with one of my instructors who happens to be really great when it comes down to interviewing. In our class that comprises mostly of people starting fire tech classes, nobody did very well. It was a great lesson about how we need to start preparing and getting to familiarize ourselves with the testing process. However, 2 guys who were friends with our instructor, participated in our mock orals, and put the rest of us to shame. (They obviously have spent countless hours practicing orals with our instructor!)

They really knew their stuff, and not having any oral experience myself, I was very impressed, along with the rest of my class. My question is that these guys were so well rehearsed and knew each question and answers like the back of their hand, they sounded like actors in a play - anybody could tell that everything down to expressions, and hand motions had been practiced over and over to perfection, is this what interviewers want when they interview you? Do they really want to see rehearsed answers? Don't get me wrong, the answers were very good, but seemed so artificial. If anyone could let me know if it's better to answer questions to the best of your knowledge, or just to memorize good answers. Thanks, any input would be great.

Reply:

What you saw was a perfect example of turning candidates into "Clones". It's impressive at first. But if you felt it was too rehearsed, so will the oral board panel. When you see it over and over again it gets old and puts the panel into a daze. We could tell who the instructors were on many of the clone candidates by the second question. This will stick out in an interview. One thing about clone candidates; they will end up with a score that will put them in the clone pack.

One of our officers was going to be on a panel for our department. He had been shooting his mouth off that he could tell which candidates were mine. After the interviews, he was telling us about this great candidate who nailed his interview and came out number one. I asked him if he thought the guy had been coached? He said he was so good using his own stuff he couldn't have been.

When I told him this was one of my candidates, he screamed . . . NO WAY! Yep, he's one of our guys. Not only that, this guy had been testing for over 3 years. He scored 532 on his last test in Stockton. He came to us three weeks before his oral with our department. He had great stuff, but didn't know how to present it. The toughest thing for candidates to do is be themselves on purpose. Not a clone of someone else.

LUCK IS GIVEN TO THE PREPARED!

In the weeks before Christmas there are two types of people, those who are happy and enjoying the season, and those of us that want to hurt the happy ones. The difference is the first group prepared, their shopping is done, cards written and they relaxed and enjoyed themselves. Meanwhile the second group is trying to find that last minute gift before their car was done filling up at the pump and they have to pay.

I was outside a building where oral interviews were taking place. I saw a guy sitting in his car writing like mad on a piece of binder paper. Another guy walking by looked in the car and acted like he was thinking if maybe he had written some stuff down he might not feel like throwing up right then. These guys have never shopped early for Christmas.

Right after Christmas, you are probably saying, as most of us do, I will have all my Christmas shopping done by October next year. That same attitude should apply to your preparation for your oral interview.

Please allow me to get on my soapbox for a moment. If you have put in an application, taken the written, or physical ability, you have an oral coming up...If you are in a fire academy, working as a volunteer, in

high school, or are twelve years old and are going to be a firefighter some day YOU HAVE AN ORAL INTERVIEW IN YOUR FUTURE; YOU JUST DON'T KNOW THE DATE YET.

The choice is up to you. How do you think you can present yourself in the best light? If you have spent weeks or even months preparing or you are sitting in your car an hour before the interview still trying to figure out what you have done to prepare and hoping it looks something like what you put on your application.

My suggestion is you kill two birds with one stone. Prepare for your interview like you know you should, and next year you can give everyone a picture of you with your new badge for Christmas.

WHAT DO I WEAR TO A JOB INTERVIEW?

I had a candidate tell me he went to an interview wearing a tie, suspenders and no jacket. I asked him, "Who did you think you are, Larry King?" I asked him if they called him back for a chief's interview? No. The defense rests.

The strongest non-verbal statement you can make in the oral board is what you wear. It is time to step up and make the investment.

Men: Do wear a wool suit in dark blue or gray. Pinstripes are fine, but avoid brown, black, or high fashion brightly colored suits. Sport coats or blazers are out, so is polyester. Tie should be in a solid color such as navy, red, maroon, or yellow stripe, or paisley print. Wear a white or off white, or pale blue long sleeved shirt in cotton or a cotton blend. Starch it no matter what the instructions say. No patterned shirts!

