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The executive engaged in the normal conduct of business devotes much of his time to interviewing. However, there is an appalling lack of effort given to systematic attempts at building improvements into this age-old process. Interviewing remains one of those activities which we *think* we know all about merely because we have been doing it so long; we have been lulled by habit. It seems apparent that a modest effort aimed at an analysis of our interviewing techniques would yield generous returns.

In the broad sense, interviewing is the process whereby individuals (usually two) exchange information. The individuals may be concerned with a job opening, a promotion, a special assignment, a product sale, information for intelligence purposes, a proposed merger, or other questions. The information exchanged need not be limited to facts. In business, particularly, such products of an interview as meaning and understanding are oftentimes more significant than objective factual statements.

Interviewing in the contemporary business setting invariably takes place in an atmosphere filled with a sense of urgency. The time allocated to the interview is necessarily limited. Consequently, a nondirective approach finds little application; it is necessary to use the guided interview in the vast majority of situ-

ations. This inherent time constraint sometimes brings about dysfunctional consequences: the interviewer is so preoccupied with budgeting his time that the content and the purpose of the interview are vitiated. Hence, we must define what we mean by an effective interview. For the purposes of this article, an effective interview is one that optimizes the perceived communication objectives of the individuals involved, with time as the principal constraint. We shall focus on research findings concerning:

- The proper kind of preparation for the interview.
- Value of such procedures as having an outline of points to be covered and taking notes.
- Use (and misuse) of questions and questioning techniques.
- The kind and amount of control that the interviewer should exercise over the discussion.
- Analysis and evaluation of information obtained.

Planning & Preparation

The lack of adequate planning for an interview is the greatest single fault found in my studies of the interviewing process.¹ All too often, the inexperi-

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¹See, for example, my report, *An Analysis of Precision Learning, Evaluation of Information and Decision-Reaching, in Two Groups, Using Closed Circuit Television* (Los Angeles, Western Management Science Foundation, 1962).

enced interviewer launches into a discussion only to find midway through that his preparation is incomplete. A moderate amount of preplanning can easily obviate such unfortunate occurrences.

When the objective of the interview is well-known in advance, it is usually a good practice to allow the individual concerned ample time to prepare for the talk before the actual involvement. By indicating, ahead of time and in writing, the points to be covered, the interviewer gives the interviewee an added advantage and reinforces the specific purpose of the session. Too often the expectations of the interviewee may be far different from those of the interviewer. This misunderstanding, if not corrected, can be disastrous.

On the other hand, too much preplanning and detailing for an interview can be equally harmful. The interviewee may then develop conventionally correct answers or platitudes which, of course, reduce the informational content of the interview to virtually zero. In short, he needs a guide, a "steer"—but no more than that.

A written outline of important points to be covered is not necessarily an indication of rigidity; rather, it reflects consideration for all parties concerned. When explained, it generates a feeling of confidence as well as fairness—particularly if two or more people are to be ranked in an evaluation. The outline may even include typical questions in order to solicit comparable responses. Again, however, a warning against excess is needed: too much reliance on a programmed questioning approach is often disconcerting to the interviewee and may lead to stereotyped answers. Ideally, of course, each question should be designed for the situation and the respondent.

In presenting information, a speaker allocates blocks of time to various items on his agenda. If no time limit is established, the presentation can continue indefinitely. Even worse, the truly important information may never be told. This process takes place by dint of the normal human trait of retaining the most significant bits of information for the end. Psychiatrists recognize this and are particularly attentive in the last ten minutes of the therapy session. Borrowing from this insight, the interviewer, although not able to set an hourly cycle as does the psychiatrist, should try discreetly to indicate a time scale. This allows the interviewee to plan and to include relevant information which otherwise might be withheld. If the interview is terminated too abruptly, the probability of losing valuable information is very high.

A time limit can be suggested by citing the next appointment or by noting, perhaps, a previously scheduled conference. Actions such as tapping—

consciously or not—on one's watch to indicate time are out of order, of course; so is sitting precipitously on the edge of the chair. Sometimes it may be in the best interest of both parties to set another date for an extended session or to plan on completing only one or two stages of progress at a time.

Building Rapport

Certainly the general tone of the interview should be one of helpfulness and friendliness so as to minimize the immediate barriers to forthright communication. In this connection it should be mentioned that privacy is a first prerequisite to good interviewing. An important component of this is freedom from distracting interruptions. (The telephone many times is such a distraction.)

In order to establish the critically important element of rapport with the interviewee, a genuine attempt should be made to put the interviewee at ease—especially in job application, promotion, or other interviews where significant differences in status exist. Unfortunately, sometimes this rapport is attempted by such gaucheries as, "Now, don't be nervous!" or, "Relax!"

