

Key Questions for Success: Insights on Interviewing from Lauraine Bifulco

Announcer: You're listening to HR Mixtape Your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Lauraine Bifulco She's a keynote speaker and president at Vantageo HR. Lorraine, thank you so much for sitting down with me at SHRM 24 here on the expo floor to have a chat.

Lauraine Bifulco: I'm delighted to be here. Thank you for asking me.

Shari Simpson: So you have a really unique connection with Paylocity. Not only... I love Paylocity. That's great. You speak at our client conference and I saw that you were speaking here and I just I wanted to take the opportunity to chat with you. So I'm so glad this worked out. We're talking about interviews and compliance.

Lauraine Bifulco: That's my session that I'm speaking at at 3.30 this afternoon. So your timing is impeccable. Perfect.

Shari Simpson: So let's start with HR. As we kind of learn to do interviewing, as we're helping coach managers, what are some of the major compliance things we need to think about in interviewing?

Lauraine Bifulco: That's a great question. You're queuing up my session this afternoon. It has become a complex world with a lot of landmines for HR folks. It used to be back in the day that we could sit down and just have a conversation and it could be free form. and we'd find places we connect and the conversation would meander in a certain direction. And there are now so many things from a compliance perspective that we're not supposed to go there. We're not supposed to ask those questions. We're supposed to plug our ears if somebody tells us the answer to the question we didn't even ask, right? So some of the big things are the issue of protected categories. We've all known that Thou shalt not discriminate based on age, race, religion, et cetera. The list is getting longer and longer every year. And the challenge is that in an interview, first of all, you can't overtly ask those kinds of questions like, oh, please tell me your ethnicity. We got to steer away from that. But the challenge is that the answers to those and the revelation of somebody being in one of those protected categories could come up organically in an interview. And so it's really important. In fact, I have a one or two pager that is like, here's the wrong way to ask that question. Here's the right way to ask the question. So for an HR person, and I'm going to add to this, it's not just your HR people doing the interviews, but if it's any manager within your company, anybody doing the screening, they need to know that steering clear of identifying people as being in one of those protected categories or having a protected characteristic has to be like off limits in an interview.

Shari Simpson: What are some of those questions that you've heard? And I have a whole list in my head. Questions that aren't exactly asking the thing, but are questions that definitely leave the candidate open for sharing things we don't wanna hear. So I'll give you an example.

I've heard people ask the question like, where do you live?

Lauraine Bifulco: Exactly. That could be a little bit problematic. To dovetail off of what you just said, you have the coolest accent It may be coming from a place like, I'm fascinated with languages, right? I studied linguistics. I might just want to chit chat and I want to hear about you and your life story. And it's fascinating for me to say, gee, I love your accent. Where are you from? And that is identifying somebody's national origin. And it could be inappropriate. it could inappropriately influence the decision. So questions like that, like your question of where are you from or where do you live? Our office is located in downtown Chicago. We frequently need to make trips to see clients out in the suburbs. Do you live within the area where that would be feasible for you? So tie it back to what the business need is. Which is a little bit sad because I think there's this kind of element about we're interested in finding out about each other where we kind of can't go there sometimes in an interview.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, I remember coaching a manager many years ago because they would ask or they would evaluate a candidate rather on you know, I really think I could get a beer with this person. Yeah. And yeah, well, and they've asked me, well, how am I supposed to determine that? I was like, OK, well, what is the thing that is most important from a cultural perspective to you? And they'll be like, well, teamwork. I was like, great. So let's ask a question around teamwork to highlight that cultural component you want. It's totally doable. We just have to think about what those questions are.

Lauraine Bifulco: And that goes to being prepared for an interview. going in and just free-forming chit-chatting with people is more likely going to get you in trouble. And, and I know it's very human. If I have an affinity with somebody, I'm going to tend to meander off path and just have conversations about points of commonality that we find when talking to each other. But if you discipline yourself and your team members to have sort of a roadmap for your interview with bullet points, it doesn't mean you can't deviate and ask us extra questions at all along the way. but trying to pull yourself back to making sure that you're sticking to your agenda, your interview agenda. And it allows two individuals that interview the same person to better compare notes. Like if we both free-formed it, I'd be like, well, I talked about their ski trips. What did you talk about? Right. You know. So I want to go back, folks. I don't think I fully answered your initial question, which is where do you what do you stare clear of? So the protected categories, you just got to not go there unless you have a bona fide occupational requirement, which is a small carve out in a subset that doesn't happen very often. But in today's day and age now, we're also seeing increased legislation about asking people about criminal backgrounds and asking them about their salary. The number of cities counties, states that have laws now that mandate in the hiring process, if and when, at what point you can ask questions about that. Really important to be very respectful of where you are interviewing somebody and when you can ask questions about things like criminal background and salary.

Shari Simpson: You know, as you were talking about developing that rapport with a candidate, you want to get personal. You want to ask, you know, are you married? Do you have kids? You know, what are your what are your hobbies? You know, did you serve in the military? You know, there's all these things that feel very genuine and may well be genuine. Yeah. But we have to stay clear of them because it introduces things to our decision making. that is protected that we have to stay away from.