Don't: wear casual or novelty watches, too much jewelry, monograms, religious, political, or fraternity affiliation accessories. Beards are out; mustaches are a gray area. When in doubt, shave it off.

Women: Do wear a tailored business-like suit or dress with a jacket not overly feminine. Choose suits in conservative solid colors such as gray, navy blue, black, beige, or camel with conservative hemlines. Natural fibers, such as wool or linen, are your best bets; most synthetic blends, no matter how attractive, give off a whiff of the bargain basement.

Always wear stockings in natural shades. Avoid dark colors with light colored shoes. Always carry a spare pair.

Don't: Wear anything flamboyant, trendy, faddish, low-cut, too tight or short, or otherwise provocative. You are not trying to make a fashion statement, but trying to get a badge! No heavy perfume, ankle bracelet, stockings with patterns, lace, bold colors, or seams; sandals, very high heels, unusual colors, or casual styles. Ladies: hair up; no bangs falling into your eyes or face.

Don't ever wear slacks, even pantsuits. I had a female who was a paramedic who had been trying for 5 years to get on the fire department. She just missed the cut at Contra Costa County. She was tired of being the bridesmaid. I asked her what she was going to wear. She said she always wore a pants suit. I convinced her it was time to step up and make the investment. She showed up for coaching in a \$650.00 tailored (Killer) wool suit. I showed her in 10 minutes on the video the mistakes she was making in her presentations. She called me two weeks later on her birthday, that she had received her notice that she nailed that job in Oakland. She now has the job of her dreams.

I've been coaching firefighter candidates for over 28 years. You may have great credentials, but if you can't pass the job interview, you don't get the job.

STORIES MAKE THE POINT!

Events like Detroit's Devils Night can be a great example how to use your personal life experiences in answering questions in an oral board. Although the following is from a promotional interview, it might spark a personal experience story you can use in your next oral.

Steve was going for his third engineer's test. Even though he had the knowledge and acting time experience, he hadn't made it high enough on the previous lists to get the badge. When asked questions, he would just give the standard technical answers. Everything changed when he stated caboosing signature stories as part of his answers.

Steve was a firefighter in Arizona. He had also been a firefighter in Detroit. You've heard of Devil's Night during Halloween? Steve had worked many a Devil's Night attacking a fire, picking up and moving to another fire. I asked him if he had ever used these stories in his answers during testing. He said, "No." I marvel why candidates have these great "Nugget" treasure stories that no one has ever heard. These stories can demonstrate their experience and they don't use them.

During his next engineers test, Steve was asked if he were fighting a fire and was given an order to pick up and move, how would he do it? He told the panel how he would do it technically and then took the panel on a Detroit Devil's Night recreating the magic, excitement of the actual events when he had to pick up and move all night. Steve couldn't believe the difference in his testing score. Firefighter's love firefighter stories. He was confident and conversational because he was on his own turf. His signature stories. His own experiences. Oh, by the way, Steve got the badge this time!

POSTURE IN AN ORAL BOARD

What posture is acceptable in an oral? I often receive questions like this one:

Is it okay to use your hands when in the oral board? I have taken public speaking classes in high school and college and have learned to use my hands to help emphasize points, etc. I feel pretty comfortable using my hands to explain myself; my question is will it hurt me in the oral board.

Chris

Chris:

Yes it's O.K. to use your hands. A Stanford University study showed that getting a job is 15% knowledge and 85% percent enthusiasm! How can you be enthusiastic if you're a frozen statue in the chair? It can't be done. If you can light yourself on fire with enthusiasm and bring the excitement, emotional, the magic of the actual event in a story, the oral board will stand up, applaud and watch you burn.

I have candidates tell me, well, they said you can't use your hands. Sit on your hands if you have to. I always ask, "Who are they? Where is that written?" I've never been able to find out who they are, or where that is written.

It's perfectly acceptable to use your hands. If you are already using them, you will cause problems trying to stop. You will start concentrating on stopping and that will throw off your timing, concentration and presentation. A good rule of thumb is the keep your hands and arms in the confines of your body.

When I play back a video for review during private coaching sessions, many candidates go to a different posture. Some even lean forward with placing their elbows on their knees. I look for this different posture. I will ask if that position is more comfortable? If so, I encourage them to use it. It makes for a better-personalized delivery in the oral.