Normally, at the beginning of an interview an allowance should be made for the interviewee to adjust to the interview environment. The situation is new for the interviewee; it may be his or her first experience of this kind. Unless there is a specified adaptation period, the interviewee may be unable to reduce his or her level of anxiety, with the resulting loss of the entire session. Part of this adaptive process is familiarization with the surroundings. It is an often overlooked truism that whenever an individual is placed in a strange situation, he becomes apprehensive.

Overcoming this fear is often a most difficult procedure. By explaining, for example, the need for commonplace objects such as pencil and note paper that are anxiety-provoking, the level of tension may be reduced. Also, it is well to remember that the manner and simple courtesies extended by the interviewer are greatly magnified in the eyes of the interviewee. Thus, a limited amount of pleasantries may be condoned if they fulfill this useful purpose.

By jotting down significant bits of information, the interviewer can readily reconstruct what actually took place. The record assists with details which would be hard to remember if not recorded. The time that would be needed to fix them in mind without benefit of notes can be used to greater advantage listening and thinking. Then, too, writing down items compliments the interviewee; it means that his

responses are considered important enough to be recorded. It is a convenient reinforcing mechanism; it may even be used to guide the path of the interview.

Information of a picayune variety should naturally be avoided. Similarly, allowing the interviewee to relate too much information can be dangerous. Any inadvertently revealed facts or incidents may bring about severe anxiety feelings when he or she reflects on them later. Temptations to divulge information too freely should be sidestepped as lightly as possible so that continued rapport may be maintained. In addition, circumspection should be exercised at all times lest the interviewer become too emotionally involved in the exchange. Disagreements tend to provoke planning for verbal counterattacks with the result that the informational content is lost.

Guiding the conversation

The interviewee is overly sensitive to all reactions by the interviewer. Taking advantage of this, the interviewer may easily steer the conversation along the most productive channels. Small inflections in the voice give encouragement. By repeating phrases already expressed, one finds the respondent expanding with details on a relevant issue. Sometimes, merely restating the reply allows a time for reflection and quite natural expansion or clarification of a point perhaps lost in the first verbalization. Phrasing a question by rewording it into a rhetorical one gives the interviewee a period to think through a definite response (although caution should be observed that the "right" words are not put into the mind of the interviewee).

Support given by nodding is most effective. Other nonverbal means of rendering assistance are equally significant. The use of semiverbal expressions of a meaningless nature—for instance, "Umm . . ."—can prove most useful. Because such utterances provide no direct interpretation, they are received as the interviewee wants to receive them. He then emphasizes or magnifies the point as he sees fit.

A succinct summary of information from time to time not only allows for clarity in the communication process but also gives the informant a mirror of just what has occurred. Alterations can be made easily by the interviewee once he hears what he has said. In the final stage, a precise statement of what was agreed on or of the general conclusions reached often allows for a reduction of confusion.

When details or figures have been discussed, the summary can often be in the form of a written memorandum. If the interviewer wants to be sure of what the interviewee communicated or to check on whether the interviewee really understood the data discussed, he can ask him to write the memorandum.

Developing Information

The tools of the interviewer are his questions. They should be used with dispatch and yet with the utmost care. Sarcasm or obscure humor should be avoided unless the interviewer is positive that the interviewee perceives them as such. Usually, the latter's interpretation of such activity is entirely serious; he or she may respond at the time with a semblance of perceived humor, but the real reaction is often deep concern and suspicion.

Through the judicious use of questions, the skilled interviewer not only obtains information but also guides the talk along productive lines. Leading questions or questions designed with built-in responses are usually not very effective. Similarly, the double negative type of interrogation is to be shunned as it tends to evoke anxiety. To avoid slipping into such traps, even the best interviewer should review his questioning techniques from time to time. Thus, self-analyzing by tape recording or by having a third person observe an interview for diagnostic purposes can prevent poor techniques from developing into set procedures. This process may be extended to the use of video tape recordings with proportionately more significant results.

In a research project that concentrated on questioning techniques, I analyzed the recordings of about 100 interviews held for the purpose of selecting job applicants, appraising executive performance, or counseling employees in their careers. One of the conclusions from this study is this: successful interviewers (as evaluated by information obtained) utilize at the outset of the interview a pattern of broad, general questions. Apparently this allows the respondent to answer with information which he feels is important, as well as providing him the opportunity to expand into areas that he deems to be of vital concern. Once this information is released, the interviewer can sharpen the focus with specific questions eliciting short answers. For example, the "yes or no" kind of question should be reserved for the final exploration of a subject, while queries such as "How do you feel about working with Joe Smith's group?" might well obtain results most useful at the beginning of a particular subject.

