Chief Operating Officer interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for chief operating officer roles are typically rigorous and multi-stage, focusing on your ability to execute strategy, lead through change, and manage financial and operational risk. Expect to meet with the CEO, board members, and sometimes your future direct reports.

- **Strategic and operational:** Questions about how you turn strategy into processes, set KPIs, and allocate resources.
- **Leadership and people:** Questions about leading cross-functional teams, managing performance, and building culture.
- **Financial acumen:** Questions about budgeting, forecasting, and financial modelling.
- **Change management:** Questions about leading major change such as ERP rollouts or restructures.
- **Risk and governance:** Questions about identifying operational risks and implementing controls.
- **Scenario-based:** Hypothetical situations that test your judgement under pressure.

The process usually starts with a screening interview with a recruiter or board member, followed by a panel interview with the CEO and board representatives. Some organisations include a case study or presentation on an operational challenge. Final rounds often involve meeting the broader leadership team and a reference check.

1. Walk us through how you would approach your first 90 days as COO.

Why they ask

Tests strategic thinking and your ability to prioritise quickly in a new executive role.

How to structure your answer

Use a phased walk-through: first 30 days for listening and diagnosis, next 30 for prioritisation and quick wins, final 30 for implementing changes and setting up reporting.

Example answer

“In the first 30 days I would meet with each department head, review existing KPIs and financial reports, and identify the top three operational pain points. In the next 30 days I would work with the CEO to prioritise one or two initiatives that can deliver early wins, such as streamlining a reporting process or addressing a supply chain bottleneck. By day 90 I would have a clear operating rhythm in place, with monthly KPI reviews and a risk register that the board can rely on.”

2. Tell me about a time you led a major operational change, such as an ERP rollout.

Why they ask

Assesses your change management skills and ability to lead cross-functional projects.

How to structure your answer

STAR: describe the situation, the task, the actions you took, and the result.

Example answer

“At a previous organisation, we were running three separate systems for finance, inventory and HR, which made reporting slow and error-prone. I led the selection and implementation of a single ERP platform. I started by mapping current processes and consulting each department on their needs. I then set up a cross-functional project team with clear milestones and ran weekly check-ins. We phased the rollout by business unit to manage risk. The result was a significant reduction in

month-end close time and much better data accuracy, and the finance team could produce reports for the board in days rather than weeks."

3. How would you handle a situation where one business unit is underperforming and needs resources reallocated from another?

Why they ask

Tests judgement under pressure, financial acumen, and stakeholder management.

How to structure your answer

A judgement under pressure structure: acknowledge the situation, gather data, consider options, make a decision, communicate.

Example answer

"First I would want to understand why the unit is underperforming: is it a market issue, a cost issue, or a capability gap? I would pull the financials and operational KPIs for that unit and compare them with the rest of the business. Then I would consider whether reallocating resources is the right move, or whether there are other levers like process improvements or leadership changes. If reallocation is necessary, I would present a clear case to the CEO and board, showing the expected return and the impact on the other unit. I would also communicate transparently with both teams to maintain trust."

4. How do you ensure operational risks are identified and controlled across multiple departments?

Why they ask

Tests your knowledge of risk frameworks, internal controls, and governance.

How to structure your answer

A process question: describe your framework, then give an example of how you applied it.

Example answer

"I use a risk register that is reviewed quarterly with each department head. Each risk is assessed for likelihood and impact, and we assign an owner and mitigation plan. I also build controls into our processes, such as segregation of duties in finance and regular compliance checks. For example, when we identified a supply chain risk from a single supplier, we qualified a second supplier and adjusted our inventory buffers. I report the top risks to the board each quarter and track whether mitigation actions are completed."

5. Describe your experience with budgeting and forecasting, and how you work with the CEO and board on financial performance.

Why they ask

Tests financial analysis, modelling, and board reporting capability.

How to structure your answer

A technical and behavioural blend: describe your approach, then a specific instance where it made a difference.

Example answer

"I have managed operating budgets for multi-site operations, typically using a bottom-up approach where each department head submits their needs and I consolidate and challenge assumptions. I use rolling forecasts so we can adjust when market conditions change. Each month I present a KPI dashboard to the CEO and board, highlighting variances and recommending actions. For example, when a key input cost rose unexpectedly, I modelled three scenarios and recommended a combination of hedging and process changes that kept margins stable."

6. Tell me about a time you had to influence a peer or stakeholder who disagreed with your operational plan.

Why they ask

Tests stakeholder management, people leadership, and your ability to build consensus.

How to structure your answer

STAR: describe the situation, the task, the actions you took to influence, and the result.

Example answer

“In one role, I proposed centralising procurement to reduce costs, but the sales director was concerned about losing flexibility. I set up a meeting to understand his concerns and then worked with him to design a centralised model that still gave sales fast turnaround on urgent orders. We piloted it with one product line and measured the results, which showed both cost savings and no impact on sales responsiveness. He became a supporter, and we rolled it out across the business.”