Behavioral Interview for Senior Roles

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STAR with reflection, a story bank mapped to signals, and what each question family really tests at senior and staff level.

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Mental model

A behavioral question is not asking what happened; it is asking how you think. The interviewer is grading how you defined the problem, which trade-offs you made under real constraints, and whether you would do it the same way again — the story is only the vehicle for that judgement. The same round also sets your level, so a story that shows a correct decision at too small a scope still scores low.

STAR with reflection

Part	Answers
Situation	Where, when, what was at stake
Task	What you had to achieve
Action	What **you** did, why, and the alternatives
Result	Outcome, measured where possible
Learning	What you would do differently now

STAR is the standard structure. The Tech Interview Handbook adds a final reflection step — “STAR(R)”, often called STAR-L — as the strongest seniority signal: finish by looking back at what you learned and what changed afterwards. The Action is where the score is earned, because actions are the repeatable behaviours the interview is named after.

```
S  Payments migration, 3 teams, Q4 freeze
T  Cut over without a checkout outage
A  I proposed dual-writes over a big-bang
```

```
   switch; traded 3 weeks for rollback
R  Zero-downtime cutover, 2 weeks late
L  I'd involve finance in week 1, not 6
```

> **Gotcha:** “We decided, we built” hides you. The interviewer cannot credit a team; say “I proposed”, “I convinced”, “I chose not to”, and keep the team’s work as context.

The big three questions

Question	Prepare
Tell me about yourself	Two-minute arc ending at this role
Your most impactful project	Impact, scope, your part
A conflict you resolved	Most common soft-skill question

The Handbook argues that drilling long question lists pays off less than preparing stories, with three exceptions that appear in almost every loop. Prepare bullet points for them rather than a script, and rehearse them aloud so they come out naturally.

```
Tell me about yourself:
  now   -> staff eng, payments platform
  how   -> 3 roles, each larger scope
  why   -> want grid-scale energy systems
  ask   -> which is why this role
```

Build a story bank

Signal	Story you need
Conflict	Disagreement you resolved
Failure	A mistake you owned and fixed
Influence	Changed a decision you did not own
Ambiguity	Defined an unclear problem
Scale	Work that crossed teams or systems
Growth	Feedback that changed how you work

Start from projects, not questions: the Handbook suggests collecting 3–5 projects with high impact, high complexity and high personal involvement, then mining each for several stories, because one large project usually contains conflict, ambiguity and a mistake. Map every story to the signals above and look for empty rows — those are the questions you will fumble.

```
Project: payments migration
  conflict  -> finance vs platform on dates
  ambiguity -> no owner for refunds path
  failure   -> missed FX rounding in test
Project: on-call redesign
  influence -> got 4 teams to adopt SLOs
```

Pacing an answer

Part	Share of the answer
Situation and Task	Brief — just enough stakes
Action	Most of it
Result and Learning	Short, concrete, measured

Candidates overspend on setup because it is the part they remember best. Give enough context to make the stakes clear, then move to your decisions. Keep the first pass compact and let follow-up questions pull out detail; an interviewer who wants more will ask, one who is lost in background will stop listening.

```
Too long:  4 minutes of org history
Better:    "Two teams owned checkout and
           neither owned refunds. I had to
           ship refunds in 6 weeks." -> Action
```

Senior signals

Signal	Shows as
Scope	Multiple teams, systems or quarters
Stakeholders	Who you aligned, and how
Trade-offs	Options you rejected, and why
Measured outcome	A number or observable change
Reflection	What you would change now

The Handbook names two purposes of the round: whether you have shown the right behaviours, and your level. At senior and staff level the same story is scored on how wide its consequences were and how you handled the people around the technical problem. Name the option you did not take; a decision with no alternative is not a decision.

```
Mid:    "I fixed the flaky deploy."
Senior: "Deploys failed 1 in 5. I could
  patch our pipeline or fix the shared
  runner; I chose the runner, which took
  2 weeks longer but fixed it for 6 teams."
```

Question families

Question	Really testing
Conflict with a co-worker	Empathy, resolution, no blame
Disagreed with your manager	Backbone and commitment
A failure or mistake	Ownership, learning
Something you pushed for	Influence without authority
Tight deadline	Prioritisation, trade-offs
Criticism of your work	Coachability

These families come from the Handbook's list of commonly asked questions across large tech companies. Each one has a trap answer: a conflict where the other person was simply wrong, a failure that was really a success, a deadline met only by heroics. Pick stories where you changed your own behaviour.

```
Weak:  "My weakness is I work too hard."
Strong: "I used to review PRs late at
  night; reviews became a bottleneck. I
  now block two review slots a day."
```

> **Warning:** Never blame a former colleague or employer, even accurately. The interviewer hears how you will describe them next.

Amazon Leadership Principles as vocabulary

Principle	Typical question
Customer Obsession	Went beyond the spec for a user
Ownership	Fixed something outside your remit
Have Backbone; Disagree and Commit	Challenged a decision, then delivered
Dive Deep	Found a root cause others missed
Deliver Results	Shipped despite a setback

Amazon publishes 16 Leadership Principles and its interviewers map questions to them, which makes them a useful shared vocabulary even for other companies. “Have Backbone; Disagree and Commit” captures a senior expectation: respectfully challenge a decision you disagree with, and once it is made, commit wholly. Read the target company’s published values and tag each story with the ones it demonstrates.

```
Story: dual-write migration
  Ownership, Dive Deep, Disagree and Commit
Story: on-call SLOs
  Earn Trust, Insist on the Highest Standards
```

Questions to ask back

Goal	Ask
Real work	“What problem would you want me to solve first?”
Bar	“What does success look like for this team?”
Culture	“What is the most frustrating part of working here?”
Decisions	“How are technical decisions made, and by whom?”

The final minutes are part of the interview. These questions, adapted from the Handbook’s list, show you think about impact and team health, and the answers tell you whether you want the job. Prepare four and ask the two the conversation has not already answered.

```
"What's the most costly technical decision
the team is still living with?"
```

Further reading

- Tech Interview Handbook — Behavioral interviews
- Tech Interview Handbook — Common behavioral questions
- Tech Interview Handbook — Questions to ask
- Amazon Leadership Principles