

# The Knack of Interpreting Interviews

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Interpretation of interviews can be the payoff phase of a consulting engagement. It distills the data collected on site, observed and captured during interviews, analyzes and evaluates them, and produces the conclusions and recommendations which will solve the client's problem or achieve the purpose of the engagement.

Inputs to interpretation come from all forms of data gathering: published materials, surveys, interviews, observations – and inferences. The last may be defined as impressions derived from a series of hints or clues, all pointing in the same direction – like circumstantial evidence in a criminal investigation. The need for product managers, for example, might emerge from: poor communication between functional departments, lack of product cost or profit numbers, lack of product development goals, general versus pinpointed product advertising, poor product knowledge among field salesmen, etc.

Regarding the interpretation of interview notes, two problems may arise: (1) interviewees sometimes shade their stories or lie, and (2) interviewees may present conflicting views of "facts".

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## *Is He Telling the Truth?*

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An early and sometimes continuous task in every interview is to determine whether the interviewee is telling the truth. Many motives prompt interviewees to

warp the truth or tell out-and-out lies. Their own job security or career future may be on the line. They may feel they must protect a friend, their boss, or their department. They may resent the intrusion of consultants and try to lead them astray. Or, they may wish to appear more knowledgeable than they are and fabricate or assume facts or events they don't know about for certain.

It is important that the consultant be aware of such motives and alert to the following indicators of honesty or dishonesty.

- Admissions of error or poor judgement are usually characteristic of people who are being open and above board.
- Internal consistency of the interviewee's story provides another clue. Does it hang together and make sense? Are the events and results plausible? Are the causes sufficient to produce the outcomes? E.g., was a general strike by all employees likely because a supervisor disciplined a clerk for smoking; or isn't it more likely that far more pervasive and deep seated problems were already present in the situation?
- Is it likely that the interviewee would know, understand, or have access to the information he is relating? If not, was his source a reliable informant?
- Body language will sometimes unmask exaggeration or lying. The interviewee may hem and haw, blush, or squirm in his seat. Some writers on body language maintain that the

three monkeys – see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil – symbolize three clues to deception: 1) avoiding eye contact or shading one's eyes with one's hand, 2) tugging at an ear lobe, and 3) covering one's mouth while speaking. (Much depends on the context here. Maybe the interviewee just has an itchy ear lobe!)

The times to be most alert for deception or bias are when the interviewee is discussing events that can enhance or detract from his own image or role. On these occasions, if the interviewer suspects that the interviewee is exaggerating or lying, he should not challenge the interviewee or disrupt the spontaneous flow of discourse. A probe or two will tell whether the interviewee is going to stick to his story or back off, claiming he misspoke or was misunderstood. If the consultant wishes to challenge the interviewee, he should do so at the end of the interview when he has little to lose.

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## *Conflicting Views*

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Like the blind men feeling the elephant, we see events and situations from our own point of view, and most engagements involve at least some differences of this kind. These differences may not be due to intended deception. Honest men may differ due to different perspectives, judgments, and perceptions. In such situations the consultant should

first seek external evidence or objective criteria to resolve the differences in his mind. Failing this, he must use his own best judgement regarding 1) the most plausible story or 2) the most honest and open interviewees.

The frequency of conflicting views teaches the experienced consultant to avoid jumping to conclusions early in an engagement. Often at the end of the first day or two of interviews, it appears that the white hats are clearly identifiable and that the solution is obvious. Sometimes a single interview will seem to illuminate the whole situation with insightful perceptions and cogent answers to all the problems. Typically, however, as the engagement progresses, the plot thickens, the truth turns out to be somewhere between the white and black hats' positions, and the solutions are neither obvious nor simple. This is why even the most seasoned consultants often find it advisable to confer with their peers, sleep on it, and use informal previews or trial balloons before settling on their best judgements in a complex engagement.

