The Last Hurdle Between You and The Civil Services

What is personality? Personality is defined as ‘the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character’. Two things are evident from this definition - first it is about who you truly are and second that it cannot be acquired in a short period of time. In the CSE, the definition of personality would also include the possession of qualities required to function properly as a bureaucrat. Out of many things, three top-most qualities in a bureaucrat are the ability to estimate correctly the depths and nuances of an issue, the desire to overcome bottlenecks and time constraints in order to deliver services and lastly the aptitude to learn from past assessments on issues so as to further improve future solutions.

How to prepare for the personality test? Well, the answer is pretty straightforward - you cannot prepare for it exclusively, it has to be a part of developing who you already are. You will have to meticulously gather bits and pieces from here and there - learn and internalize proper behaviours, develop understanding and consciousness of the world around you and bridge the gap between your ‘true and imagined self’. Sounds big right? Do not worry because we are going to break it up for you.

Here we will divide the strategy into two parts. Part one will be a general strategy aimed at achieving personality development in the mid to long term. Part two will focus on the immediate course of action one must take before appearing in the CSE personality test.

The Kothari Committee constituted by the UPSC has listed the qualities that should be rated in the personality test. They are as follows:

- Clarity of expression
- Grasp of narrative and argument
- Reasoning ability
- Appreciation of different points of view
- Awareness and concern for socioeconomic problems
- Range and depth of interests and personal attributes relevant to interaction with people.

PART-I

Like we mentioned above, personality development takes time. The strategy given below will ensure that you can include personality development in your CSE preparation without much effort. We would like to say that personality development can be a subconscious effort and the strategy we have devised can be followed subconsciously, needing only that you remember the basic guidelines or steps.

The following four steps you will need to follow while preparing exclusively for the personality test. This works best if you have ample time to begin with, for example those who are only starting with their CSE preparation. You need to follow these steps because the results of these exercises will get subsumed into your consciousness and will become part of who you are.

Step 1: Read - you must read. Read books, blogs, newspapers, magazines etc. Make reading your second nature, a habit. Read widely, do not restrict yourself to the text books, read novels and poetry, read

newspapers, remember you are not reading to pass an exam, you are reading to develop your own inner self. After you have read something, ponder on it, add your own thoughts to it, make it personal and most importantly reflect on it keeping the CSE in mind. Over the course of time your vocabulary, ideas and understanding will grow and you will yourself start noticing changes in your thought patterns!

What type of books would help in the CSE interview? There are actually two aspects to this answer. First is the current events part which make it mandatory for you to read newspapers and magazines, watch TV news and discussions and if possible take part in group-discussions and mock interviews. These mockinterviews and prep-tests help not only in familiarizing with interviews in general but they also point to events that a candidate should have an understanding of. Such an exercise can be helpful because it will provide the much needed insight into one's preparation. Once the preparation for current events gets steady you should concentrate on the second part viz. expanding your knowledge. Books by renowned Indian authors, international best-sellers, highly praised books on subjects like history and foreign policy, biographies of important people such as My Experiments with Truth by Gandhi could be looked at. A well-read person is always instantly recognizable. He will be able to connect various topics with ease and weave intricate webbings of knowledge that is both interesting and pleasing. The only way to achieve that ennobled tag of being well-read is to start the reading habit early in your CSE preparation.

Step 2: Speak - speak your heart out. First choose your language for the personality test - English or Hindi and then stick to it. It is very important that you speak fluently, confidently and without hitches. In order to achieve this do this simple exercise - talk to a mirror. It helps in three ways, first it will create and boost selfconfidence, second it will help connect speech to facial expressions and third it will remove any inhibitions you may have with speaking out your emotions. After continuing with this exercise for sometime you should proceed to speaking with other people, for example, friends, relatives, teachers, colleagues and even strangers. You will notice that all it takes for fluency is practice and clarity of thought. It can even be recommended that you go for public speaking. Participate in healthy debates and discussions. Once these barriers are broken, speaking fluently in the CSE interview will be a breeze!

Step 3: Behave - imbibe the right behaviours. It is extremely difficult to learn new behaviours let alone follow them. But for the sake of our betterment we must not leave it at that. First, we must identify what is good behaviour and what type of behaviour is expected from a bureaucrat. Yes, we all have notions on what good behaviour is, problem is not in identification of such behaviours but following them. Also we must identify what sort of behaviour is expected of a bureaucrat. Without thinking twice we should be able to name these - truthfulness, honesty, calmness, empathy, compassion, respectful, self-control, non-reactionary, careful and responsible etc. To top up, basically a bureaucrat must be hard-working, thoughtful and not corrupt at any cost. How do we go about imbibing these values into ourselves? Here is a little secret - recognize good behaviours, consciously follow them as a rule and remind yourself every time you break a rule. Over time you should be able to collect more than enough traits to reflect in your day-to-day activities, in your body language and in your involuntary habits. Armed with such self-affirming knowledge you should be able to impress not only the CSE interview board but also everyone who comes in contact with you.

