

Cafe Manager interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Cafe Manager interviews mix operational detail with people management and a bit of maths under pressure. Expect the panel, often the owner or an area manager, to probe how you actually run a shift rather than what you believe about leadership in the abstract.

- **Process:** Walking through how you handle a recurring operational task such as rostering or stocktake.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of managing staff, conflict or underperformance.
- **Scenario:** Judgement calls under pressure, such as a short-staffed shift or a difficult customer.
- **Financial and numeracy:** Basic questions on cost control, wastage or reading a sales report.
- **Safety and compliance:** Food safety, RSA and WHS knowledge specific to a cafe environment.

Most interviews for this role run as a single 30 to 45 minute conversation, sometimes followed by a paid trial shift. It usually opens with your background and current responsibilities, moves into scenario and behavioural questions about staff and customers, and finishes with practical questions on cost control, compliance and availability.

1. Walk me through how you build a weekly roster.

Why they ask

Rostering to demand while controlling labour cost is one of the core, recurring tasks in this role, so interviewers want to hear your actual method, not just that you can do it.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a step-by-step walk-through: what information you check first, how you allocate shifts and skill mix, and how you adjust once the roster is live.

Example answer

"I start by pulling the last few weeks of sales data from the POS to see which hours are actually busy, then check who's on leave or has fixed availability. I roster my strongest coffee makers across the peak windows and pair newer staff with someone experienced rather than leaving them alone. Once it's posted I keep an eye on it through the week and adjust if a shift looks over or understaffed against how trade is actually running."

2. Tell me about a time you had to deal with an underperforming staff member.

Why they ask

People leadership is central to this role, and hiring managers want evidence you can address problems directly rather than avoid them.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the situation, the specific task or standard that wasn't being met, the action you took, and the result.

Example answer

"One of my baristas was consistently running slow during the morning rush, which was backing up the queue. I sat down with him one-on-one rather than raising it on the floor, found out he was unsure on a couple of the more complex orders, and ran a short retraining session with him during a quiet period. His speed and confidence picked up within a couple of weeks and the queue backups stopped."

3. It's Saturday morning, the queue is out the door, and one of your baristas calls in sick. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests how you prioritise and communicate under real operational pressure, which is a normal part of running a cafe.

How to structure your answer

Talk through the immediate decision, who you'd contact and in what order, and how you'd keep service running while sorting a longer-term fix.

Example answer

"I'd get on the machine myself straight away so the queue keeps moving, then quickly message the rest of the team to see who can come in early or extend their shift. I'd let waiting customers know there might be a short delay rather than let them guess. Once the immediate rush is under control I'd sort out proper cover for the rest of the day and follow up with the sick staff member later."

4. How would you handle a customer who complains their coffee is cold after you've already remade it once?

Why they ask

Service recovery with a customer who's already been let down once is a common, tricky situation in a cafe.

How to structure your answer

Describe how you'd de-escalate, what you'd offer, and how you'd close the interaction so the customer leaves satisfied.

Example answer

"I'd apologise properly rather than getting defensive, and remake the coffee myself to check the temperature before it goes out. If they're still not happy I'd offer a refund or take it off the bill, because at that point the goal is making sure they come back, not winning the point. I'd also have a quiet word with whoever made it the second time to check nothing's wrong with the machine."

5. Your food cost percentage has crept up over the last month. How would you find out why and fix it?

Why they ask

Budgeting and cost control are named parts of this role, and interviewers want a practical diagnostic approach rather than a guess.

How to structure your answer

Walk through it as a diagnosis: what you'd check first, how you'd narrow down the cause, and what corrective action you'd take.

Example answer

"I'd start by checking whether it's a pricing issue, a portioning issue or wastage, by comparing recent supplier invoices against sales volume. If portions are drifting I'd retrain on standard measures at the pass. If it's wastage, I'd tighten par levels and check stock rotation isn't slipping. I'd keep tracking the number weekly rather than monthly so I can catch it early next time."

6. What do you know about food safety requirements for a cafe, and how do you keep the team compliant day to day?

Why they ask

Health and safety standards sit alongside the day-to-day running of the venue, and this checks both your knowledge and how you embed it in practice.

How to structure your answer

Combine a brief knowledge check with a description of your routine practices.

Example answer

"I hold a Food Safety Supervisor certificate and make sure temperature logs, cleaning schedules and date labelling are done every shift, not just when someone's checking. I run new staff through the basics in their first week and do quick refreshers if I notice standards slipping. If a health inspector turned up unannounced I'd want our records to already be in order, not scrambled together on the day."