



## INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW WITH STAN

### LEVEL 2

Stan is a forty-three-year-old, mid-level vice president at a company we will call Textile Products, Inc. TPI is the largest manufacturer in its industry, generating over \$5 billion in revenue. TPI is seen as the best in its class, commanding almost a quarter of total market share. Stan has worked there for 20 years and has over 40 people reporting to him in his procurement group.

TPI's CEO suggested Stan when I asked to interview someone in the organization who had appeared to have great capacity for leadership early in his/her career, but had not risen to meet that potential. In Stan's interview, we will see that he has acquired the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform his job (in other words, his Lateral development meets expectations), but we will also see that his Vertical development has not crossed the effectiveness transition. In other words, he has the required knowledge and skills to perform well in his industry and profession, but he is viewed as not meeting the expectations required for leadership advancement that would continue his ascent in the organization.

Stan's CEO recognized that Stan had reached a point where he didn't have what it takes to continue increasing his influence. Stan had reached a "personal effectiveness ceiling", but the CEO could not put his finger on exactly why this was the case. I have sat through many talent evaluation meetings of next generation leaders where the evaluation committee cannot specifically name what it is that causes their lack of confidence in certain high potential leaders, but they know that the person doesn't have what it takes. What I hope to illustrate in the Level 2 and Level 3 interviews is that it is a lack of Inside-Out understanding in many cases that garners these types of reviews.

When I met Stan, he seemed a little skeptical of our time together. Stan was average height with an athletic, but wiry build. He was wearing a short-sleeve, no-iron shirt with a tie and khaki pants. He appeared uneasy, sitting forward in his chair with some intensity in his voice. Initially, I was impressed with Stan's quickness and the certainty with which he responded to my questions. My initial reading was that he was Level 4, which would have been a reasonable expectation based on his age and position. It soon became apparent, however, that he didn't understand the world, himself, or others from Level 4. What initially came across as confidence and certainty, quickly degenerated to narcissism, concreteness, and simplicity. We will see in his words how hard it is for him to describe the complex relationship between differing points of view. He views almost everything through the lens of "What's in it for me?" He lives in a win-lose world where motivation to work, and work well, is about personal gain or loss, and he assumes that this is what motivates everyone else.

## STAN'S INTERVIEW

***We can start wherever you want to start. Do any of the cards jump out at you?***

No. We can start with success, I guess. Business-related. When I go home at night, I am very task-oriented, and I want to see that I accomplished something that day. You know, I want to see the bridge that got built or whatever.

***So is success for you the completion of a task?***

Completion of something, whether it's big or small. I want to see something built at the end of the day, week, month, year—whatever it is.

***Why is that important to you?***

Just that I'm moving in a direction. To me, that's the tangible part. Whether my goal is to make more money—either personally or professionally—and at the end of the day I made that little step, then I've been successful. A completion of the task at hand.

***How important is it to you that others see that you've completed the task successfully?***

I think it's extremely important. And for me personally, my immediate boss or the CEO or anybody who I work for in the food chain—or even the people who work for me—they don't have to slap me on the back and say I did a good job because I know I did. If I perceive that they think I did, then I'm okay. I really believe that if I've laid the groundwork for people to complete a task, that's enough. But everybody is different. Some people want to have you recognize them and say, "You did a good job."

***You appreciate that some people want that?***

They want that. Even though I don't need that and never have, I recognize that there are a lot of people who do. Some people want you to take them to lunch—that's a tangible thing. That's good. There are other people who are very money-oriented and they want to get . . . we all want to get . . . a big bonus at the end of the day, but some people are more in tune with that.

They feel like they haven't been recognized unless something like that happens. But recognizing a person's achievement is very important, I think.

***Are you saying you believe that it's important to figure out how a person wants to be rewarded?***

I think it's critical. I mean, you have a task in front of you that you're trying to achieve for some reason, and when you get there, you did it either to make yourself feel good, or to get a better job someplace, or to qualify to do something else. I assume you're not just doing it because you didn't have anything else to do today when you got up.