Step 4: Dress - choose to wear comfortably yet formally. A certain degree of formality is expected of potential bureaucrats and the clothes you choose to wear determines whether you are being formal or informal. If you dress casually most of the time, like we do in everyday jeans and t-shirts, then you should familiarize yourself with dressing formally with a shirt and tie. Women candidates may wear traditional dresses or formal wear which are not very bright or colourful - dressing in sober colours can be safely recommended here. On the day of interview you may choose not to wear suits or ties but even then you will have to wear well ironed, clean and good fitting formal shirt and trousers. In case you have got a new suit, wear it atleast once before the day of the interview to get rid of any awkwardness or feeling of discomfort.

Now let us wrap up part one of the strategy and get to the part where we see how to exclusively prepare for the CSE interview after the Mains are over. As is well known, the interview is a personality test where more than testing your knowledge, your personality is tested. But that doesn't mean one can completely ignore most of the questions that will be asked by the interview board. You will at least have to answer a few questions correctly. Even though confidence is key to scoring at the interview, it would be pointless to say no to most questions put by the interview board regardless of the level of confidence you exhibit. Therefore as a rule of thumb it is always better to answer correctly with confidence than to not answer

with the same confidence. Only if the question is completely out of your orbit say ‘I don’t know the answer to this question’. Otherwise follow the rule of thumb religiously. Better safe than sorry, right?

PART - II

The CSE personality test has two important aspects to it which can be turned into advantages if these aspects are properly understood and prepared. These are the Detailed Application Form (DAF) and the generic questions (for example, why do you want to join the CSE? etc).

The possibility of questions being asked from a candidate’s background (as detailed in the DAF) is high. Therefore we will guide you step-bystep on how to prepare from the DAF.

- As a rule, always read up on the meaning of your name and surname, the significance of your place of birth or hometown and the politicaladministrative who’s-who of your residing state and district (who is the CM, DM, DSP etc). For the place of birth or hometown dig deep into its history, demography, economy etc and for your name look up its origins (esp. if mythologically important) and the message it conveys (if any).
- Questions have been asked about the places a candidate has lived in. For example, if you have moved out of your hometown for studies then questions can be put on your knowledge of the place you have moved to. Typical questions on this topic are on comparisons between your hometown and place of study (or work etc) and on urban-rural considerations if the situation arises. Therefore it is best if you prepare on all the places you have listed in the DAF.
- Next comes a candidate’s parents (job profile, business etc), his family background and profession (if any). Questions asked here are not in the form of a scrutiny but only informative in character. For example, it is expected that a candidate know what profession his parents are in or what their job profile entail. Also if a candidate has been working prior to appearing in the CSE it is expected that he know sufficiently on his former work.
- One of the most important topics to prepare from the DAF is on one’s education and career. Often questions are asked on the subjects a candidate had chosen for his graduation. Also, questions have been asked on favourite subjects, on why a candidate has selected a subject different from the one he graduated in for the CSE and also on why a particular subject chosen for the CSE in the first place. For example - If an engineering student chooses a Humanities subject as an optional, there may be a question related to this switch of the stream.
- If a candidate has a professional degree or job, questions maybe asked on why the candidate has not chosen to pursue that professional career or on what drove the candidate to leave his old profession to join the CSE.
- The questions on one’s hobbies are common and can be tricky so, it is best to prepare this topic carefully. It is very important you take a look at the box titled ‘hobbies’ for an understanding on how to prepare on hobbies.
- Service preferences can also be a source for questions in the personality test. The general preference is IAS, IFS, IPS (sometimes IRS for women candidates) and if this preference hierarchy breaks then a question can be asked on it. For example, if a candidate has selected IPS as first preference then it is best if that decision can be skilfully explained during the interview.
- Preferences on cadre is also very important. Things like why has the candidate selected a particular state first and another last can trigger questions that has the potential to change the course of the interview. So, it is best that a candidate has all the answers to all the questions he can think of regarding state preferences.

Hobbies

- Select hobbies carefully and prepare them exhaustively.
- If you do not have a hobby then carefully evaluate what is it that you love doing the most or have been doing for a long time - anything that you have more than a passing interest in. An example would be ‘taking long walks in the evening’.
- Hobbies should not be too openended. If you mention ‘reading’ as a hobby, it is best you specify what type of reading. Instead of ‘reading’ a proper hobby would be ‘reading mystery novels’. Doing this lowers the amount of preparation needed to cover the hobby and also lowers the chances of facing generic questions like ‘why do you read’ or ‘what books one shouldn’t read’ etc.
- In any case do not put too many hobbies on the DAF. We would recommend that you do not

mention more than three hobbies if possible.
- Also prepare generic questions on hobbies. If your hobby is very time consuming or involving then it might raise the curiosity of the interview board. A typical generic question on hobbies can be like this - How did you balance pursuing your hobbies while preparing for the CSE?

