

Teaching Tip  
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## Interviewing Guest Speakers Podcast-Style

One of the joys of teaching is to bring students into the real-world, or rather, bring the real-world to them. Many of us do this by inviting guest speakers to our courses. In my case this is the most apparent in my leadership course, where I have a guest speaker in about half of the class sessions. The challenge with guest speakers, as I'm sure you know:

- Staying on topic (for speaker and for students asking questions)
- Timing
- Keeping the class engaged
- Appropriate question and answers

The *default* in many classes is to invite a guest speaker to “talk” about their area of specialty for a given period of time, and then open it up for questions and answers from the audience. This is fraught with risks though, namely because the guest speaker may not be used to presenting in front of a class (or presenting at all), may have prepared too much (more common) or too little (less common) material, or may divert onto various tangents or goes too deep into technical material. When setting up a guest visit this way, you are potentially open to these various pitfalls.

The tip is to think of the speaker as a *podcast guest*, with you as the *podcast host*. Think about what works in podcasts:

- Interviewees typically have little or no preparation
- Interviewees are usually quite comfortable
- It feels like a “chat” more than a formal “interview”
- Content is more dialogue-like with stories rather than uninterrupted lecture

When I bring in guest speakers I don't want to ask *them* to give a speech, or rely solely on student questions. Instead I conduct a simulated podcast with the guest, where I ask specific questions about how the guest has dealt with some of the leadership issues that we have discussed in class. Here are some main tips to do this:

### *Logistics Tips*

- For an in-person class, have your chair and the guest's chair facing each other, not the students. This sets up students as the audience and you and the guest as having a conversation. It's much easier to talk to one person than talk to an entire class. During Q&A you can shift if needed.
- Use mics if there are any concerns about students being able to hear.
- A good timeframe is about 20-30 minutes for the conversation, then q&a from the audience.
- Tell the guest they do not need to prepare anything (guests love this!). Obviously in some circumstances a guest speaker might be presenting a specific technology or idea that may

require visual aids. That's fine, but try not to make them feel like they have to prepare an amazing TED talk for your class.

- Give students the bio for the guest ahead of time.

### *Content Tips*

- Give the interviewee a couple of questions you might start with, especially if they are nervous, but then focus follow-up questions on what they are saying rather than a set list of pre-determined questions.
- Tailor your questions to each guest; ask about specific instances and stories rather than general feelings (e.g., "How have you led a challenging team?" is much better than "Tell me your leadership philosophy"). Sometimes a pre-visit chat can help with this if you do not know the guest.
- Consider doing a lightning round of questions to start or finish the interview (see below – I do this at the end).
- Talk with your students *before* the class regarding how to ask questions (see below).

I know many educators might be worried they are putting too much of *themselves* in front of the class (in-person or online) when orchestrating guest visits in this way. Remember your goal is to *make the guest comfortable and get them talking*. Interviewing guests is fun! – give them a platform to share their stories / insights and your class will be quite engaged.

### **SAMPLE Podcast-Style Questions I've used**

*Note: For inspiration take a look at the interview questions starting on p. 21 in Talent by Tyler Cowen and Daniel Gross (2022).*

- What's something weird or unusual you did early on in life?
- Think of the best leader you have ever worked for. What did that person do for you that inspired you to take on something new or to otherwise go outside your comfort zone? At what point in your career did you start think about moving up in the chain of command? What people were most central to that decision and process?
- What does bad leadership mean to you?
- Are these leaders bad apples or is there something in the system that is rotten?
- When are times you think you are a particularly good leader and a bad leader?
- Of the time you spend at work in your managerial role, how do you allocate your time during a typical week across all of the managerial functions (e.g., feedback, evaluations, solving problems, logistics, etc.)?
- How do you *decide* how to allocate your time?
- Can you give us an instance where you perceived a team problem at work, you stepped in to fix it, and it didn't work? What happened? How about one where things did get better?
- If you had an extra dollar (or million) to invest in your company, where would you invest it? Infrastructure? People? Processes? R&D? Business Development? Something else?
- How do you tell your story in the face of conflict? Especially knowing that your emotions are contagious to others?

### **SAMPLE Lightning-Round Questions I've used**

*Note: many students say this is their favorite part of our guest speaker visits!*

- What are the open tabs on your browser right now?
- What did you have for breakfast?
- Walking meetings or sitting meetings?
- What is your Zoom background?
- Coffee, Tea, or Water?
- Three words a close friend or family member would use to describe you?
- Ocean or Mountains?
- What does relaxing mean to you?
- Dogs, Cats, or something else?
- Perfect age for retirement?
- Last movie you watched in a movie theater?

### **Guidelines for helping students ask good questions**

#### *Tips for asking great questions*

- Make sure your tone is appreciative and positive, even if the question is critical.
- Be confident this person can indeed answer your question.
- Make sure the question fits in the context of the discussion.
- Be specific in your question – broad questions return broad answers.
- Prepare some possible questions in advance.

#### *Less-than-ideal questions*

- **The three-part question:** “Can you explain to us first how the trade surplus influences your long-term strategy, second how it influences research and development, and third, what is your corporate strategy for continued growth?”
- **The inappropriate / wrong-time and wrong-place question:** “So, how can you sleep at night knowing your company is dumping toxic waste into the local water supply?”
- **The not-a-question:** “It seems that your company’s debt-to-equity ratio is quite high for similar companies in your region. This of course might concern investors in a difficult time.”
- **The “wrong-person” question:** “I know you are a bank president, but can you tell me about the threats to our supply chains from political tensions in Asia?”
- **The broad question:** “What’s your stance on the environment?”
- **The long and rambling question:** *self-explanatory* ☺