

UNION INVESTIGATIONS

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

As a Steward, you will be expected to “get the story” from grievors and witnesses. Although there are no simple formulas, there are a number of techniques which you may find useful. You will probably discover that you have a great deal of experience as an interviewer and as someone who has been interviewed.

An interview is not to be confused with a “chat” or “conversation.” An interview normally is “going somewhere” and participants usually have one or more specific objectives. It is not a one way directed form of communication. Unless both parties participate in the exchange, there is no productive interview. The verbal and nonverbal behaviour of one person cannot be analyzed without taking into account the corresponding behaviours of the other person.

Proximity

Probably all of us have listened to a speaker and have been compelled to yawn out of either fatigue or boredom. Most times, our “gauche” behaviour has gone unnoticed by the speaker. In a two person (dyadic) situation like the interview, a yawn can have a significant impact indeed. The participants are so close that all verbal and nonverbal messages are greatly amplified.

An innocuous movement (such as glancing at one’s watch in the interview situation) can result in a number of interpretations or misinterpretations by the grievor. “Is the Steward bored?” “Am I keeping them too long?” All are reasonable interpretations of the cue which you have, perhaps unintentionally, given the grievor.

Related to this aspect of proximity in the interview is the magnification of communication behaviours which can readily be observed in “elevator communication.” Most of us have experienced this phenomenon. People talk quite freely in the corridor (gesturing, laughing) and then, upon entering the elevator, fall into very hushed tones or complete silence. The environment in an elevator is suddenly “intimate”. So it is with most interviews.

Setting the Stage

The physical environment for the interview should be comfortable and private, and as free from distractions and interruptions as possible. It may also be important to ask the grievor approximately how long they anticipate the interview will take. If you have other commitments which would interfere with completing the interview, it may be preferable to set an alternate time to meet.

Interviewing Barriers and Biases

Any unwanted distortion in the communication between interviewer and interviewee can be considered a barrier. In any interview situation, each person comes with a fixed set of attitudes, personality characteristics, motives, goals, and needs. Our background characteristics which may influence the interview include age, sex, race, religious beliefs, income and many other factors. Our experiences, value system and prejudices affect our interpretation of what we see and hear. Our own biases may act as a filter for accepting or rejecting the other person in the interview situation. As a Steward, you will be more effective if you are aware of your own biases so you can make an attempt to set them aside in order to try to see the world from the grievor’s point of view.

Behavioural Influences

The behaviours of both parties in the interview can also act as positive or negative forces. Behavioural influences include:

- > Physical
- > Vocal
- > Feedback

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Physical

Physical communication includes such things as eye contact, facial expressions and mannerisms. A pleasant and relaxed appearance conveys a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The initial impressions - gained in the first 30 to 60 seconds of the interview - can seriously affect the remainder of the interview. For some people, gum chewing or cigarette smoking may be serious irritations. Remember that physical factors are magnified because of the close proximity in the one-to-one interview situation.

Vocal

Vocal communication includes such things as voice pleasantness, audibility, articulation, and projecting interest in the other person through the voice. Negative vocal factors could include speaking too fast or too slow, or speaking in a brash or impersonal manner.

Although physical and vocal communications are important, perhaps the most important trait that could overcome both limitations is the feeling that you are taking a personal and genuine interest in your interviewing partner.

Feedback Behaviour

Feedback behaviour concerns the willingness and sensitivity of one participant to respond to the various cues being received from the other. Remember that anything to which either party assigns meaning is considered a form of feedback: verbal, nonverbal, intentional, or unintentional.

A listening feedback technique designed to improve understanding is to restate the response or statement of the other person in your own words. The restatement principle makes the other person feel that he or she is being listened to and it also improves the accuracy of the interchange.

Some areas such as sensitive or embarrassing topics may be difficult to bring out because of their apparent inappropriateness. A good interviewer will sense this and create an atmosphere in which the other person feels free to discuss these issues.

Listening and Questioning

When we talk about listening, we mean a good deal more than “hearing.” We mean listening with your eyes as well as your ears, attending not only to what is being said but tuning into the underlying feelings. Sometimes, the failure to ask the right question in an interview results from the failure to listen to earlier answers or nonverbal cues. Effective listening is hard work and involves a very “active” set of behaviours. It means listening with eyes, ears, and insight, not only to the content but also to the feelings behind the content. Active listening includes giving feedback such as restatement. The speaker then knows that the listener has really understood what has been said. If the restatement is not accurate, the speaker has an opportunity to clarify.

Uses and Abuses of Questions

Interviewing depends heavily upon techniques of questioning. As children, questions were often a prelude to accusations, advice, blame, orders, etc. At home, we would be asked what we did, or what we didn't do. At school, most questions seemed designed to find out what we didn't know rather than what we did know. As adults, the questions keep coming and we may feel defensive about responding to certain types of questions, particularly if we feel that we are being interrogated.