Generic questions are questions that can be asked irrespective of a candidate's background, optional subject or gender. These type of questions can make or mar a candidate's selection in the final merit list. The reason why such questions can be asked is simply that these type of questions allow the interviewer to gauge the candidate's inner thoughts without explicitly asking for it. The secret is to prepare on as many generic questions one can think of and devise answers that reflect the candidate's own personality and academic background. As a hint of caution it is best if candidates do not try to be overly creative or unique while devising answers to such questions. Moreover, since such questions test the candidate's presence of mind and the ability to think outside the box it is best if a candidate is comfortable with answering extempore.

After the DAF and the generic questions, what remains are knowledge of current events and development of opinions on these events. Read the newspaper religiously, with special focus on editorials and columns but exercise your own opinion on most matters. Go for simple solutions and if possible ignore ideological and political leanings - stay on the middle path when in doubt. Combine these opinions with your education and life experience. Make these opinions your own and share them with confidence.

A common prevailing myth about civil services interview is that while some boards are very liberal others are very conservative in awarding marks. It is also a misplaced notion that some panels unnecessarily grill candidates by asking very factual questions which cannot be answered usually. But the reality is quite different. Basically all boards are cordial and fair and all of them give marks ranging from very low to very high. Even if a board tries to put pressure on a candidate, it is only to check his/her attitude under demanding situations. An interviewee who maintains calm and answers honestly according to one's understanding is perceived in good light by the panel. So, a candidate should not develop preconceived notions with respect to the various interview boards. Doing so may prove detrimental for her because if she gets a board for which she has a negative
misconception then she won't be able to give her normal performance and end up messing up the interview.

Examples of generic questions that can be asked in the CSE interview

- Why do you want to join the Civil Services?
- What would you do if you are not selected in the Civil Services?
- Why should we select you for Civil Services?
- Tell us about yourself.
- Why have you selected this optional? (Especially if your university subjects differ from optional subjects, for example an engineer appearing with psychology)
- Can one serve society only through Civil Services?
- Do you think bureaucracy is corrupt? OR What is your opinion on corruption in bureaucracy? (Any recent topic relating to UPSC or bureaucracy that has moral-ethical dimensions to it)
- Did you take any coaching for your preparation? What are your opinions on coaching? What role does coaching play in CSE success?
- Who have inspired you the most in your life?
- (During the interview) Are you nervous?
- (For married candidates esp. women candidates) How did you manage different engagements while preparing for this exam?

What to do and more importantly what not to do during the CSE interview

- Do think before you speak. In the interview, there is ample time for thought but there is not enough time in the universe to make up for regrettable utterances. So, be careful on what you say. Also, try and avoid interjections as much as possible. Speak naturally without accent.
- Do not bluff. ‘I don’t know’ is a far better substitute to a false and unnecessary answer. A false answer will not only fetch zero marks but may make a negative impression on the interview board.
- Be honest with the interview board. Imagine a situation where you are speaking to your friend’s father. That situation requires you be free and frank and yet be formal and respectful. Speak with the interview board in same manners.
- How you say it is as important as what you say. Always check the tone of your voice and never raise your voice or lose eye contact while making a point or when ambushed by the board (yes, they can do that sometimes). If possible avoid scoring points. Instead speak as if you are personally invested in the issue and that its solution will help you too, more than anyone else, in your life. Always remember that the ability to keep a cool head in a crisis situation is a very highly sought after and a very well rewarded quality.
- Be expressive but not to the extent that you do not filter anything. Your expressiveness should be very well filtered and kind-hearted, focused on reality with an attitude towards problem-solving.
- Nothing can be more serious during the interview than the display of a moral compass that does not point north. When answering questions, always as a rule keep humanity above everything else. For example, you can follow this hierarchy from top to bottom - human life, lives of other animals and plants, the planet earth, social and economical institutions, man-made organisations…basic requirements for survival, consumerist things, things that satisfy our greed, hedonistic pleasures… corruption, crime, murder etc. From the above example, if there is a choice to be made between saving human lives and saving a legal-economic institution, choose human lives. Human life trumps everything else in this universe.
- Lastly, be polite, humble and engaging. There must be a visible amount of enthusiasm in your replies. A laid-back attitude will work against you in the interview. Instead be curious and creative, be spontaneous and intelligent, don’t be over-smart or casual and most importantly be enthusiastic and show that you are eager to learn even during the most important interview of your life! Remember these three golden rules - don’t get nervous, don’t bluff and be your natural self.

The mantra to success in the CSE interview in particular and life in general is to keep on learning, evolving and developing and to not stop until the sun has set. With this we would like to now conclude this strategy but before we end we would implore you to consult the box given below titled ‘What to do and more importantly what not to do during the CSE interview’ for a firm idea on how to carry oneself through the actual CSE interview. We will see you soon with a new strategy next month.

— Team Drishti.

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