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Can you keep cool under pressure?

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By Murray Kerchavel

You are walking through a pitch black tunnel, when suddenly a hand comes and slaps you in the face. What would be your immediate reaction?

The answer given, from the three below, could determine how you would deal with an intense situation you might face in an IT job, according to a technology firm that has devised a series of aptitude tests aimed at call centre personnel.

The three responses are:

- (a) Try and find the person, and hit them back
- (b) Get frightened and hide or duck, fearing further assault
- (c) Try to figure out from which direction the assault came from, and find the fastest way possible out of the tunnel

Answer (a) indicates that the person is prone to react in a stressful scenario aggressively and without hesitation. These hypothetically aggressive questions can also increase a person's tension there and then, which could mean that they are susceptible to stress and prone to make dramatic responses and reactions.

Answer (b) generally indicates that the person cannot adequately deal with sudden events, resulting in an alarmed state of mind, freezing in a stressed scenario.

Answer (c) indicates that the person analyses the immediate situation first, and then considers the options that would solve the event. This answer indicates that the person will take a calm and calculated approach to a possible problem situation. All the possible scenarios should be considered before any direct action is taken.

Now, try the following: imagine you are walking along the street and the police suddenly begin chasing someone. They suddenly shout: "Hands up!" What would your immediate reaction be?

- a) Put your hands up in the air and stand there
- b) Flee as fast as you can, disobeying the order, quickly getting out of the situation
- c) Calmly assess what has occurred and survey the area around you. Coolly ask the policemen whether it is you that has been shouted at, or a stranger, asking for guidance as to how you should act next.

Answer (a) might signify that the person would potentially freeze under sudden stress, unable to respond in a dignified or eloquent manner.

Answer (b) could signify that the person reacts without much thought to a sudden pressure situation, and rather than confront the situation calmly, cannot deal with the situation or the possible consequences.

Answer (c) could indicate that the person can calmly analyse the situation, however stressful the person's position may be, and be level-headed enough to request guidance in matters.

Answers (a) or (b) concern the basic fight or flight theory. Does the person flee a potentially stressful or intimidating situation, or do they react following their confrontational instincts to settle the matter in very much a primeval way?

Answer (c) is, in fact, the response that would signify an ideal candidate. It illustrates that the person does not follow their instinctive reactions and that they remain calm under potentially volatile occurrences. They are essentially able to defuse the situation, a quality that is vital in the professional world.

A similar technique, though not in question form, is where the candidates are purposefully made to wait together for about 30 to 45 minutes, without any information given for the delay. This wait and their ignorance of the matter increase their frustration, while building the tension within themselves and the group as a whole.

Eventually, they are addressed together and given a vague explanation concerning the reason for the wait. They are then asked for their feedback regarding the explanation and the interview process in its entirety.

Some typical responses could include the following. (a) The candidate exhibits a high level of irritation, which suggests that they probably become impatient very quickly. It is plausible that they cannot control their temper in times of unknown circumstances. There is also the possibility that they are even feeding off others irritation, signifying a lack of independent thinking.

(b) Other candidates are completely distracted: they have lost interest in the situation and their prerogative. They are vague in their responses and possibly digress from their responses. This signifies that the person may lose focus quickly, especially when left to their own devices in a situation which is unexplained or spontaneous.

(c) The candidate remains calm and composed, even with the disturbance and uncertainty of the chaos around them. The upheaval of the process, which differs from their expectation, is perceived in an interested manner, their concentration never diminishing, their condition unchanged.

This signifies that they are: independent thinking individuals, that they are patient and alert, and are able to concentrate on the original motive for their presence, however much they have been sidestepped, and are ultimately able to complete the original task.

Nivid, through these aptitude tests, can comprehend just how well-matched the individuals would be for the position. The correct answers give considerable insight into the candidate's basic personality, which could well be suppressed at a normal interview.

"The reason we've devised such an intensive testing programme for potential IT applicants is that we supply global mission-critical IT services, which involve our staff encountering extreme levels of stress," said Pushpendrasinh Jhala, chief executive of Nivid.

"The key qualities are the abilities to think logically and calmly under a highly pressurised environment, when our IT professionals could well be on the receiving end of some very tense and diverse scenarios.

"In the current market conditions, it's no longer good enough to be a highly qualified IT technician, to deal effectively with the myriad of complexities which exist in today's business environment.

"They have to be supported by a robust analytical mind that can rapidly assess processes, analyse situations and arrive at potential solutions with clarity of thought.

"Personality profiling is a critical part of the equation in the process of selection, where

IT staff are accessing large amounts of client-facing work on their systems.”

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