ASK ELLEN – interviewer badmouthing my employer

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Q: When I was interviewed for a full-time librarian position at one organization the supervisor who was interviewing me was badmouthing my current job. What should I do?

A: There are few things that may be going on here, but what you should do remains the same regardless.

First, though, whatever the interviewer’s reasons for the badmouthing, that’s just inappropriate. It’s poor form to speak ill about anyone or any workplace during an interview, and shows a lack of good judgment. What if you love your current job and have to leave due to circumstances beyond your control, such as a layoff or relocation? And, for all the interviewer knows, you could go back to those at your current job and tell them what the interviewer said.

S/he may just have been off guard and speaking too freely at that moment without thinking of appearances or consequences (still a red flag), or may be an angry, negative, highly critical person in general, which could be a real problem if you were to end up with this person as your supervisor.

Another possibility is that the interviewer was testing you to see if you’d join in with the criticism or if you could be provoked to a strong reaction of disagreement. This too is a bad sign, as you’d then wonder if that kind of baiting goes on regularly at that workplace or with that supervisor.

Whatever the interviewer’s motives and how sinister they may or may not be, what you should do is remain calm and positive no matter what. It may take some effort, especially if you disagree with what the interviewer is saying. Arguing, of course, is not going to lead to a good outcome for you in this situation, and joining in with the badmouthing will only make you look bad. I’d also recommend changing the subject as soon as possible, back to what you should be discussing, which is the position and your suitability for it.

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Thank you and good luck!

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