No consultant – or other professional – can reasonably be expected to be omniscient. He is, however, expected to observe due diligence: to do his homework, document his findings, and give his best thought and judgement to the solutions he proposes. In other words, he should be able to say why he recommends what he does – and to defend his position. To do this well he must possess a number of essential consulting skills, among them critical thinking, problem solving, client presentations, and report writing. The usefulness of all these skills, however, depends on a solid base of findings, including properly

conducted interviews and dependable notes which capture the salient points for later interpretation.

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### *Pitfalls to Avoid*

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Anyone who does much interviewing will sooner or later meet up with a hostile interviewee or someone who wants to interview the interviewer. Some people intuitively handle these situations well. Others get flustered, confused, or even angry. A little

*This article, the third by the author concerning the art and science of successful interviewing, concentrates on ways of maximizing the information that an interview can provide. It also discusses some common pitfalls a consultant would do well to avoid.*

preparation will enable the interviewer to handle such predicaments more adroitly and with a minimum disruption to the interview process or the client-consultant relationship.

As a general rule, consultants should not bring up the issue of confidentiality. Like preaching on sin, it only gives people ideas. If the initial part of the interview has been well handled, the interviewer should have established an atmosphere of openness and trust – trust that the consultant will not use any information disclosed in a way that will undermine or

damage the interviewee. To bring up this subject can break the spell and show doubt. If client personnel get fired, demoted, or otherwise damaged as a result of the engagement, it should be because of their generally known statements, documented performance factors, or a reduction in force. It should not be the result of comments made during the interview!

No matter how open and trusting the atmosphere the consultant has created, however, during most engagements one or more interviewees will at some point bring up the subject of confidentiality. This concern will be phrased in a number of ways: “Who is going to read your notes?” “Are you going to tell my boss?” “Can I tell you something in confidence?” “I’m not sure I should be telling you all this.”

When this occurs the consultant should be prepared to respond in one of several ways, depending on the situation.

- At one extreme he can say: “Please don’t tell me anything you don’t want repeated to higher management.” Or: “Consider everything you say to be on the record.” If the engagement is highly sensitive or an adversary one, such as an unfriendly takeover situation, this kind of warning may be stated at the outset of the interview – sort of a Miranda-like warning – or it may be inserted when a touchy subject comes up, e.g., the interviewee’s role in safety rule infractions or a major cost overrun.
- A more flexible response would be: “I plan to combine your comments with others and present only the major or significant findings from all

interviews to management – without indicating any single source.” If the source would be obvious from the comments themselves, the consultant owes it to the interviewee to state that if his comments are vital to the engagement the consultant will use his best judgement regarding how he will use them in his presentations to management.

- A third approach would be to agree, if the interviewee insists, that his comments will be kept in confidence. To reinforce this promise, the consultant should refrain from note-taking while a confidential subject is being discussed. For very shy or nervous types, the consultant may have to wait until the end of the interview, close up his note book, put away his pen, and lean forward in his chair to signal his readiness to discuss the most confidential matters.

The key issue regarding confidentiality is not which approach the consultant uses, but his integrity in abiding by his word. If he says he will keep the interviewee's comments in confidence, then he should do so, bearing in mind that there are many ways to modify a comment or opinion, or disguise a source so that it cannot be identified.

A last word on confidentiality: in my experience it has often turned out that interviewees are eager to tell what they know or think regardless of the consultant's stand on confidentiality. They may even use the “off the record” prefix to underscore the importance of their remarks. After a pro forma concern over secrecy, they proceed to relate the most sensitive material. A

common parallel in fact and fiction would be: “I promised Bill I'd never tell this to anyone – and I'll kill you if you repeat it, but . . .” Some things are just too juicy or important to be kept to oneself!

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### *Steps to Reduce Hostility*

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Handling hostility or an interviewee who refuses to talk or cooperate can be tricky. Inexperienced interviewers may need some rehearsal to deal with such situations in ways that do not further aggravate client personnel or disrupt the engagement. Below are a few general guidelines and some suggested steps which should restrain the hostility, and may open up a balking interviewee and save the interview.

