



## Navigating Toxic Work and School Environments

### Interview Questions for a Potential Mentor, Advisor, or Boss

Throughout our careers we experience many interviews, formal and informal. By saying a formal interview, I refer to an interview you may take for a job or for admission into a university. An informal interview, then, refers to conversations you may have with a potential mentor, advisor, or other affiliate where you are “testing out” whether you want to continue in a professional relationship. Examples of informal interviews can be when you meet a potential mentor at a networking event, meeting a professor you are considering as your doctoral advisor in graduate school, meeting a professor who you may want to work with in their laboratory as an undergraduate, or even having a Zoom meeting with someone inspiring who you would like to work with one day.

We commonly think of interviews as a time when the potential mentor, boss, or advisor is testing and getting to know us; however, it is also an important moment where we must get to know them as well! An interview, formal or informal, is a crucial moment to take advantage of and determine whether or not you can work well with this person.

People, myself included, make the mistake of thinking that someone with more credentials than them is wise, intelligent, kind, or well-intentioned. Unfortunately, there are many bad bosses, abusive managers, and ill-intentioned advisors out there. The initial interactions with these potential colleagues and coworkers are opportune moments to ask the right questions and determine whether working with this person will lead to reaching your career goals, or leave you traumatized from abusive and harassing behavior.

It can be very difficult to determine whether a potential mentor, advisor, or boss will be a good fit for you. For instance, for the first year of working in my PhD advisor's laboratory, he was somewhat nice; however, later on, once the student he was bullying graduated and left the university, he slowly shifted his bullying to me. At the height of when my PhD advisor was being emotionally abusive to me, I overheard him tell a potential new PhD student that he was “a nice guy” when I was waiting outside his office for their meeting to end. Even though I had asked other people working with this professor about how positive their experience was in his group, like graduate students, post doctoral researchers, and my department advisor, none indicated that he exhibited bullying behavior. Nobody spoke up or, perhaps, was aware of his behavioral patterns.

While it is impossible to completely avoid manipulative, abusive, or otherwise toxic people in life, the following questions can help you learn more about a potential mentor, advisor, or boss and determine whether you would like to work with them or not. Note that you should and can ask more than these questions; consider these as guidelines to ascertain whether this person will be supportive of you and your career.



## Navigating Toxic Work and School Environments

### Interview Questions for a Potential Mentor, Advisor, or Boss

2

## Questions:

### How do they envision working with you?

- Identify micromanagers
- Identify managers who are too distanced and/or uninterested in you and your career development
- How willing are they to listen to or accommodate you and your working style
  1. How often do you prefer to meet with your direct reports/students?
    - a. What are your expectations for these meetings? (length, frequency, discussion topics, recording meeting notes, who leads the meeting etc.)
  2. How often do you hold group/department/team meetings?
    - a. What are your expectations for these meetings? (length, frequency, who is present, who leads the meeting, discussion topics, recording meeting notes, etc.)
  3. How often are you making decisions for the group/department/team's direction and objectives? How do group members give input or help with the decision-making process?
  4. Are there opportunities for professional development? If so, what are the ones you would recommend? (Note that in academia, it is common in physics and engineering for advisors and professors to look down on or retaliate against students who dedicate time to activities outside pure academic research with their lab group. It's important to find a professor or advisor who is supportive of YOUR career goals, which should include professional development opportunities.)
  5. How do you support your team members' career goals?

### How much do they value and work towards inclusion?

- Are they knowledgeable about issues like sexism, racism, and other prejudice?
- Will they be supportive of you if you faced harassment or discrimination?
- Are they inclined to harass or discriminate against you?
- Are they willing to listen and learn to grow their knowledge of oppression?
- Do they have a track-record of implementing systems and policies that promote inclusion?
  1. Ask to meet other people on the team to determine how diverse the workplace is. (Note that if you are the ONLY person in a specific demographic, this could be a red flag.)
  2. Ask how they promote inclusion in the workplace.
  3. Ask how diverse the organization, team, department, etc. is.
  4. Ask for information from the company's HR or university's diversity office regarding number of incidents of harassment or discrimination that have been reported (If this number is very low or if they do not know, this is a red flag!).
  5. What groups of individuals do you consider underrepresented in this workplace, and how is the company/research group working to hire, retrain, or advance people within the groups?
  6. What type of people get promoted, and how are they celebrated?



## Navigating Toxic Work and School Environments

### Interview Questions for a Potential Mentor, Advisor, or Boss

#### Other Key Items to Pay Attention to During the Interview:

1. Is the workplace visibly diverse?
2. Do you feel welcome in the interview?
3. Do you feel like they value your opinions and ideas?
4. Were teamwork and collaboration spoken of positively?
5. Do they offer ongoing training and development?
6. Are people happy and engaged at work?
7. Do they talk about inclusivity openly, and do they practice what they preach?

#### Additional Resources:

There are many resources online with many more questions you can ask. Below are a few places to start if you would like more ideas:

##### Workplaces:

<https://bccareercenter.wordpress.com/2020/01/27/how-can-i-tell-if-a-workplace-is-inclusive-or-not/>

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-best-way-to-figure-out-if-a-companys-truly-committed-to-diversity-and-inclusion>

##### PhD Advisor:

<http://ijobs.rutgers.edu/wordpress/2016/11/17/choosing-a-thesis-advisor-choose-wisely-and-avoid-years-of-tears-in-graduate-school/#sthash.YN3cvbhm.dpbs>

<https://www.quora.com/What-are-some-red-flags-of-a-toxic-PhD-advisor>

<https://blog.ml.cmu.edu/2020/03/02/questions-to-ask-a-prospective-ph-d-advisor-on-visit-day-with-thorough-and-forthright-explanations/>