I've had candidates in an oral move the chair right up to the table and place their elbows on the table. After a candidate did that in an oral, one of our rater's commented, "Did you see how he took it right to

us!" He got top scores. It was this candidate's style and personality. He was able to pull it off. You might not. It can be risky. If you're going to try it, first ask the raters if you can move the chair.

Also, when you're that close to the interviewers you have to use the owl affect to talk to the raters. That means you have to turn your head way to the extreme right and left to make contact and answer the raters questions. This can also violate the rater's healthy boundaries and make them feel uncomfortable. Sitting in a comfortable boundary for yourself and the raters is critical. A healthy boundary is where others' end and you begin.

As each candidate enters the room at an oral board, they have a tendency to pull the chair back a little as they sit down. After several candidate s cycle through an interview room the chair can end up further away from the interview table than you want. If so, ask first, and place it where you would feel most comfortable to make your delivery.

Oral Board Skills: Are You Prepared?

I've been on over 100 oral boards. Believe me too many candidates fall short. They think they can wing it. They have firefighter friends that have given them mock orals. Their friends can't bring them selves to tell them how bad they are. You know other candidates who have all the answers. If they had all the answers, they would already have the badge in a city that paid well.

I know you have been number 3 in Seattle, in the top 5 at Ontario, made the cut on the CPS test, waiting for the next call from LA City, and tested in Portland, Chicago, Stockton, Dade County and passed the tough physical agility test in Phoenix to go onto the oral. If you're a medic, you had the advantage of taking more tests.

You have every degree, certificate and merit badge you can get. A volunteer, paramedic, education, and great experience. But you're still the bridesmaid. You don't have the badge. The guy you thought was the village idiot went through our program and has his chest all puffed out with a badge.

NO! You're probably not ready. You've been driving and flying all over the country collecting frequent flyer miles, putting careers on hold, ruining relationships, running out of money and hope, and haven't figured out that with all your education and experience . . . the rubber meets the road in the oral board. If you can't pass the Job Interview, You don't get the Job! This is where you putt for dollars. Even golf pros take lessons.

Haven't you been beat up enough yet? It's been said that when the student is ready to learn, the teacher appears. Are you at this point now? In the articles to follow, we want to help you shortened the learning curve to the closest point between you and the badge.

Ready? OK, here we go. Keep you hands and feet in side the ride at all times:

What are you actually doing going to an oral board? If you answered: selling yourself, making a good impression, and, yes, don't forget to ask for the job are good. But, what you're really doing is auditioning for the part to be a firefighter, engineer, inspector or officer. Just like the part in a play. Do you know your lines? Do you know your part? If you went down to a local college to audition for a part in the community play, you have to know your part and lines wouldn't you? Right? It's the same thing in an oral board. You have to know what you're going to say before you sit in the chair.

Does a Broadway play start on Broadway? Of course not. It starts in Iowa, Miami or Connecticut. They take it on the road to try it out, work out the script, refine and polish it up. If they create enough interest, sell enough tickets and get great reviews from the critics, they make it to the bright lights of Broadway. It's the same in getting ready for your oral boards. You have to take this puppy on the road to get ready for your oral boards. You have to get your script down. A script about you, not a clone of someone else.

Then, you practice, practice, practice. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse until it becomes second nature to you. Once you do this it will be in your subconscious. That's where the magic takes place.

Some will say this will be "canned". No, it sure will be planned though. Success is where preparation meets opportunity. The harder I work, the luckier I get.

Oral Board Skills: First Impressions

What's the first impression the job panel has of you? Your physical appearance, yes. What else? Your choice of words, what you're wearing, eye contact, and your hand shake are all important. You probably missed the most important point!

Your application and resume before you walk in the room! I can't tell you how many times we've seen applications with misspelled words, horrible spelling, chronological order wrong, and we haven't even seen the candidate.

Most resumes are poorly done. The business resume format is not the best for firefighter candidates. That's because with the high volume of candidates, the raters only have a few moments to look at resumes before you walk into the room.

