



## Candidate Interviewing Tips

*The following are some tips regarding interviewing for a fire department (created after a recent final interview for the Cosumnes Fire Department in 2021):*

- *Arrive early. 15-30 minutes will allow you to become familiar with your surroundings, calm down, and shows that you are prepared. Do not stumble in all rushed and disheveled.*
- *Be professional with your attire. If you wear a tie, make sure it is snug at your collar. If you have a suit coat, keep it buttoned, if possible. Sit straight in your chair; don't slouch. Don't rock back and forth or play with a pen. Practice beforehand and record yourself to see your mannerisms and the use of "umm" or other distracting words. Keep your hands on your lap or with fingers crossed on the edge of the table. Try not to use your hands while you speak.*
- *Always be polite to the person who is greeting you in the lobby. Some interview processes include an observation of how you interact with all persons who are in the lobby. Fire departments are big on customer service. Start a conversation with the greeter and never sit down with your back to the greeter(s) (unless if there is no other choice). Some greeters may not be able to have an in-depth discussion with you, but remember to always be polite. Studying should have been completed before arriving for your final interview. Show everyone that you are prepared. Keep in mind that your final score may be dependent upon your observed public interaction.*
- *Bring copies of your resume with you (usually three to five) and offer them to the panelists. During COVID, the panelists may not be able to accept your resume, but they know that you did your best to provide one and appreciate your hard work. Make sure there are no spelling or grammatical errors. Attention to detail is important in everything you do. A cover letter definitely adds to your resume.*
- *Hopefully someday soon, a firm handshake will be allowed again. Although not customary in some cultures, shaking someone's hand and looking at them in the eye demonstrates honesty and trust.*
- *Smile and be positive. Be energetic throughout your interview. This starts the moment you walk in. First impressions go a long way. No negative answers. When you smile and are positive, it makes the panelists happy. When the panelists are happy, they score you higher. When they score you higher, you get the job.*

- *Have an organized introduction. An icebreaker question, that the panelists know you know, is, "Tell us about your education and experience and why do you want to work for our department (or something similar)." This question, or something similar, is usually asked as the first question. Why? Because you know the answers and it is intended to calm you down. Everyone knows that interviews are stressful, and the panelists know that you are likely nervous. The panelists want you to be successful and they want to get to know you in the short amount of time they have with you. So, prepare for that question, answer it with confidence, be concise and organized, and don't leave points on the table.*
- *Your answers should be designed to be no more than three minutes per answer. If you are told, "You will have 10 questions and 30 minutes to answer the questions," then plan your time accordingly. Spend an average of three minutes on each question. If you are done in 15 minutes, you likely left many points on the table. Remember, a panel will likely have many candidates to interview and only 30, or so, minutes to get to know you.*
- *Know the mission statement! It will be asked of you in some form or another almost every time. If it's not asked, weave it into your answers anyway. The same applies to the department's core values. These are the guiding principles of any organization. When you get hired and you have to make a tough decision, ask yourself, "Is this supporting the mission and in line with our core values?" If your answer is no, then don't do it.*
- *Know the history (and information) of the department you are testing for; and the qualities of the community (or communities) it provides service for. All of the needed information is within a department's website. It is always helpful to drive around the community, beforehand. As you can imagine, the majority of candidates will all have the same answer: the year, the quantity of stations, the population, the square mileage, etc. Those who separate themselves are the ones who expand upon the statistics and can demonstrate a connection with the community. If you live in the community, or nearby, use that to your advantage. "This is home." "I grew up here (or close by)." "This is where my family shops (or recreates)." "This is where I want to live." These answers are important to a panel and are appreciated by any community when you are fortunate enough to serve that community. Our hometown is something we have pride in. Ask yourself this question, "Does it bother me more when I see someone littering in my hometown compared to a random city I am visiting?" Likely it does. Why? Pride.*
- *Do not use certain words that are not inclusive. These include "You Guys", "Fireman", "3<sup>rd</sup> man on the medic", referring to elderly patients as "Gertrude", etc. Yes, these words were stated by certain candidates during this round of interviews. The "You Guys" term was consistently said by many candidates. Please remember that the fire service is a professional environment, thus communication with others must be inclusive and respectful.*

