

Chapter 1

A View from Behind the Interview Desk

“Did you crack the case?”

About five minutes had passed in my first interview with a Bain & Company partner. It was the first of two interviews I would have that morning—the “fit” interview, to be followed by a case interview. The partner’s job was easy. He would determine whether I suited the Bain culture and might make a good summer intern. I thought the interview was going very well. We had a nice exchange about the firm, why I was interested in management consulting and why he thought Bain was the best place to work. And then I felt things start to slip.

I couldn’t put my finger on it. Maybe it was intuition from several years of client meetings. Maybe it was a slight change in his body language. Whatever the source, I knew he was mentally tossing me in the “ding” bucket. And there was no way I would let that happen without a fight. My blood pressure rising by the second, I took a risk and asked him point blank, “What problem do you have with my working for Bain this summer?”

He blinked in surprise, then paused awkwardly. Finally, he spoke: “Well, let me see,” he said, pulling out my resume again. “To me you seem like the kind of person who would fit well at EDS [systems consulting] or Andersen [*Ouch! I had just come from there!*]. So my question to you is: *did you crack the case?*”

All I could do was smile and say, “We’ll find out soon. My next interview is the case.” We shook hands and I left. I cracked that first case. Within the next two days I went to the final round, cracked three more cases, and was offered the job.

My own entrance into management consulting is a lesson in how quickly an interviewer can make decisions about a candidate. It is also a lesson in how each candidate has the power to change the course of an interview. Like everyone else, I had prepared for my case interviews using whatever materials and mock interview partners I could find. But to be honest, I still felt unprepared and incredibly nervous.

“Did you crack the case?” This question sums up the purpose of the case interview. Cracking a case is not a matter of finding *the one* right answer. Nor is it a matter of simply saying all the expected things during the interview. To crack a case is to systematically solve a business problem using logic and data in an organized manner. It is one of the few objective criteria firms can use to evaluate and compare you to other candidates.

Some schools do not disclose MBA grades. Undergraduate performance is somewhat dated and is considered before interviews, not afterward. GMAT scores help, but almost all candidates are above the “high” threshold. Looks, personality and manners do play minor roles, as I’ll discuss later. But in the end, it always comes down to the case.

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Over time, as I interviewed MBAs and undergraduates and talked with other interviewers, I found the “crack the case” mentality to be a constant theme. Why? Because a case interview is a unique tool that allows the firms to “test drive” their candidates, to assess their mental horsepower, and to preview their ability to communicate with clients. In the firms’ view, your performance during the case interview is the best predictor of your future success.

In this chapter, I’d like to give you a glimpse into the mind of a typical interviewer talking with two different candidates. Both look great on paper, with comparable backgrounds and experience. They are from the same school and have similar GPAs and GMAT scores. What will differentiate them as they try to solve this basic profitability case? Read on.

Meet Danny Ding

Minutes 0-2



Danny’s a nice guy. He steps forward quickly after I call his name in the waiting room where twenty-five candidates are sitting, making small talk with the greeters. Firm handshake. Good eye contact. Nice smile and a few pleasant comments about the weather. I like this guy; we’re off to a good start as we walk to the interview room. Today we’re in a fancy hotel suite, and I motion for him to take the seat across the desk from me.