Lauraine Bifulco: That's protected where your intent may not have been. But we all have those biases as well that we may not even be aware of. So, you know, one of the things that I'm a big proponent of is doing work style assessments or in the olden days, we called them personality assessments, which people like to not talk about that anymore. Some people are offended by the concept of a personality assessment. But these tests that do query into people's communication and management and human interaction style. And I think that they are a great way, if you use a good company and a good vetted test, it's a great way to cull some of the information that you're talking about that maybe we would get to in more free form dialoguing and chit-chatting. But it'll talk about, you know, whether someone's an introvert or an extrovert, what they like to do in their spare time, how they tend to work in teams. Are they a solo person or are they a team member? Do they look at the big picture or details? And I really think Not that you would use that as a first line of interviewing, but after you've narrowed the pop down to some candidates you're really interested in, I feel like you can go that deeper level and get there if you use some kind of assessment tool.

Shari Simpson: I also think that's a good opportunity for you to see some skills that might be really unique for your organization. You know, if you work in a high change organization and you are interviewing somebody and they meet all the kind of all the criteria for the role, but then they do an assessment like that and their threshold. They do not roll with change. Yes. Yeah, their threshold for change is really low.

Lauraine Bifulco: It may not be disqualifying, but it's good for you to know that going in. The other thing that I love about the assessments is you can benchmark to your existing team. And so let's look at all of us on a graph with the two candidates that are our finalists and let's see where we're alike and where we're similar and where we're just similar. I think it's super helpful.

Shari Simpson: such an interesting point that I haven't heard anybody talk about before, about benchmarking against your current team. If you are introducing an assessment that you haven't used before on candidates, give it to your whole team. Give it your whole team.

Lauraine Bifulco: That's such great advice. Or at least your senior team, or at least the folks that that person's going to work most directly with. Yeah, absolutely.

Shari Simpson: How have you encouraged HR professionals on how to coach managers to do these interviews? Because I've been there and I've heard many a manager say to me, like, I've never gotten in

trouble before. Like, it's fine. Yeah, you're stressing about nothing. Lauraine Bifulco: I really think it takes training and hiring and retention are so important and doing a good job of them. And we hand the job over to people and don't train them at all. We just presume, oh, it's just a conversation. We're going to get Joe or Sally to go meet with the candidate and they're going to chitchat. And we as HR don't sit down and train them. And I'm talking about a formal training where they'd sit through an hour of don't do this, do this. Here's the protocols. I also think that if somebody is new to interviewing, having them shadow somebody that's a more experienced interviewer, maybe for the first couple of times. That's a good thing to do. But it's something we tend not to do in HR.

Shari Simpson: It's true. And I think we also assume that if you're at a manager level, someone along the way has already given you that feedback. And that's, like you said, probably not true. They probably haven't gotten formal training.

Lauraine Bifulco: To get off topic, we promote people into management positions and we don't train them on anything related to being a manager, not just how to interview. We do. They're good at the job they're doing. We tend to move them into a supervising manner, a managerial role. And we make the presumption that some of that skill set is inherent. And it's not. Sometimes we really do need to train people up on how to do this and do it well.

Shari Simpson: What pitfalls should we be aware of when we're interviewing remotely?

Lauraine Bifulco: Oh, that's such a good question. I'm a big advocate of when remote interviewing to start with a phone screen. Zoom is different. We're also Zoom-esque these days. We know how to do Zoom. I want to first hear how people do on a phone call because we still have a lot of our business life that is spent on phone calls. I also like doing a very first interview via phone because you are blind to what the person looks like. So you don't get the opportunity to see their color of their hair, the color of their eyes, the color of their skin, much about them and seeing what those interview skills are like. After that, if we are going to interview remote and we're going to be, you know, in a Zoom or a Teams or whatever. Look at the background, look if the person is being distracted, if there's family members running around, animals crawling across the keyboard, how well the person makes eye contact. As much as you could try to assess that you would assess in person, you should try to do when you're doing it. via some kind of remote platform. But I mean, now that I've said that, I am a huge advocate for at least one in-person meeting. And I know it's not always possible in every scenario, but I still think nothing takes the place of in-person communication. You know, we have studies in science that shows us that it's a very small percentage of communication that happens verbally. And studies since COVID that have been done about what's happened in our world since we've migrated to all talking to each other over the computer, that there are a lot of cues that gets missed because we just can't pick up on them unless we're in person.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, I'm not going to get the exact time number right,

but it has to do with how fast the computer screen is rendering your micro expressions, and it can't do it. So you're missing all those little...

Lauraine Bifulco: You're missing those things. It was one of the reasons why they determined people were so exhausted during COVID, because your brain has to work so much harder at trying to pick up on those cues over an electronic medium than in person. And so it was exhausting us. It seems like it shouldn't be any more work than sitting and talking in person, but it actually makes your brain work a heck of a lot harder. Yeah.

Shari Simpson: As you think about the field of interviewing in general, how do you think it's going to change as the future evolves, as technology evolves, as we look forward to the younger generation who are digital natives? What is your predictions there?

