

Chapter 6: Desperation Is a Tell

How desperation quietly shows up in an interview, even when it looks like the opposite, and how to rebuild the real confidence that makes it fade.

When my longest stretch out of work began, I thought I had this handled. I'd been interviewing for years and I was good at it—or I thought I was. I treated interviews as conversations, walked in easy, and honestly expected to walk out with offers. That had more or less been my experience before, so I wasn't worried. I figured I'd have something lined up in a few weeks and this whole unemployment thing would be a short, forgettable gap on the calendar.

Then the offers didn't come.

The first three interviews I went on that stretch are burned into my memory: three solid companies, three roles I could have done real work in. And in all three I was defensive and tentative at the same time, which is a strange, losing combination. I stumbled over questions that should have been layups. "What are you looking for?" I'd fumble it. "Why did you leave your last position?" I'd get a little clipped, a little guarded, like the question was an accusation instead of small talk. And then there was the dreaded one: "Tell me about a time..."

I hate those questions. Always have. They ask you to talk about yourself, and talking about myself is not something I do comfortably. It feels like bragging, so I'd shrink from it, give a thin answer, and move on before I'd actually said anything. An interviewer asks "tell me about a time you solved a hard problem" and my instinct was to keep it short and modest, which in an interview reads as *she doesn't have a story*. I had a hundred stories. I just couldn't make myself tell them.

Each "no," and worse, each silence, took a chip out of my confidence. And the lower my confidence went, the worse I interviewed, which produced more nos, which took more chips. You can see the spiral. Within a couple of months the easy, I've-got-this me had left the building, and in her place was someone who didn't want to leave the house at all. I slid right back into being the job-search troll I'd been years earlier: holed up at the kitchen table, firing off applications for hours, at least five a day, several hundred over the course of the year, and hearing back from almost none of them. I'd refresh my inbox like it owed me money. That's where a year like that takes you if you let it. I'd walk out of the rare interview I did land, sit in my car, replay the whole thing, and think: *what happened in there?* And I genuinely didn't know.

Desperation doesn't always look desperate

Here's the part I didn't understand at the time, and it's the most important thing in this chapter. Desperation doesn't always show up as neediness. Sometimes it shows up as the opposite. Sometimes it looks like attitude.

Go back to that confident version of me at the start of the year, the one who expected offers. Underneath the ease was something I couldn't see yet. By then I had more than ten years of experience, and somewhere under the fear I'd built a little wall of entitlement to stand behind. I'd walk into a room half-thinking, *I have nothing to prove. Look at my résumé. They should be glad I showed up.* I told myself that was confidence. It wasn't. It was fear wearing armor. And

interviewers can feel that just as clearly as they can feel the sweaty-palmed version. Maybe more clearly, because nobody wants to hire the person who acts like the job is beneath them.

So that was me sabotaging myself two different ways in the same conversation: too guarded to open up, too proud to sell. Both of those are desperation. Both of them are a tell. Like in poker: you think you've got a straight face, and the whole time you're broadcasting.

Why the tell matters more than your answers

When you've been out of work long enough, the fear stops being something you feel and turns into something you give off. It shows up in the small stuff: how fast you jump to answer, how hard you laugh at a joke that wasn't that funny, the flicker when they ask why you left, the flatness when you should be lighting up about your own work. Interviewers rarely put a name to it. They just come away thinking something felt *off*, and they go with the other candidate. You get the polite email, and you're left in the parking lot with no idea what went wrong, because on paper, nothing did.

That's the cruel thing about the tell. It doesn't show up in the transcript. You could read back everything you said and it would look fine. The problem was the temperature you brought into the room, and temperature doesn't make it onto the page.

The other cost: settling

There's a second price desperation makes you pay, quieter than the blown interview. It widens your net in the wrong direction. When I was deep in that year, I found myself interviewing at companies I wasn't actually interested in, for roles that didn't excite me, at salary levels that flat-out didn't meet my needs. Not because any of it was right, but because desperation whispers *take the meeting, take anything, just make the not-knowing stop*.

The trouble is that chasing things you don't want is exhausting, and it doesn't even work: the lack of genuine interest is *also* a tell. You can't fake enthusiasm for a job you don't want any better than you can fake confidence you don't have. So you spend your limited energy on interviews you're half-hearted about, perform badly in them *because* you're half-hearted, and come away feeling like even the jobs you didn't want rejected you. Which is a special kind of insult to the ego. It's a bad loop. Desperation built it.

Why "just be confident" is useless advice

This is the point in a book like this where you'd expect me to tell you to walk in there and just *be confident*. I won't, because it's empty. If you're a year in and running low, being told to be confident is like being told to just be taller. You can't perform a feeling you don't have. And remember, the performance is its own tell. My little wall of entitlement was exactly that: a performance of confidence that fooled no one, least of all me.

So faking it is off the table. The real move is to go rebuild the actual thing. And you don't rebuild confidence by talking yourself into it in the bathroom mirror. You rebuild it out in the world, with other people.

What actually pulled me out

For me it wasn't a mindset trick or a morning affirmation. It was leaving the house: the very thing troll-mode had me avoiding. I started going to networking events and job fairs, the kind of thing I'd always found faintly awkward and had a dozen good reasons to skip. I made myself go anyway, low mood and all.

I remember one job fair in particular, because it did something no amount of self-talk had managed. I worked my way around the room, table to table, and at every single one the feedback was warm. Recruiters were genuinely glad to meet me. They leaned in. They wanted to keep talking. Table after table, the same thing: interest, energy, people happy I'd walked up. And somewhere around the fourth or fifth table it hit me: *I'm still good at this. I'm still someone people want to talk to.* Many months of silent inboxes had quietly convinced me otherwise, and one afternoon in a crowded room started undoing it.

