



LESSON 2

THE CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE: UNCOVERING HOW CANDIDATES THINK

Introduction: Putting Them to the Test

The Critical Incident Technique is an advanced questioning method that takes the behavioral interview to the next level. Instead of asking for a past example, you present the candidate with a hypothetical but realistic and challenging work-related scenario—a “critical incident”—and ask them how they would handle it.

This technique is particularly effective for assessing a candidate’s problem-solving skills, their judgment, and their ability to think on their feet.

The Difference Between a Critical Incident and a Hypothetical Question

While a critical incident is a hypothetical scenario, it is different from a traditional hypothetical question in a few key ways:

- **It is Specific and Realistic:** A critical incident is a detailed, job-relevant scenario that the candidate is likely to encounter in the role.
- **It is a “No-Win” Situation:** The best critical incidents are complex, challenging situations where there is no single “right” answer. This forces the candidate to weigh different options and to demonstrate their thought process.
- **It Focuses on the “How,” Not Just the “What”:** The goal of a critical incident is not to see if the candidate can guess the “right” answer, but to understand how they would approach the problem.

How to Design and Use Critical Incidents

Step 1: Identify the Critical Competencies

Start by identifying the most critical competencies for the role. What are the make-or-break skills that a successful candidate must have?

Step 2: Brainstorm Realistic Scenarios

Work with the hiring manager and top performers in the role to brainstorm a list of realistic and challenging scenarios that they have actually faced on the job.

Step 3: Frame the Question

Frame the scenario as a direct, open-ended question that puts the candidate in the driver's seat.

- **Starter Phrase:** "Imagine you are in this situation... Walk me through, step-by-step, how you would handle it."

Step 4: Probe Deeply into Their Rationale

As the candidate walks you through their solution, use probing questions to understand their thought process.

- "Why did you choose that course of action?"

- "What are the potential risks and benefits of that approach?"

- "What other options did you consider?"

- "What information would you need to make a final decision?"

Examples of Critical Incidents for Different Roles

Hotel Manager:

“Imagine it’s a Saturday night, and your hotel is at full capacity. A pipe bursts and floods a hallway on the third floor, forcing you to evacuate 10 rooms. At the same time, a large wedding party is complaining about the noise from the bar, and your night auditor has just called in sick. Walk me through how you would prioritize and handle this situation.”

Restaurant Manager:

“You have just received a negative review on Yelp from a customer who claims they got food poisoning at your restaurant. The review is getting a lot of attention online. At the same time, your head chef has just told you that two of your line cooks have quit, effective immediately. How would you respond to this crisis?”

Corporate Office Manager:

“You have just discovered that a trusted employee has been submitting fraudulent expense reports. This employee is a top performer and is well-liked by the team. How would you handle this situation, from the initial investigation to the final resolution?”



CREATE YOUR OWN CRITICAL INCIDENT QUESTION

Time needed: 30 minutes

What You'll Do

Design a realistic workplace scenario question that reveals how candidates think and solve problems. Learn what makes a great behavioral question.

What is a Critical Incident?

A critical incident is a realistic work challenge with no single "right" answer.

- **Bad question:** "How do you handle stress?"

- **Good critical incident:** "A guest is screaming at the front desk because their room isn't ready. Two other guests are waiting to check in. Your manager is in a meeting. What do you do?"

- **Why it works:** Shows how they actually think, prioritize, and problem-solve under pressure.

Instructions

Step 1:

Choose Your Role (5 minutes)

Pick ONE role: _____

- ☒ Hospitality:
- Front Desk Agent

▪ Restaurant Server

▪ Housekeeping Supervisor

▪ Event Coordinator
- ☒ Corporate:
- Customer Service Rep

▪ HR Coordinator

▪ Sales Associate

▪ Marketing Assistant

Step 2:

Create Your Critical Incident (10 minutes)

Download the worksheet and build your scenario:

- ☒ Your scenario must include:
- I Multiple problems happening at once

▪ No obvious "correct" answer

▪ Time pressure

▪ Real situation that could happen

▪ Competing priorities

Example - Restaurant Server:

"It's Saturday night dinner rush. You're serving 5 tables. Table 3's food is taking too long and they're getting angry. Table 5 just spilled red wine on their clothes. Table 1 is ready to order but you haven't greeted Table 2 yet. Your manager just seated Table 6 in your section. The kitchen is backed up. What do you do and why?"

Now write YOUR scenario:

Role: _____

The Situation: (Write 3-5 sentences describing the challenge)

- 1

- 2

- 3

Why it's complex: (List 2-3 competing priorities in this scenario)

- 1
- 2
- 3

Step 3: Create Probing Questions (10 minutes)

Write 5 follow-up questions to dig deeper into their answer:

Good probing questions ask:

- Why they chose that priority
- How they'd handle pushback
- What they considered
- What they'd do if their solution failed

Example probing questions for the restaurant scenario:

- 1

"Why did you prioritize that table first instead of the others?"
- 2

"What would you say to the angry table to buy yourself time?"
- 3

"If your manager disagreed with your approach, what would you do?"
- 4

"How would you prevent this situation in the future?"
- 5

"What if Table 5 demanded you comp their entire meal?"

Now write YOUR 5 probing questions:

1

2

3

4

5

Step 4: Test Your Scenario (5 minutes)

Answer these quality checks:

- ☒

Does it have at least 3 competing priorities?
- ☒

Is there time pressure?
- ☒

Could it really happen in this role?
- ☒

Is there more than one acceptable answer?
- ☒

Would their response reveal their thinking process?
- ☒

Are your probing questions open-ended (not yes/no)?
- ☒

Do your probing questions explore different angles?

Score: 7/7 = Excellent | 5-6 = Good, revise | Below 5 = Start over

Step 5: Create the Answer Guide (Optional but Recommended)

What would a GREAT answer include?

List 3-4 things you'd want to hear:

- ① _____
- ② _____

What would be a RED FLAG answer?

List 2-3 responses that would concern you:

- ① _____
- ② _____

Self-Check

Read your scenario out loud. Ask yourself:

- ☐

Would this stress me out if it happened to me?

(Good = yes)
- ☐

Could someone answer in 2-3 minutes?

(Good = yes)
- ☐

Is it too easy?

(If yes, add another problem)
- ☐

Is it unrealistic?

(If yes, simplify)

Common Mistakes

- ☐

Scenario has one obvious right answer
- ☒

Multiple acceptable approaches exist
- ☐

"How would you handle a difficult customer?" (Too vague)
- ☒

Specific situation with details
- ☐

Probing questions are yes/no
- ☒

"Why did you..." "What would you..." "How would you..."
- ☐

Scenario is too simple
- ☒

At least 3 things going wrong at once

Submit Your Work

- ① Your complete critical incident scenario
- ② List of 5 probing questions
- ③ Quality check score
- ④ Answer guide (what good/bad responses look like)