- *Look at each panelist as you answer each question. Start with the panelist who asked the question, spend a little time each of the other panelists, and end with the panelist who answered the question. Do not worry if they are not looking at you; they may be writing notes as you are speaking.*
- *Use caution with joking too much (or trying to be funny). A little humor is appreciated, but you do not want to come across as if you are not taking the position seriously. On the contrary, being too serious is also not recommended. A balance between the two, with more of your time on the serious side, is recommended.*
- *The Cosumnes Fire Department is not the Consumnes Fire Department; there is only one “n” in Cosumnes. It is important to know the name of the organization you are testing for and to be able to say the name correctly. Several candidates added an extra “n” as they pronounced the name. Actually, although Cosumnes is commonly pronounced as “Co-Sume-Nes”, it is actually “Cuh-Sum-Nes”. The Cosumnes River that divides Elk Grove and Galt was named after the Cosumne people who inhabited this land for many centuries beforehand. We must consider that as we show respect to those who were here long before we were.*
- *Know your core values. Not because they may be asked of you during the final interview, but because they define you. State your core value(s) and the “why.”*
- *Know what diversity is. Inclusion is so very important in having a workplace where people feel accepted. More importantly, the community deserves open-minded fire department personnel who respect the differences among all who call it home. Diversity is more than race alone. We are all different in so many ways, yet have so many more similarities to one another. Study this topic, reflect upon it, and be ready to provide a meaningful answer to the question.*
- *Be prepared to have an answer regarding customer service. Great customer service is truly what separates a good organization from a great organization. Remember that customer service does not have to be only for external customers. As important are the internal customers- those who you work with and for. We even had a candidate with a military background refer to his soldiers as his customers.*
- *Put yourself in positions where you could broaden your experience. When applying for a fire department, experience within the 9-1-1 system will help with separating you from others. Although a candidate is not required to work in a 9-1-1 system beforehand, it will allow a candidate to stand out when competing for a firefighter position in a 9-1-1 system. The 9-1-1 system can be fast-paced and will likely include a variety of emergencies. That is why fire departments are usually all-hazards and all-risk. Try to gain experience within the 9-1-1 system, even if on a part-time or volunteer basis.*

- *Learning never ends for professionals. Your educational and career goals should be organized within your thoughts. Be prepared to state your goals and don't limit yourself. Be humble, but make it clear to the panelists if you plan to work hard to rise through the ranks throughout your career. Succession planning starts on day one and great organizations need great people to advance into key roles to continue to remain great. Just pace yourself.*
- *Expand upon your answers. Even what may appear to be a question that can have a one or two-word answer should have some depth to it. Tell me something unique about you... "I can (add information here); and that is important to this department (or community) because (add information here)." The first part of the answer is definitely worth points. The second part of the answer is worth the remainder of the available points. That applies to all answers. They must all tie into the mission, the department, the community, etc.*
- *Show that you really, really, really want the position. Sometimes a tiebreaker goes to the person who appeared to want it most.*
- *Have a great closing statement. This is your opportunity to connect the dots. A brief recap and most definitely, something that will remain with the panelists. Leave them with something they will remember. The most impressive closing statement included something to effect of, "If you hire me, I promise I will dedicate the remainder of my career to pay back this opportunity." Wow. Impressive.*
- *Regarding whether a candidate should ask a question... it may feel as though it is important for you to do so or show the panelists that you, too, are taking this opportunity seriously and are also evaluating whether the organization will be good for your future. However, normally, interviews are scheduled with limited time between each interview. Additionally, a panelist may be caught off guard by the question or have strict instructions to ask the same questions and provide the same opportunities for each candidate and may not be able to answer your questions. If the panelist says, "do you have any questions for us?" then it is fair game. If not, then it may be best to provide your closing statement and appreciatively thank everyone for giving you the opportunity. Remember to smile as you leave, even if you are wearing a mask (and shake hands when allowed again).*