



Tell Me About a Time . . . by Earl Creps

As I sat tapping on my computer keyboard in a Midwestern Starbucks, an unexpected event unfolded nearby. A manager sporting a green apron sat down at a table with a young man who turned out to be a prospective employee. The purpose of their meeting was a job interview—Starbucks style.

The conversation seemed quite practiced on the manager's end. She worked hard to help the interviewee feel comfortable while being questioned. Our tables were close enough to make the entire conversation public domain. As they talked, I had an impulse to type up the progress of the meeting and eventually produced something of a rough transcript, plus some impressions.

If you apply for a job at Starbucks (maybe while church planting), your interview will revolve around questions like these:

1. Why do you want to work at Starbucks?
2. Tell me about a time you have worked in a situation that required a dress code.
3. Tell me about a time you had to deal with someone who wasn't getting his or her job done.
4. Describe a time when you failed to meet a customer expectation.
5. Tell me about a difficult decision you had to make at work when you didn't know the right course of action.
6. Tell me about a time when you had to make a difficult ethical decision.
7. In your most recent job, describe your relationships with your co-workers.

The manager wrapped up the exchange by informing the applicant that the average employee takes four months to reach proficiency on the store's learning curve. A huge international conglomerate was asking only seven questions. But six of these items dealt with actual conduct rather than opinions or intentions.

After the initial question about motivation, every other one began with something like: "Tell me about a time . . ." In other words, Starbucks believes a person's behavior is best predicted by patterns that can be identified in the past.

While I may *believe* that I work well under stress, or I may *value* doing so, my actual conduct is the only real indicator of what type of person I become when the heat is on.

The Starbucks method immediately reminded me of all the bad job interviews I have conducted. These mostly focused on the person's "values" or "gifts" or "attitudes," but paid very little attention to how they

actually lived. While I assumed that resume items reported the individual's conduct, they really only offered me information about previous jobs.

How the applicant lives day to day only comes out when I say words like, "tell me about a time . . ." I intend to use this approach in all future interviewing. Of course, the respondent may misrepresent himself or herself, but so do resumes and references.

The Starbucks method brought to mind the words of James: That we are to be doers of the Word and not just hearers only. If I really live the values I profess, then I will be able to answer questions like those that begin with "Tell me about a time when . . ." My conduct is the only trustworthy indicator of what I truly value. It is the difference between Christianity as talk and as walk.

All of us value evangelism, but when was my last spiritual conversation with a person in need of faith in Christ? All of us value unity, but when was the last time I resisted the urge to say something negative about a peer? All of us value our families, but when was the last time I took a day off just to be with them (and turned off my cell phone)?

My Starbucks experience made me wonder if, in our first moment at the Judgment Seat of Christ, we might hear the words, "Tell me about a time . . ."

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The Right Question

*Leaders do not need answers.
Leaders must have the right questions.*

Two small-membership churches merged. As they prepared to break ground for a new building for the new congregation, they prepared a video in which they interviewed some of the older members using this question:

What is the legacy of faith that you want to leave for the next generation?

Do Our Assumptions Still Fit? by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Peter Drucker maintains that organizational problems are not the result of groups doing things poorly or even doing the wrong things. Organizations fail, he contends, because the assumptions on which the organization was built, and on which it is being run, no longer fit reality. Could our congregations be taking for granted some things that were safe assumptions in the past, but no longer fit? Consider the following:

- *People in our communities are religious.* The only religious preference that grew in every U.S. state since 2001 was “no religion.”
- *There are lots of “young families with children.”* Married couples with children under 18 living at home represented 50 percent of households in the 1950s; today, only 25 percent.
- *Most adults are married.* Married couples now make up just under 50 percent of adult households in the U.S.
- *Young adults get married in their twenties and early thirties and return to church.* Married people are more likely to attend church; but of young adults between 25 and 35, just over half are single.
- *Making our budget is a sign of vitality.* Perhaps. But some churches have more money because a higher proportion of their membership is over age 50, the group with 70 percent of the wealth in the country.
- *People find us through the newspaper or Yellow Book.* Increasingly, the first place a person learns about your church is the Internet.
- *Most people in our community already attend a church.* The percentage of unchurched people has increased in virtually every part of the U.S. in recent years. And do not be misled by the polls showing that over 40 percent of people worship each week. The actual attendance numbers do not back that up.
- *Many people have moved away.* This is true in some areas, but churches can be too quick to jump to conclusions. Often the children of church members have moved away; but there are new residents, often less well off, who have moved in. How else does a new church succeed in a building once used by a congregation that died because “all the people have moved away”?
- *There is one right way to worship.* A church member told a pastor, “I don’t like guitars in worship.” The pastor replied, “That’s exactly what people said when the organ was introduced.” Many worship practices considered normative today emerged out of a particular era and context that may have changed.

We demand little and expect much.

Rudy Rasmus

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