Lauraine Bifulco: Gosh, the magic wand, the crystal ball. I think we're going to use AI a lot more in the screening. I guess maybe I can't foresee a world or I hope I don't foresee a world where AI would completely take the place of the human interaction piece. I hope it doesn't. But I think we're already seeing AI being used pretty prevalently right now in at least an initial screen of resumes on paper to weed down the candidates. I think there may be some form of AI interviewing that starts becoming a lot more prevalent. So what I was talking about, that initial phone screen, the initial screenings, I think we will probably see technology step in and play a bigger role in that. I'm not sure I think that's fabulous. I think it may be a time saver, but I don't know that it's going to actually end up with better results. We'll see. AI gets smarter every day. So, you know, ask me that in three months from now, I might change my mind, right?

Shari Simpson: Yeah, I am curious to see if the increase of AI is going to lead to moving backwards as far as getting jobs means having the human connection, who you know, who you talk to, the fairway conversation.

Lauraine Bifulco: Already seen, and before we were even calling it AI, but just when companies years ago now, four or five years ago, where you know, electronic application systems became more and more prevalent that I have a friend, I think he's great for your job, I wanna introduce him to you. And that's the way good jobs were landed and good people were found, right? That human connection of I know somebody and I've seen companies that can't accommodate that and tell my very good friend that I'm trying to refer directly to you, you gotta go to our website and you gotta go through our electronic system. So I think we have already lost a little bit of that ability to get someone in the door, so to speak, right?

Shari Simpson: What do you think is the most important interview question to ask and why?

Lauraine Bifulco: I have a couple. One of my favorite interview questions and my most important one is, maybe not for a very first interview, but definitely if it's a second interview, I start with this almost every time. OK, Shari, you've now met with two other of my colleagues and you and I are sitting here today. So obviously you're

interested. What have you learned up until this point about our company and what makes you still want to be sitting in the chair interviewing that you think you're going to be a good fit and we're going to be a good fit for you? That is extremely telling. There are people that do little to no homework about the company before they apply and they interview. And that to me is a bad sign. But when somebody responds to that question and is able to say, well, I heard from your colleague this and I learned this from going online and reading this about you or the firm. And here's my experience and why I think that's a great match. To me, that's already so many like check boxes in the right direction. I absolutely love asking that question. And then I have another favorite question. And I learned this from one of those assessment tools that I use that Some of the assessment tools will queue up for you, good interview questions that you go into a final interview and questions you wouldn't have thought of asking. And this is one that based on a certain personality communication profile, this question is suggested. I ask everyone this question now. Shari, tell me about the biggest mistake you ever made at work and what you did to fix it. And do you know there are people that either A, can't answer. It's a hard question. And I always tell people, take a few minutes and think about it. There are people that either can't answer it. And I have had many people say to me, I've never made a mistake at work. It's pretty much, there's no more interviews after that. If that's everyone out there, if you're listening to this, never say that.

Shari Simpson: You know, it's funny. I have been asked that question before in an interview. And early, early, early in my career, somebody gave me bad advice. And they said, well, answer the question, but answer it in a way that it's, like, really, really positive. Like, you didn't really quite make the mistake.

Lauraine Bifulco: Or it was really your co-worker that made the mistake. And you sort of were going to, out of solidarity, pretend it was your mistake and help fix it. Yeah, that's a bad answer.

Shari Simpson: I quickly realized that that wasn't setting me up for success. And so you show up so much more authentically if you are sharing what you really experienced and what you really learned from it. And your interviewer, that's what they want to hear. They don't care about the mistake. They care about how you handled it, the outcome.

Lauraine Bifulco: Nobody wants to, nobody expects to hire someone that's never going to make a mistake. We all do. And I think the reality is we want to know what you do with that. You said, did you grow from it? Did you learn? Did you get better? Did you improve things? How did you handle it?

Shari Simpson: All right. As we wrap up our conversation, the last question I want to ask you is about when candidates have questions for the interviewer. What are some good questions that the candidate can ask the interviewer to get together two pieces of information? One, a better understanding of how the culture of work is done in the organization. And two, their direct supervisor that they're going to

work with diagnosing potentially what their management style is.

Lauraine Bifulco: Wow. That's a really good question. So for the candidate, asking a good question I'm not sure everyone would answer this, but tell me about somebody in the past that's been in this role that was successful. Tell me about somebody in the past that was in this role that wasn't successful. No need to mention names, but hearing the stories of why it worked in the past with someone and why it didn't. Now that will work if it's not a brand new role, but I think that's a great question. Another question to assess the manager. If the candidate asks the manager, tell me about your relationship with your boss. Who was your favorite boss that you ever worked with? And it could be present or past. And who was your least favorite boss you ever worked with and why? You learn a lot about somebody from those questions. So I think it's a fair question for an interviewer to ask a candidate as well. But I think it's an interesting spin that a candidate might pose those questions to the interviewer.

Shari Simpson: This was a great conversation. Thanks for sitting down with me. I appreciate it. You are so welcome.

Lauraine Bifulco: It's been an honor and a pleasure. Thank you.