



THE COMPANY • THE CANDIDATE

Paul Pompeo

PRONOUN PRONOUNCEMENTS . . . AS PAST AND PROLOGUE

The hidden meaning of ‘you’ and ‘they’ and the importance of tense during an interview

I’m starting this column with an old joke that, for some reason, I still find amusing: *The past, present and future walk into a bar. It was tense.* Yes, I’m sure your next thought is, “Don’t give up your day job.”

Never fear. In many past columns we’ve talked about the “war for talent” being fought every day in the lighting, electrical, energy and IoT arena. And, as I’m sure you’re aware, our industry is not alone in this battle. Unemployment has shrunk to record levels, which is a wonderful thing—unless you are trying to hire someone.

This month, we will talk about a couple of tools to help hiring managers in the battle for top candidates. To put it more bluntly, how do you separate the top performers from the ham and eggheads?

I recently came across an interesting article titled “If You Want To Fail A Job Interview, Just Say The Words ‘You’ And ‘They’” on *Forbes.com*. Written by Mark Murphy, chairman and CEO of Leadership IQ and a *New York Times* bestselling author, the piece offers candidates advice on words to avoid (or to use) to improve their chances of being perceived as a top performer during an interview.

The title intrigued me, as the words it focuses on seemed very minor and random—it seemed almost petty to me. A couple of cartoony illustrations didn’t change my initial impression that the author was grasping at straws, trying to draw some big conclusions from some very small pieces of evidence.

Nevertheless, I began reading the piece, and the more I read, the more my



skepticism receded. In fact, many of the examples brought to mind candidates I’d spoken with—both for client companies of The Pompeo Group as well as for employment by The Pompeo Group.

While the research study Murphy discusses is focused on candidate tips, for our column, we will flip this around for employers and hiring managers. Want another key indicator to help identify high performers during your interview process? According to Murphy, it boils down to a candidate’s choice of words in two areas:

1. Tense. The research study found that low performers would couch their interview answers in the present or future tense. When asked about a scenario, they would say, “in that situation, we...” (present tense) or “in that set of circumstances, I will...” (future tense). In fact, low performers used future tense 70 percent more often than high performers. Even more, low performers used present tense 120 percent more often than high performers. Why? Low performers will, when asked about specific situations, give general answers about ways they would respond in the future, or, if using present tense, speak about how they would respond in theory.

On the other hand, according to the research, high performers will use past tense more often—in fact, 40 percent more than low performers. Why? Because their answers to interview questions are culled from actual past experience and performance—not based on what they would do hypothetically, or how they would react in theory.

2. Pronouns. For someone like myself who has interviewed literally thousands of lighting professionals over the years, this was something I must

admit I hadn't noticed until it was discussed in this research study. Low performers use third-person pronouns (they, she, he) 90 percent more often than high performers; neutral pronouns (it, itself) 70 percent more often; and second-person

pronouns (your, you) a whopping 400 percent more than high performers do. Wow! Notice that low performers are using second, third and neutral pronouns to talk about things in theory. Your high performers will use "I" or "we" because they

are sharing from past experiences, successes and accomplishments.

So, what seems like a slight grammatical difference is actually a great, albeit subtle, indicator of your interview candidate's performance level. Asking for examples of how a candidate would

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handle various situations will allow you as the interviewer to gather more clues as to the candidate's past performance and performance potential.

Do these verbal cues work 100 percent of the time? Of course not—what does? But this research study shared by Mark Murphy should give you a couple of additional tools in identifying and then separating that high performer from the candidate pack.

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