For me, that's a driving factor. If I want to be successful, I have to make the people around me make me a hero. In order for me to be successful, they have to be helping me get there. I can't do it by myself, if they are going some other way.

***Like what way?***

Whatever their activity is during the day. If their job is to answer the phones, so that when someone calls me or this nebulous staff, this wheel with all the spokes, the phone always gets answered, then that's good; that's a reflection on me and the group below me. I really believe that it is my job to make my boss look good, and it's his job to make the guy above him look good, and it's his job to make the CEO look good and really, the CEO's job is to make the board of directors and the stockholders look really good, like they did the right thing by buying our stock. That's what it boils down to.

***Would the CEO say that?***

I don't know.

***From your perspective though, he wouldn't look as good if there weren't this group of people below him trying to make him look good?***

Yes. I don't believe in any business that a single guy can do it all himself. That's impossible. Whatever little piece [of the business] you are in, you have to focus on that piece.

***What happens when the pieces are in conflict? How do you handle those situations?***

First of all, I was brought up in a household where getting angry and having conflicts never accomplished anything. My dad was a coach for more than forty years at a high level. He had a very simple rule: If you were one of his assistant coaches, you could come into his house or his office and shout and scream and curse at him. But when you walked out on the field, it was clear who the boss was. And so any conflicts or confrontations were always done privately.

When I get into one of those situations, I tend to be the loser, or I back down the quickest because I know it's not going to accomplish anything. And I know it has to be done privately. That's my style.

***What about situations where there is a conflict of ideas?***

Again, going through all of these company changes, especially the acquisitions, the road map for how to get where we're going has changed constantly. Particularly, when you put two companies together and you've got two guys in the same position at the same level and there really is only room for one, and neither is better or worse than the other, it's more a case of how to get there. So yeah, that probably happens every day. But it's how you handle it as to whether it's true conflict or not.

I like to preach that there is always more than one right answer, and they are both equally good. It's a question of which one you choose.

***Do you actively seek multiple right answers, or do you think . . .***

Multiple right answers come from having multiple opinions. I suppose all of us sometimes think, *I don't know if I should do A or B*. I can usually wrestle that one to the ground or close my eyes and guess. It will tend to be, if I feel strongly about something and a peer feels strongly about something else, then somebody has got to make the call—that's why there is another level.

***So that's one of the purposes of the hierarchy, to make the call when there's a difference of opinions?***

In my mind, that's one of the only purposes. This is a very flat organization. There is a hierarchy. My opinion is that it's for two reasons: one, to resolve conflicts, or to just choose between the two options; and two, there needs to be a hierarchy for the outsiders looking in. There is great comfort in thinking that this is a very organized company and that everybody has a well-defined role. In reality, I doubt that any company today operates effectively in little cubicles doing exactly what the job description says. I can't imagine anyone operates that way today.

But, yes, if a peer has an idea of what we should do, and I have an idea, and my boss says we are going to go with the way my peer thinks we should go, that's not necessarily the wrong thing to do. In my opinion, it may take longer, cost more money, cost more people—or I would have gone with it—but it's not necessarily the wrong thing.

***Does it affect you personally when they don't choose your way?***

You have to understand. I hate to lose. So to me it's a personal loss that I didn't convince the decision-maker that my way was better. Maybe I just didn't do my job well enough. Or maybe I was wrong. I will accept that.

***How do you know when you are wrong?***

Well, if you're working with the right people, you're never wrong. Because they just picked another right way. Your way was also right, but you just didn't get chosen. You were wrong when you get to the end of the game and it didn't work. And I'm wrong every day. There are a lot of things we try that don't work, but that's not a reason not to try. To me, that's losing again if my way didn't work. But you don't know until you try it. Until then, I assumed my way was right, or one of the right ways, and we didn't chose it. The other guy's way worked, so that's fine, too. And that self-preservation, you know, that way I'm never wrong.

