"Be courteous" is a fundamental rule of interviewing. But what do you do when the interviewer's behavior is offensive? You want to ace the interview and leave with your self-respect intact. Here are some strategies for responding tactfully to a discourteous interviewer.

**Do a Reality Check**

Sometimes we read more into a remark than the interviewer intended because of the pressure and heightened emotions of an interview. Before you take action, ask yourself: "Was that really disrespectful?" Some issues are clear-cut, such as age, religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Others, unfortunately, are not. If the interviewer's behavior is clearly disrespectful, then respond with the strategies outlined below. If you're unsure, then put it aside and continue with your interview.

**Decide Whether to Salvage It**

You worked hard to land your interview. Your priority is to keep the interview focused on what you have to offer the company. Take a deep breath and briefly consider some reasons to make the best of this challenging situation.

- You can decide about the company after you complete the interview.
- The interviewer doesn't represent the entire company.
- The job may not involve working with the interviewer.
- This behavior could be part of a "stress interview" in which they test your response to high-pressure situations.

**Get Back on Track**

Sure, it's a challenge to stay polite when you're dealing with less-than-polite behavior. Yet, there's a lot you can do to get your interview back on track.

- Be open-minded. The interviewer may recognize the problem with her behavior and try to fix it.
- Ignore the disrespectful comment and talk about your skills.
- Ask the interviewer a question that will shift the focus to an area of interest to him.
- Keep your sense of humor and make a light remark.
- Ask for feedback or clarification if the interviewer repeatedly contradicts or interrupts you.
- Use "I" statements and be polite when you give the interviewer your opinion.

**Know When to Exit**

Sometimes a graceful exit is a necessary last resort when you've done everything you can to save the interview. Thank the interviewer for her time. Then, politely excuse yourself from the interview without commenting on her behavior. If you must say something, be courteous.

**Learn from Your Experience**

Before you put this encounter behind you, identify what you've learned about this potential coworker. Then use this experience to improve how you respond to difficult people.

The final step is to practice dealing with negative interview situations with someone who'll give you honest feedback. In this way, you'll be ready to act with composure if you ever encounter another disrespectful interviewer.

*Copyright Carla-Krystin Andrade 2010. All rights reserved.*