The Importance of Listening in the Interview and Interrogation Process

"One can obtain more accurate and complete information in interviews through simply listening."

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Some time ago, a Kansas sheriff talked to a suspect in a liquor store robbery. At first the suspect was reluctant to talk about anything, much less the robbery, but soon began to talk about his girlfriend. They had gone to California together, began visiting and drinking with another man at a bar, and soon the three were making rounds of the bars together. After several days, the girlfriend deserted the suspect, leaving with the other man. Of course this had absolutely nothing to do with the liquor store robbery. Many in law enforcement would have instructed the suspect to talk only about the robbery. The Kansas sheriff, however, listened to the story of the suspect's love life. After giving the full details of his love life, the suspect said, "That's why I got into this trouble." His full confession soon came as a result of more listening.

It is assumed that sharp questions, piercing the subject's lies, lead to confessions, but what about listening? Who has ever confessed while the interrogator was talking? Isn't listening as important as questioning?

Distorting the Story

Since most texts center more on questioning than listening, what is the effect of questions? While not conclusive, research has shown that some questions may distort both the answers and later recollection. In one study, a 3-minute video tape of a disruption of a class by demonstrators was shown to 56 undergraduate students. One group was asked passive questions, such as, "Did you notice the demonstrators gesturing at any of the students?" Another group was asked active, loaded questions, such as, "Did you notice the militants threatening any of the students?" When tested 1 week later, those who were asked active questions remembered the incident as more noisy and violent and the demonstrators as being more belligerent. Their reaction to the demonstrators was more antagonistic than those students who were asked passive questions. The article concludes that descriptions of witnesses to a complex situation can be influenced by the questions used to interrogate them about the incident. How suggestive a question may be or how much a person may be influenced is difficult to determine. If a witness gives a narrative report rather than answering frequent questions, would it be more accurate? In a previous study it was stated that "a good deal of research has been conducted over the last 70 years and has indicated that relative to a narrative report form, an interrogatory report is more complete, but less accurate. Thus one conclusion that might be reached is that when people are forced to answer specific questions, their accuracy suffers, and further, that some
The Narrative Report

One can obtain more accurate and complete information in interviews through simply listening. After the formalities of introduction, the interviewer should ask, "What happened?" and follow this question with a long period of active intense listening, allowing the witness or subject to tell the full story as he sees it. How well the interviewer listens initially is crucial to the interview. Only after the full story has been told in narrative form, without interruption, should specific questions be asked. These questions should be based both on missing elements of the narrative and planning before the interview.

Listening Aids

A few simple aids to better listening that can be easily remembered, practiced, and added to everyday habits will aid in forming successful listening habits. Practice of these listening skills should lead to improved interviews and interrogations.

Avoid Distractions

Most people speak at a speed of about 125 words per minute," extremely slow compared to what the brain can handle. A poor listener's thoughts drift away into daydreams or outside thoughts during this spare time, then fail to return for crucial spoken words. While a listener is wondering whether he turned off the waffle iron, the witness or subject may say something important—thought connections are...
"An interviewer who lacks patience and understanding is headed toward an unproductive interview and is creating an obstructive witness."
Interview reports contain only the content or spoken word. The spoken word gives far less than the full meaning, since much of the emotion or attitude is exhibited not through words but through body movements, facial expression, or voice tone. Bearing this in mind, notes should reflect the emotional as well as factual content. There is nothing wrong with reporting in notes that a witness smiled or frowned as he said something, or that the witness looked downward when telling an important fact. While reading conclusions as to the meaning of nonverbal action can be risky, describing nonverbal behavior can and does add substantially to the completeness and accuracy of an interview. Yet, few interview reports actually contain more than the words spoken.

Training to Listen

Listening has become an important part of interview and interrogation training of new Agents at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Va. New Agent trainees interview an instructor playing the role of a witness or suspect, while another instructor evaluates the trainee's performance. Experience has shown the best listeners to be the best interviewers. Role play scripts purposely contain unclear or partial information that could not be contemplated in preinterrogation planning—the interviewer must listen carefully to the witness. Questions to complete the information must then follow. For example, one role playing situation calls for the witness to mention some information but leave large gaps that must be filled. A few names, times, and places are mentioned by the witness without further explanation. Mention of these facts to a good listener triggers necessary questions. In another role play scenario, a bank robbery suspect said, "There weren't any customers in the bank." This lone statement is an excellent admission that a good listener should catch, making a notation of the exact words and trying to prove their listening skills through practice.

Summary

Often, an investigator may not be satisfied that he has obtained enough information or that it has been received accurately. By adhering to a few simple, practical interviewing rules, the completeness and accuracy of interviews and interrogations can be substantially improved. Those who achieve these skills will soon find themselves understanding others better. They may also gain an unexpected dividend—understanding themselves better.

Notes

- Poor listeners interrupt; fail to ask followup questions to clarify what a witness says; are impatient, over-eager, or over-relaxed; have little or no eye contact; and take few notes to the story given. Bad listening can be corrected through criticizing role play interviews.

- A shorter listening exercise that has proven worthwhile is to have a speaker explain to a listener several happenings that have had profound influence on the speaker's life. The listener then attempts to paraphrase the story to the speaker's satisfaction. Speaker and listener then exchange roles, followed by a discussion of their listening habits. This training exercise can be done in 5 or 10 minutes for each person and is especially useful when it is video taped so that each person may view his own behavior when listening.

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References

- "Poor listening is one of our most proficient forms of communication," says bull. "It is the one skill that we all have, and it is the one skill that we all need to improve." (Bull, "The Psychology of Unspoken Communication," American Journal of Psychopathology, vol. 32, No. 15, 1983, p. 185-186.)


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