That's really why I push this so hard. Three things happen when you get in a room with people. First, it breaks the echo chamber: when you spend every day alone with your inbox, your own worst thoughts get very loud, and a room full of humans turns the volume down. Second, you get to practice talking about yourself where nothing is on the line, so by the time it counts, the words come out smooth instead of strangled. (If you hate talking about yourself the way I do, this practice is not optional: it's the whole fix.) Third, you meet actual people, and a lead that comes through a person you've shaken hands with sits on completely different footing than application number three hundred dropped into the void.

That last part is worth underlining, because it's the same thing that later made my most recent search take about six weeks instead of a year. I didn't get better suddenly. I had help. The network I'd built by getting off the couch was doing the work.

The interview that ended the year

The interview that finally broke the streak was for a role in my field at a company where I'd worked years before. They wanted someone who already understood the environment, who knew how the place actually ran, and that was me. But the résumé fit isn't why I got it. I'd had good fits before and blown them. What was different was *me*. I walked in relaxed. I was confident without the armor, engaging, easy to talk to. Accessible, which is the word I keep coming back to. I wasn't guarding anything and I wasn't performing anything. I was just a person who knew her work, having a conversation. Which, ironically, is exactly what I'd *thought* I was doing back in January, except this time it was real.

Compare that to those first three interviews, where I was clipped and defensive and secretly annoyed I had to prove myself at all. Same candidate. Same résumé. Completely different temperature in the room—and the room is what decides.

By then I'd also flipped something in my head. I walked into that interview sizing *them* up as much as they were sizing me up. Was this somewhere I wanted to be? Did I like the people? That's not a trick you play on yourself; it's just true. An interview is two parties deciding, not one party begging. When you hold that posture, the desperation has nowhere to sit. You're too busy evaluating to grovel.

Before and after: settling your nerves

Most of this chapter is about the long game: rebuilding steadiness over weeks. But you also need something for the specific morning you've got an interview at ten and your stomach is already in knots. So here's a concrete routine, before and after.

Before. The night before, do your prep and then physically close the laptop. Cramming at eleven p.m. adds anxiety, not knowledge. The morning of, move your body first, even a ten-minute walk (Chapter 5); it burns off the jittery adrenaline that would otherwise come out as a shaky voice. Give yourself margin, because nothing spikes nerves like rushing. Arrive early, or log in five minutes ahead. And right before you walk in or turn on the camera, take a few slow breaths, longer on the exhale than the inhale, and remind yourself of the reframe from this chapter: this is a conversation between two people deciding, not an interrogation. You're allowed to just be a person.

After. However it went, resist the urge to relive every answer on the drive home. The performance is over, and the replay only feeds the tell for next time. Give it one capped window (Chapter 2) if you need to, then let it go. Send a short thank-you note within a day, two or three genuine sentences; it's a small, kind, professional thing that occasionally tips a close decision, and it gives your restless brain something useful to do. Then, and this is the hard part, put it out of your mind and keep the search moving. Pinning all your hope on one outcome you can't control is exactly how the desperation creeps back in. A full pipeline is the best cure there is for interview anxiety, because no single no can level you when three other possibilities are still in motion.

A few things that actually help

None of these are magic. They're just the moves that turn the tell down.

- **Cap the spiral, then move.** Give yourself a set window to feel the fear. An afternoon, not a month. Then make yourself do one concrete thing. (There's a whole method for this back in Chapter 2; use it.) Sitting in the panic is what feeds the tell, and it's what turns a rough week into troll-mode.
- **Get in rooms with people.** Networking events, job fairs, a professional meetup, coffee with a former colleague. It doesn't have to lead straight to a job to be worth it, even if all you walk away with is a stale mini-quiche and one decent conversation; that beats another afternoon refreshing your inbox. It rebuilds the muscle and the mood, and it reminds you that you're still good at what you do.
- **Prep your three or four stories cold, especially if you hate talking about yourself.** The "tell me about a time" questions killed me until I stopped treating them as bragging and started treating them as recall. Pick three or four real moments: a problem you solved, a mess you cleaned up, a project you carried. Get them ready before you ever sit down. Then you're not selling yourself in the moment; you're just telling a story you already know. That reframe made all the difference for me.
- **Get a little choosier than fear wants you to be.** Chasing companies you don't care about at salaries that don't work is desperation widening your net the wrong way. Aim at

roles that actually fit. Focused beats frantic, and your genuine interest will read in the room, the same way its absence does.

- **Watch for the armor, not just the neediness.** If you catch yourself thinking “they should be lucky to have me,” that’s not confidence talking. That’s fear in a costume. Name it, set it down, and go back to being a person having a conversation.
- **Remember it goes both ways.** You’re deciding about them too. Walk in evaluating the fit, and you’ll carry yourself completely differently. And it’s true, not a pose.

The good news about a tell

Here’s what I’d tell that version of me if I could reach her: either the cocky one in January expecting offers, or the one hiding at the kitchen table in June: the tell is real, but it’s temporary, and you are not stuck with it. You don’t beat it by hiding it better. You beat it by going and doing the things that make it fade on its own. Talk to people. Get your stories ready. Be a little pickier than the fear wants. Drop the armor *and* the shrinking, because they’re the same scared thing wearing two different outfits.

The steadiness comes back. Mine did, in a crowded job-fair hall and then in a conversation with a company that already knew my work. And when it comes back, it’ll show in the room the exact same way the desperation used to—except this time it’s working for you.