A basic rule of interviewing, and the first line of defense against balks is to *assume consent*. For example, don't say: “Would it be all right if we begin with your job?” Or: “May we discuss your role in trying to keep costs down?” Instead say: “Let's begin by discussing your job.” Or “I'd be interested in the success – or lack of it – of cost reduction programs in this company.”

When, by silence or his demeanor, it is obvious that the interviewee is hostile, it is essential that the consultant remain calm and uninvolved in the hostility. Do not take it personally. Instead, let the interviewee vent his feelings while you try to understand what prompts them. Is it past experience with consultants, fear of layoffs, or concern that he or his department will be blamed for something? Or possibly it's

his strong disagreement with management over the need for this engagement, when he has been telling them all along what the problems are and what they must do to fix them.

If the consultant can reflect the interviewee's feelings, he can sometimes get at the source of the hostility and even rescue the interview. For example, he might try: “I can understand how you might feel about not wanting this project. I gather you feel that . . . , or did you have other reasons?” This response conveys understanding and acceptance of the interviewee (but not necessarily agreement with him), and probes for further sources of hostility.

When the interviewee has calmed down, the consultant might try: “Assuming you are right about that, what might be two or three solutions or improvements you would like to see around here?” This approach moves the interview quickly to the heart of the matter, and, after some judicious patting of the interviewee's ideas (e.g., “that sounds like a very interesting approach”), should calm the person sufficiently to go back to other topics the interviewer may want to cover.

Sometimes consultants are warned in advance about a potentially hostile individual. If such hostility becomes immediately apparent, it can be confronted by: “I understand you have been dead set against this project from the start, Mr. Smith. However, since the Board has insisted, let's do the best we can. I'd be interested in getting your views on . . .”

As the above illustrations point out, interviewers should abandon the planned topical sequence when confronted by hostility. Anger or resentment must be

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dealt with first before other subjects can be discussed.

A final point: consultants should be aware that some balks simply cannot be overcome. It is often impossible, for example, to force an interviewee to incriminate himself. Also, information which is obtained under duress is usually worthless or misleading. If, therefore, it becomes obvious to the consultant that the interviewee is hostile and has clammed up, he should follow these steps:

- (1) Restate the question or topic, together with the reasons for wanting this information. E.g.: "It is important for our study of productivity to get a clear picture of your organization and how the work flows from department to department. That's why I'd be interested in your reporting relationships and how you have structured your department."
- (2) If the interviewee still refuses to cooperate, the consultant should (a) acknowledge the reluctance ("I gather you don't want to talk about this now."); (b) stress the importance of his input ("We very much value your special perspective and views on this subject."); and (c) disengage as gracefully as possible ("We don't want to put you on the spot. Let's drop it for today. If you change your mind, please let me know. Goodbye for now.")
- (3) Report to his project leader or the client department head that he has encountered a balk. Ultimately, it is the

client who must decide what to do about it.

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### *Don't Confront Too Soon*

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To preserve the spontaneity of the interview, challenging should usually be done at the conclusion. At this point there is little to lose. Done earlier during the interview, challenges raise defenses and stop the unguarded and spontaneous flow of information. The major exception to this rule would be the case where the interviewee is obviously trying to make a fool of the consultant to lead him down the garden path. When this is suspected, the consultant might say: "Mr. Jones, our research on this engagement indicated that . . .

Were we mistaken or how might this be explained?" This reply shows that the consultant has prepared himself in advance and will not be easily fooled. If the interviewee persists, a confrontation may be necessary: "You seem determined to mislead me, Mr. Jones. Are you concerned about this project, our findings, what we may tell your boss, or what?"

Openly deceptive or hostile interviews can, of course, be truncated or aborted. They should not be abandoned, however, without some attempt to unearth the causes of failure to cooperate. Such probing can sometimes reveal important findings: bad morale, a disgruntled employee, or even a conspiracy to steer the project in a false direction.