***What if someone above you in the hierarchy says, "Stan, I know you're trying to go to the same town as I am, but I want you to take my route. I don't want you to take this other route to get there." What impact does that have on you?***

It's a loss. I don't like to lose. I didn't do the job I should have done to convince him that my way was a better way. So I take it personally in that sense. And again, I go back to the analogy of my dad being a football coach. I like to have the decision made, and once the decision is made, then that is what we are going to do and that's what we do.

Now, if I'm working for somebody who gets halfway down the road and then says, this isn't right and throws it out, I don't like that. That makes me a little bit crazy because then we have just wasted that amount of time. Even if they then adopt my idea and start over, I'm still upset because you've wasted that amount of time.

***Because you have to backtrack.***

Yes. So on a personal level, it's important. But ultimately you want to get done what you want to get done.

***Why is not losing so important to you?***

I don't know. I don't like to lose at anything. I've been beating my son at board games since he was four years old, and he knew I would beat him until he was smart enough to beat me. [Pauses for a few seconds.] I'm not quite that mean, I guess, but . . .

[With a chuckle] ***You know, there's not a lot of skill to Candy Land.***

Yes. But I think part of that comes from inside. You can't teach that. You have to be a person who wants to achieve something, who wants to win at whatever you're doing.

***What happens when someone is not that kind of person?***

Complacency. If you don't have a reason to get up in the morning, even if for you winning is doing the best job you can, going and cleaning up the auto mechanic's stall, for him, that's winning on that particular day, getting a paycheck and supporting his family. I think that is what makes us different from the animals. And I know there are a lot of people who drift through life and just sort of succeed. And I don't understand that. I have a real problem with that.

***Is that because they have a different value system?***

I don't know exactly what word to put on it, but somehow or another it's not right. Whatever you do, you ought to try to accomplish something and then you win. If you just succeed or just drift along, you are losing.

***Is there a part of you that wants to develop or grow a different side of yourself that might not need to win as bad?***

I'm not sure I follow you.

***If we had a continuum, with "high need to win" on one end and a "low need to win" on the other, are you saying that you are on the "high need to win" end, or would you say that it is more of a continuum within you?***

I think there are some things that are more important to achieve than others. And on my personal agenda, there are certain things that I will be very disappointed if I don't achieve, and then there are others that I want to win at, and, you know, if I try, then that's good enough. To me, that's winning because I actually tried to do it and it didn't work out.

So it depends. I think every situation is different, every task I have to do here is different. There are some things I get very passionate about in terms of the business and then there are others that would be the right thing to do, or that I would like to do in my opinion, but if it didn't happen, it's okay. I tried. And trying was a win in that situation, whereas trying in something else might not be a win. So you have to define the word "win" I think.

***Who defines what a win is?***

Again, I think it's what you're comfortable with. And, as I have been through all of the different experiences, I get to know what I'm comfortable with and if I'm comfortable receiving it, I'm comfortable giving it. I'm convinced most people are lazy. I'm lazy. I will always find the easiest, quickest way to do something. I would love nothing better than to make it so easy and simple that



I can give it to somebody else to do. I believe that human beings by nature would rather be home sitting on the sofa, having a beer, watching TV than be here working.

***Earlier, you said it was important to continue to move forward to accomplish something...***

Well, it's a natural because you are constantly taking new big things and making them small and simplifying them and spitting them out the other end. So if everybody is doing that, then everything is becoming simpler. And that is a truly oversimplified view of the world, but if you think about it, we are all working toward—if we all instinctively want to make things as easy as possible on ourselves, then we will all try to do the same kind of thing; simplify whatever task is in front of you at the time.

***Just thinking out loud, I'm wondering if you take this notion of simplifying in order to accomplish things more effectively in some . . .***

Maybe subconsciously you do. The people who don't—and I know people who don't—I know people who you give them a task and they will muscle it through without ever thinking about *how am I going to make it easier the next time?* The people who do tend to be more successful, probably, than those that don't. You know, the axiom: Work smarter, not harder?