Fear of silence

It seems that silence in our society is to be avoided at virtually all times and all places. Unfortunately, this feeling affects the interview. Usually fear of silence is felt most by the inexperienced interviewer. All too often he tends to put forth another question while the respondent is meekly attempting

to formulate his own thoughts into a logical reply—all just to keep the air filled with words.

The tendency to hurry questions and answers is compounded by the distorted sense of time that people get during an interview. To understand the amount of distortion, one research group carried out such simple tests as stopping a conversation for a short period. Interviewers' estimates of the period of silence magnified it by a factor of from 10 to 100!² On the other hand, I find, when asking participants in an interview to estimate the time elapsed, invariably the interviewee *underestimates* the period. Consequently, the interviewer in particular should be cautious of pushing forward too quickly. In many instances, if he will permit another few seconds to elapse, he will obtain vital bits of information that would otherwise be lost or allowed to remain in a half-expressed state in the interviewee's thought processes.

During these periods of silence, the interviewer may profitably spend his time pondering the question: "What is he really trying to tell me?" Often the content of the interview makes an incomplete story when analyzed later on. Not only may the words fall far short of the desired goal, but also they may convey misunderstandings. Allowances for the ever-present failures in semantics must constantly be made, and further interrogation conducted, in order that a clear approximation of the true meaning be obtained.

Art of listening

The often posed maxim to the effect that we hear what we wish to hear does not appear at first glance to be a profound statement. Yet it summarizes the mechanics that lie behind poor listening techniques. Individual biases and attitudes as well as role perceptions and stereotyping all contribute to the phenomenon of selective perception. Thus, in order to obtain the best possible information, it is necessary that one be aware of his own particular filters that tend to impede if not prevent clear and relatively undistorted reception of information.

It is possible to hear at the rate of from 110 to 140 words per minute over sustained periods.³ The thinking or thought projection rate is approximately seven times this figure. The result is a surplus of thinking time over listening time. The manner in which this surplus time is utilized varies, of course, with the individual. However, it is at this point that the interviewer tends to project his ideas into the

interview process, thereby filtering out the interviewee's responses.

One result is that he makes assumptions about the respondent and his information that are compatible not so much with the interviewee as with what the interviewer has already concluded about the interviewee. Suffice it to say that it is altogether more rewarding to spend this extra time in formulating hypotheses, which later can be confirmed or denied as more information is revealed, or in constructing a frame of reference for the on-going interview, which allows acquired information to be categorized easily as it is given.

Analyzing data

The information that is gathered should be approached and analyzed from two points of reference: the objective and the subjective.

Objective View. The objective category can be broken down into content and form:

1. *Content*—This term refers, of course, to the factual presentation—what is actually being said and whether or not it is reliable. The overview of the interview or the pattern of the total situation must be firmly grasped and then noted. In addition, it would seem that the following items are valuable in evaluating information—

- A response that is overwhelmingly conventional is likely to be suspect, owing to the great possibility of its being less than valid. For instance, in an employment interview, the response, "My boss didn't like me," is suspect as a cliché. Similarly, the response, "I quit that job because the pay was too low," could be merely a platitude to satisfy the interviewer.
- If the respondent is impervious to interruption during the interview, then a measure of doubt is cast as to the kind of information the interviewee is relating. Such behavior generally indicates a need to cover all points in a predetermined pattern with such compulsion that, if the interviewee were interrupted, he would never be able to reassemble all the parts. Weaknesses in the "pseudo armor" should be investigated.
- A constant shifting of the subject or an extremely short attention span often denotes a degree of suspicion.
- Should gaps or illogical sequences be prevalent, care should be exercised to augment or to complete the lapses. The voids should be completed by direct interrogation, preferably later in the interview, to check continuity and to arouse a minimum of suspicion by the informant. Later validation by telephone may help with these questions.

²C. H. Best and N. B. Taylor, *The Physiological Basis of Medical Practise* (London, Baillier, Tindall and Cox, Ltd., 1950).

³B. A. Houssay, *Human Physiology* (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1951).

- Conflicting times or facts as well as gaps or illogical sequences may indicate areas for careful attention or further penetration.
- Useful visual barometers of an unduly high anxiety level are such things as—

a. color of face	d. dryness of the mouth
b. erratic body movements	e. pitch of the voice
c. varying eye contact	f. excessive perspiration

2. *Form*—By form I mean the “how, when, and why” of the information. Words take on different meanings when differentiated along these lines. Form can be subdivided into verbal (what is heard) and into nonverbal (what is observed) content. Nonverbal expressions are perhaps the purest kind of information transmitted, since they are the most difficult to mask or disguise. By developing an awareness of and a sensitivity to such signals as *when* a certain fact was mentioned, *what* prompted the mention, *how* it was presented, and so forth, the skilled interviewer takes a most useful if not an essential step. Indeed, this awareness might well be extended to include the nonverbal transmissions of the interviewer himself.

