

# The 2 Traits All Hiring Managers Look for During Interviews (Without Even Realizing It)



How cool would it be to have an X-ray into the head of the person who controls your career fate? To understand exactly what a hiring manager at your [dream company](#) is thinking when she's picking which lucky candidate she'll bring on full-time?

Well, until CAT scans start to pick up hiring decisions, that day may still be far away. But in the meantime, let me at least give you a glimpse into the typical interviewing process so you can get a sense of the main criteria hiring managers use to make those decisions.

## How Humans Evaluate Each Other

Even though your potential boss has the fancy title of "Hiring Manager," at the end of the day, she's just a human being. Which means that contrary to all that time you've spent obsessing about [brainteasers](#), she doesn't actually care how many tennis balls could fit in a 747.

Instead, she's going to size you up the same way that all humans size each other up: By getting to know you for a few minutes and then making a snap judgment. It's really not that different from meeting someone at a party, making some chit-chat, and then getting a gut feeling that either says: "Mm...I like talking to you. Tell me more!" or "Umm...I think I need to go to the bathroom. Will you excuse me for a second (a.k.a., the rest of your life)?"

But where does that gut feeling come from?

One [Psychology theory suggests](#) that these flash judgments are really based on two data points:

1. Warmth: Do I like you?
2. Competence: Are you good at what you do?

In other words, we ultimately reduce everyone we meet into four buckets:

1. Warm + Competent
2. Warm + Incompetent
3. Cold + Competent
4. Cold + Incompetent

Any guesses which of these buckets your hiring manager is more likely to pick?

Let's look at her inner monologue for each:

		Competence	
		Competent	Incompetent
Warmth	Warm	"Wow, smart <i>and</i> nice—you'd be great to work with!"	"You're so sweet—but I'd have to hold your hand on everything..."
	Cold	"Sure, you're good at your job—but life is too short to work with people like you."	"Ugh—no."

## How to Get Picked

So clearly, your goal is to get into that top-left quadrant: warm *and* competent. But how do you do that?

The trick is to not only focus on coming up with specific answers to questions that may be asked. But to also focus hard on how you answer those questions. Because, as you'll see, warmth and competence judgments aren't definitive evaluations but mere perceptions. And while you can't change who you are, you absolutely can change people's perceptions of you.

As an example, let's take that old interview chestnut: "Tell me about a time you influenced a team."

A standard answer might go like this:

“OK, so there was this time that I had to work with a bunch of people on a project. Some of them weren’t that easy to work with, so I really had to influence them to do a better job. Which was super tough because they weren’t that motivated. But after I talked with them, they started doing way better. So that’s how I influenced my team.”

The person listening would most likely think the following: *This person is both cold (it feels like she’s throwing her teammates under the bus) and incompetent (wait a second, what did she actually do here—does she even know how to work with other people?).*

While there’s a lot more to this person’s story, this snap judgment from a hiring managers makes it clear just how quickly interviewers can rush to evaluate a candidate.

But it also illuminates the importance of how we tell our stories. Because now consider this same story told a second way:

“OK, so there was this time that I got to work with a bunch of people on a big project—the launch of a new website. I was nervous about it because we all came from different departments—sales, marketing, and engineering. So the first thing I did is I got to know my engineering colleagues better by setting up coffees with each person and learning about their backgrounds and goals. And then, when we ran into a situation where the engineers weren’t making as much progress as we had planned, I was able to reframe the new website around their own goals. Seeing the connection between their personal ambitions and our team mission really seemed to light a fire under them. And the result was that we not only hit our deadline, but we actually launched two weeks early.”

Again, same exact high-level story. But notice how the telling of it changes the candidate from cold to warm (“Nice—I’d want to grab coffee with her too!”) and incompetent to competent (“Wow—she knew exactly what to do and got the results to prove it”). All through subtle techniques like:

- Using specifics: Instead of focusing on the boring abstract, the candidate brings her story to life through details: a new website, falling behind, coffee chats, a clear result
- Being self-aware: Instead of needing to stroke her own ego, the candidate shows she’s human and likable by admitting to her nerves
- Going step-by-step: Instead of glossing over the meat of the story, the candidate draws a clear connection from the challenge to her response to a specific outcome