***Are those people working just as hard?***

Okay. To me, smarter means every time you do something, you're trying to figure out how am I going to do it next time so that I don't have to do it or so I can make it simpler.

***But you think the path of least resistance is maybe what motivates that?***

Human nature says that you are just lazy. I hate that word, but you are really thinking, *I just want to get it over with so I can go home. I want to get it over with so that I can go do whatever—be with my kids. You just keep giving me more and more stuff.*

***What about tasks you do at home?***

I'm the same. I'm just like this at home. I want to get this stuff over with so I can go do something I enjoy. I want to get the lawn mowed so I can go play. I have very aggressive playthings too, so I tend not to be a person who just sits and does nothing. And your personality is the same whether you are at home or at work. I don't care what people say; if they act a certain way at work, chances are pretty good that they are the same way at home.

***Is there anything else you want to . . .***

No. You've probably gotten a pretty good spin on my narrow view of the world.

***I don't think it's very narrow.***

Oh, yeah? If I'm destined for the CEO's job, just let me know in your report. That would be okay.

***Give you a warning?***

Yes, give me my warning.

*As a sidebar, the interview started to get a little uncomfortable toward the end. I pushed Stan to explain more of how he understood what he did, not just tell me what he did--the latter he would have been more comfortable and capable of doing.*

*As the interviewer, I actually did what most people do with Level 2 leaders—I gave him an out that feels like a win, diffused the conflict, complimented him even when I didn't really mean it. These are the strategies we all use to deal with the destructive responses of Level 2 leaders, because sending them to "timeout" is not usually within our authority even though that is what we would do with the middle-schooler making sense of his world and others in the same way as Stan.*

## REFLECTIONS ON STAN'S INTERVIEW

This is what it looks like to interview a Level 2 Leader functioning in an organization. Stan's black and white, overly simple, either/or understanding of the world is displayed throughout the interview. In order for him to move to Level 3, the concreteness of his understanding will have to be challenged in some way that lets him see that there are hypothetical possibilities and compromises and synergistic solutions to the problems that he faces. There will be more gray in his vocabulary. Even Stan's understanding of himself is simplistic, or categorical. Level 2 people see themselves as people who always have to win. If Stan is able to move to Level 3, he will begin to see that there is benefit in sometimes letting other people win, not the least of whom are the four-year-olds with whom he plays board games.

This interview shows that Stan believes everyone else makes sense of the world the way he does. He asserts, "We're not just doing [what we do] because we didn't have anything better to do that day when we got up." Imagine living in a world where everyone you come in contact with has as a primary motivation getting what they want, making their lives simpler, and that they view you as a competitor to you in what they are trying to get done.

This is the way a Level 2 leader survives. People of above-average intelligence, like Stan, learn the vocabulary of the organization, or the industry, or the community of which they are a part. If they are capable of leveraging the expertise they have gained over time, or if they have taken advantage of their education in a way valued by the organization, they can often get by and even seemingly excel at their jobs. But imagine what it must be like to be Stan, experiencing all the complexity coming at him from every direction, and holding it together by simplifying everything down to the most concrete and elementary components. Imagine what it must be like to try to hold those components together in a way where others don't find you out.

If Stan is able to grow toward Level 3 at this stage of his life, it is likely going to be because a challenge presents itself to him that is so big that not doing the tough work of developing will be

seen as a bigger loss than just continuing to cram the challenge into his existing, self-centered, over-simplified categories. I often think of developmental change being analogous to wading through developmental concrete. Early on, and on time, the concrete is still liquid. There is still work involved wading through anything thicker than air. Development is never totally easy. However, the longer we stay in one place (arrest our development), the more the concrete hardens around us, and therefore the bigger the hammer of challenge needs to be to break us out so we can do the growing that should have been done years or even (as in Stan's case) decades before. If Stan is able to develop at this stage, he will not immediately jump to an age appropriate level of development. He will have to become Level 3 before he can grow to Level 4.