Subjective View. In evaluating information from a subjective point of view, the interviewer is attempting primarily to assess feelings and attitudes. It is often argued that these intangibles have no obvious place in an interview that takes place in a business environment. Yet, even though it is impossible to determine exactly how feelings and attitudes do influence the information transmitted, it is nonetheless crucially necessary that one be fully aware of the fact that these intangibles are powerful, active agents in creating opinions.

Concluding the meeting

The final 10% of the interview is perhaps the most important, since the greatest amount of information per unit of time is generally exchanged during this time interval. In a series of taped interviews involving appliance sales and sales in which travel arrangements were a factor, it was found that the sales person often did not hear vital information offered toward the end of the interview or after the sale. This overlooked information brought about frequent misinterpretations, which, in turn, accounted for many later cancellations and unsettled complaints. All of this could have been avoided if a moderate amount of attention had been exercised so as to prevent a premature termination of the interview.

Part of the conclusion usually consists of a plan of action—something to be done or achieved by either or both parties. A clear, concise summary of this plan, as mentioned earlier, is a most useful tech-

nique for achieving good results. The summary is helpful to both parties because it enables them to realize exactly what has been accomplished as well as to focus on a final concordance.

Follow-Up

I have observed in my studies that a general failing of interviewers is their inability to document just what occurred in a talk. In their usual—often premeditated—hurry to get to the next interview, they neglect valuable notes. This impatience in many cases is merely behavior resulting from a self-satisfying need to prove to themselves that they *are* busy.

Adequate notation of significant events, impressions, and agreed-on information are of great value in reconstructing the interview at a later date and in providing a framework for planning the next session. By documenting a series of events, one is able to see things which, if merely left to the fragile human memory, may fuse into meaningless, disconnected scenes in a panorama of many human happenings. To be sure, too much recorded information may well lead to a surfeit of data, a situation I have also observed in several interviewing offices, but this extreme is easily prevented if good judgment is exercised.

Another benefit of effective documentation is that it offers the opportunity to reflect on a previous event. By reviewing and considering this information, one can oftentimes discover errors and flaws in technique and improve his approach. Without such specific means for learning, the same mistakes tend to become routinized until the point is reached where they become, unintentionally, an integral part of the interviewer’s technique.

But of all types of learning, self-learning is the most valuable. Without a doubt the most important key to effective interviewing is recognizing how one’s own attitudes and biases affect the information he acquires. There is a moral in the story of the professor who lost his key by the front door, but was discovered on all fours under the lamppost. He rationalized to the police officer as follows:

“Sir, it is probably true that I lost the key by the front door, but—after all—there is no light there. Here, there is light. And, besides, while I’ve been looking, I’ve found a 50-cent piece already.”

So often the interviewer is content to come up with “50-cent pieces” of helpful information about techniques, personality, and so forth. Actually, however, the *real* key to effective interviewing lies closer to his own front door. Once discovered, it can help him attain truly effective results of a professional nature.

We are the talking tribes. The tongue is the most mobile structure of the human body, and to fetter its symbolic gestures is to dry up the deep springs of our human-ness.

These are sentiments which abound not only in the counsel of wise teachers and physicians, but also in the better wisdom of the common people of long ago and of today as well. To be human is to speak. To be abundantly human is to speak freely and fully. The converse of this is a profound truth, also: that the good listener is the best physician for those who are ill in thought and feeling.

And these truths stand out most sharply when applied to that strangest of all spectacles to be seen in the realm of living things: a man talking to himself—like wind carried on the wind, like water borne by water. A man is never so serene as when he hears him-

self out, granting to himself the quieting freedom to speak fully without fear of self-reproach. Nor is he ever so gravely ill as when he stops his tongue with crying out "Shame! Shame!" unto himself. The thoughts that we forbid ourselves to whisper and the feelings that we will not say we know are the measure of our self-abandonment. By stopping up our own ears against the sounds of our own voices we achieve not the peace of inner stillness, but the unnerving disquietude of haunted consciousness.

The realization toward which we are beckoned by these reflections is that if we are to become as fully human as we might we must not only talk freely to ourselves, but we must wholly listen too.

Wendell Johnson, *Your Most Enchanted Listener*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1956, pp. 20–21.