I'm a one-page resume guy for entry level; without a cover letter. Do not give us a book. We will not read it. The board does not have enough time. And do not come into my interview, any interview, thinking you are going to hand the resume to us and we're going to read it then. That is not going to happen. Often candidates will come in, they will try to hand out resumes. This upsets the normal flow of the interview. We're going to read it before you come in the room. If you can submit a resume, get it to personnel to be placed in your file before the interview. Don't fax it. Make the appropriate copies and hand deliver or FedEx them.

A candidate faxed me his resume for review. The cover letter for the position he was applying for stated, "Attached is a "brief" description of my qualifications." I laughed out loud because he had sent me a book. The printer ran out of paper. Save a tree, the raters will not read these volumes. Don't make me send out a search party or go on a treasure hunt to find your great stuff. Hit me with your major qualifications, starting with your experience, on one page. Write it believing the raters won't go past the first page. I don't recommend you put it in a folder. If you still insist putting your resume in a folder, don't cover up the first page with a title page. You can put any supporting details, documents, certificates and letters of recommendation following the first page. Keep it simple.

On a chief's oral you can add more to your resume for education and letters of recommendation. But don't forget to still put the important stuff on the first page, because that's what the raters are going to be looking for.

On the first page of your resume, many people start with their education. For me, I like to have experience jump right off the page. Hit me with experience, bam. Firefighting, bam. Some kind of training, apparatus operator training, fire school, whatever it is. Hit me with that experience. And that doesn't necessarily have to be in chronological order or fire service experience. So many of the resumes I see, way down at the bottom of the first page, I find the important stuff, because that's how it falls in chronological order. It starts with some education up here, some college, whatever, blah blah, experience, now we're down at the bottom of the page where I might not see it.

I was reviewing a candidate's resume and in chronological order his paramedic certification was at the bottom of the page. I asked him, "What were the most important items on his resume?" He said, my firefighter 1 and paramedic certification." They were at the bottom of the page where they might be missed. We put those items on top, so those are the first things that hit you. We put the dates on the right side of the page where it can be referenced. Once you put the dates on the right-hand side of the

page, you list your experience in order of importance; not chronological order. This makes a big difference.

My suggestion for a firefighter resume format:

Name

Address

Phone number and e-mail address

Experience:

Education:

Volunteer and community service

That's all you need. Nothing more, nothing less. Keep it simple.

If you have the opportunity to get that application ahead of time, take it and make a photocopy of it. Then plug in the information. Have a qualified person correct it.

When my son was trying to get on the fire department, he had his mom do that. She is a good speller, and a good typist. Put everything down. Then you've got something that you can transfer to the real application, and that becomes boilerplate. Then you can use it any time you have a new application.

Many applications now are computer generated. They are difficult to type your information into the limited space. These applications can be scanned into a computer where you can easily fill them in.

Make a photocopy because you never know when you're going to that job interview. I talk to people who have put in applications, and six to eight months later, they don't have a copy and don't remember what they've put down.

There are Six Steps In Answering an Oral Board Question

You should have a script that you have rehearsed with a tape recorder of anticipated questions by the time of your oral board. At the interview use these six simple steps in answering an oral board question:

- 1. Actively listen to the entire question.** I have seen candidates stop listening when they think they already have the answer. They don't. Listen!
- 2. Make sure you understand the question.** If not, have the question repeated or rephrased.
- 3. Pause and gather your thoughts.** It might seem like an eternity, but pausing is an acceptable tactic to show interviewers you are paying attention. During the pause, you can figure out the root of what they are asking.
- 4. Ask the question or make the statement to clarify the question.** The question might be, "You see your partner pick up something at an emergency scene, what are you going to do?" Taking the question down to its basic form, what is the issue? Stealing. Then, formulate a simple answer. For example, you might say, "I would ask, 'Is that yours?'" The board is going to tell you that he is taking it, but you already scored the points. After asking the question, you determine your partner is stealing, then what do you do? Since stealing is an ethical issue and he won't put it back, you might say, "Why don't we go the our supervisor?" Why? Stealing is against the law.
- 5. KISS. Keep it simple sweetie. Don't start a soap opera.** Most candidates complicate the process. They intellectualize their answers, run past the question, decide an answer before hearing the entire question and fail to understand the process.
When my son, Rob, was interviewing for his entry-level position for a large department, he was asked, "You have just finished your interview and go outside and find a man down on the sidewalk. What would you do?" He answered, "I would go up and say, 'Buddy, are you all right?'" The raters threw Pens and Pencils in the air and said, "Someone finally got the answer right." For three days, job candidates were saying things like "Activate the 9-1-1 system" and "I know CPR."
- 6. Deliver the Nugget answer with enthusiasm!** Your personalized Nugget answer will set you apart from the clones.