In the case of a routine challenge at the end of the interview, the consultant wishes to check an earlier statement to see if the interviewee will change his story, or whether the consultant's information was in error. In either case, a face-saving approach is called for. For example: "Earlier, Mr. Smith, you mentioned that . . . The Annual Report, however, was quite specific about this matter. Can you clear up my misunderstanding on this?"

If the engagement objectives are to uncover facts and design a new or improved system, then getting the right information is critical. For this objective evidence is usually obtainable without challenging the interviewee. If the engagement objectives are, or include, getting an evaluation of people, morale, attitudes, and the like, then challenging may be important to discover why people may be motivated to color their statements or attempt to mislead the consultant. Otherwise, it is not the consul-

tant's job to provoke client personnel, call them liars, or challenge for the sake of challenging. The facts are what's important, and in some instances employees may honestly differ or be misinformed.

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### *The Interviewee Reverses Roles*

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Curiosity, anxiety, or mischief may on rare occasions prompt the interviewee to try to become the interviewer. A few questions from the interviewee at the start of the interview can be expected. Some interviewees want to be sure they understand the situation, the agenda, or how and why your firm was selected for this engagement. Up to a point such questions are acceptable. However, if the questioning continues or lasts more than three or four minutes, the consultant should say: "That's a good question. I'll take some time at the end of the interview to cover that – and anything else I can clarify for you. But first I want to cover the information we need to complete our

assignment. Let's begin with your position – the major responsibilities of your job."

Another approach might be: "I can see there's lots you want to discuss about our firm. Let's take time after we've finished our interview to cover any questions you may have. Now, let's begin with your position here – the major responsibilities of your job."

When the interview is over, the consultant can take a reasonable amount of time or schedule a special meeting, if necessary, to answer appropriate questions. This is time well spent if the interviewee is a senior executive or vital to the success of the engagement. In most cases, however, concerns about the qualifications of the consultant or his firm are put to rest by a thorough and professional interview.

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### *The Team Interview*

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On large engagements it often saves time if several consultants interview the top executive or ex-



ecutives to gain an overall perspective on the client company. Usually, the consulting team will include the project head and two or three sub-group leaders. The advantage of the team interview approach is that all key members of the consulting firm get to hear the same story from the top management of the client company. The disadvantage is that the presence of several interviewers tends to reduce spontaneity and may, if not controlled, lead to a question/answer type of interview. To minimize this problem, the consulting group should select a lead interviewer who will conduct the entire interview. The other consultants present should take notes and wait until the conclusion of the interview to ask whatever questions they wish. If this is properly done, the interviewee will focus on the lead interviewer and become oblivious to the presence of the other people in the room.

This approach preserves as much spontaneity as possible in

the situation, while still allowing each consultant present to ask any questions he has at the end of the pattern interview.

Interviewing is an extension and special application of one's natural interpersonal skills. In many cases, by 15 or 20 minutes into the interview the relationship will have developed into a comfortable, relaxed, and interesting exercise for both parties. The discussion will flow easily, questions don't need softening, key points can be probed and pinned down without concern for sensitivity or defensiveness. However, knowing the techniques for handling different kinds of people and some special situations will come in handy for any career consultant. Not even a book can cover all the problem situations which can arise during interviews. In this article we have discussed only some of the more common ones. For the rest, one's common sense, intuition, and a sense of humor are his best guides to an appropriate response.

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### *Postscript*

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Mr. Quay's forthcoming book contains examples of interview dialogue which illustrate "getting the interview started" and "probing for pay dirt." It also explains and illustrates techniques for taking notes. In the appendices are practice exercises and drills for sharpening the skills of novice interviewers.

This article, like the two previously published in the *Journal of Management Consulting*, has been adapted from a book that is soon to be published.

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*"If they only consulted as well as they play PacMan,  
we wouldn't be repossessing furniture."*

Robert E. Sabath