A word to women. You have the advantage of bringing more feelings and emotions to your answers at an interview. Be careful can't be like a conversation with your girl friend. You have about 20 minutes to give complete but concise answers. I've had women at interviews start talking and it was like going on a journey. There seemed to be no final destination. Most men on the panel were not packed for the trip.

Making the First Impression

How long do you think you have once you walk into the oral board to hook them into listening to your stuff? Many guess 2, 3, 6 minutes or more.

How can you make a really great **first impression** to carry you through the interview?

After seeing clone after clone after clone candidates, someone will walk into the room and BAM, BAM, BAM they set the room on fire! They nail every answer. When they leave, the raters say, who was that masked man? We want to give them a badge! You can do it too! I haven't worked with a candidate yet who couldn't do it. They just didn't know they could do it. Just minor corrections are usually all that is needed to separate them from the clone pack of candidates.

How long do you think you have once you walk into the oral board to hook them into listening to your stuff? Many guess 2, 3 and 6 minutes. You have 32 seconds. In that first 32 seconds of your oral board you come in with what's called the "halo" effect.

In that first 32 seconds the board is checking your appearance (the strongest nonverbal statement you can make is what you wear), choice of words, inflection, voice, eye contact and body language. If you open with a **clone** answer, you're dead meat.

There are supposedly six other areas in the oral board where you can recover, but don't count on that happening. Once you see the glaze come over the oral board's eyes, you've lost them and they won't come back. Trust me. Please open using a signature story about yourself.

Candidates have about a 20-minute opportunity for a 25+-year career. The ultimate goal is to have the least amount of distractions in your oral board. Everyone has his or her opinions. It seems once a person gets hired, they quickly forget how hard it really was to nail that badge.

As well meaning as some people are, I don't believe anyone wants to be responsible for a candidate not being able to complete their pursuit for a badge. What might have worked for one candidate doesn't mean it will automatically work for others.

Since oral board scores are calculated in hundredths of points (82.15, 87.63, 90.87, etc), bad or incorrect information can place a candidate less than one point out of the running and put them out of the process. I have seen this all too often.

Question:

I just had an oral where I was asked to tell them about myself, my training and education. I proceeded to "dump the whole load". Two questions later I was asked "What have you done to prepare yourself for the position of firefighter." I was stumped. I had just told them everything and now had nothing to say without reiterating. My question is: How do I differentiate the two questions especially because I don't know what I will be asked.

Reply:

Yep, one of the worst things you want to do is reiterate in the body or closing of your oral board. Sometimes the raters make errors in asking or combining more than one question at a time.

This might help:

The dilemma is **shall I have a short or long answer for the typical opening question "Tell us a little about yourself"**. Remember "a little". This is just an icebreaker question **to get you comfortable in the chair**. A one-minute or less answer about you and your hobbies is all that is needed here.

They don't need your name (they already have it) and NEVER tell them your age (they don't have that and never will until you're hired). A "Nugget" here: If they look baffled after your short answer, ask if they want more. They usually won't.

Most candidates make a big error on this question by dumping the whole load on why they want to be a firefighter, what they have done to prepare, why this city and on and on. That's not what this question is about. **It's only to get you comfortable in the chair**. Then, when the panel starts asking why you want to be a firefighter, what have you done to prepare and the other standard 30 possible oral board questions you have to reiterate what they have already said. You lose valuable time and points here.

When some candidates start talking in an oral, it's like going on a journey. There could be no final destination. Most panel members aren't packed for the trip. I asked a candidate to tell me a little about himself during private coaching one day. I stopped him 12 minutes later somewhere in Montana. I said you have just used up 12 minutes of a 20-minute oral. What do you think we have time for now? Remember this question is **only to get you comfortable in the chair**.