One principle of interviewing is that the interview's objectives should determine the nature of the questions asked as well as the method of questioning. As Stewards, it is our job to act as advocates for grievors. If we put them on the defensive with our questioning approaches, we may find that they have difficulty trusting that we are really on their side.

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Open Questions

Open questions are broad and basically unstructured; they simply indicate the topic to be discussed and let the interviewee structure the answer as he or she sees fit. Open questions may vary in their degree of openness. For example: “Tell me about your problem” is much broader than “What do you plan to do about this problem in the future?”

Open questions cannot be answered by a “yes” or “no”. The open question is often the best way to start a discussion with a grievor. Sometimes it is important to focus the open question on a specific area or period of time so that you are not hearing an entire life story.

Direct Questions

As a Steward you will often be in situations which demand direct information. Once rapport has been established, certain questions should be asked directly. You may want to ask for explanations about or further expansion of a particular point, such as: “On average, how many hours per week do you spend working short staffed?”

The same question can be asked indirectly, such as: “I wonder how many hours on average you spend working short staffed.”

The advantage of asking direct questions indirectly is that even though they do not sound like custodians it is obvious that a response is wanted.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are a form of direct questions which greatly narrows the respondent’s range of possible answers. For example: “Given the fact that the employer states that you do not have the required qualifications for the position, what do you consider to be an equivalent combination of education, training and experience which will help us prove your case?”

Yes/No Questions (Extreme Form of Closed Questions)

This type of question allows the interviewee virtually no latitude or response except “yes”, “no” or “I don’t know”. While the yes/no question may be useful for some purposes, it also tends to limit the amount of information actually obtained. The interviewee may only answer that which is asked. Even if the interviewee volunteers some additional information, the interviewer may not pay much attention since their concentration is probably directed at formulating more questions. A major problem arising with the “yes/no” question is that it may resemble the infamous “third degree” type of questioning.

Probes

Probes are used to stimulate discussion to obtain further information. Such techniques motivate the interviewee to communicate more fully so that they enlarge, clarify, or explain reasons underlying responses made previously. Probes allow the interviewer to follow up on partial or superficial responses by directing the thinking of the interviewee to further aspects of the topic at hand. Some examples of probes include:

- > What do you mean by that?
- > Could you give me an example of what you mean?
- > I would like to know more about your thinking on that.
- > What do you have in mind when you say that?
- > Why do you think that is so?
- > Could you tell me more about that?
- > Why do you feel that way?
- > Is there anything else that may be affecting the situation?

Probing is also useful to ensure that the speaker knows that you are paying attention and are really interested in what they have to say.

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Dealing With the “Compulsive Talker”

How do you deal with the compulsive talker? Essentially, you phrase your questions in such a manner that you limit their range of responses. You avoid question which will provide them with the rationale for launching into a lengthy monologue. This, of course, means a greater use of closed questions.

In addition to the use of closed question, you may intervene during the course of your interviewee's answers to refocus their attention, very tactfully, on the heart of your inquiry. The challenge here is to provide the speaker with cues that you wish to move on in the interview without alienating them in the process. Such lead-ins as: “That’s very interesting and I would like to hear more about it if time permits, but there are some specific points we need to cover if we’re both to profit from our interview. Do you mind if we come back to this and move into the area of ____? Fine.”

Dealing with the “Non-Talker”

Your tactic here is the opposite of dealing with the compulsive talker. You will need to phrase your questions in an open-ended manner which cannot really be answered with one word responses.

This problem interviewee can be dealt with by using a variety of one word or short probes such as:

- > Tell me more.
- > Oh?
- > Could you clarify that for me?
- > I am not sure I follow you there?
- > That’s interesting, what makes you feel that way?

Frequently, the non-talker is that way because they lack confidence or is experiencing anxiety. If you detect this in the early stages of the interview, it is important to spend more time on rapport building than might generally be necessary. Stories about similar experiences or backgrounds between the two of you may help. Also, if you do detect nervousness, it is wise to start your interview with relatively easy questions.

Dealing with the Anger of a Hostile Person

Your initial response to anger should be one of calm neutrality yet sincere interest. Allow the interviewee to have their say, register the complaint or whatever, uninterrupted.

To intervene or defend yourself at the outset is to run the risk of escalation. Few people will continue attacking or arguing with a reasonable, receptive, and empathetic listener. Once the interviewee has finished blowing off steam, your response should be one of clarification. It is essential that you gather all of the facts as the other person see them. If their words upset you, your emotional response can distort or blind you to what they are actually saying. You can be so busy planning your defensive response that you stop actively listening to what is being said. When you have determined that you do understand the problem through use of restatement and probes, do not be afraid to confront their viewpoints if it appears that they are founded upon incomplete or distorted information.

The target of anger in such an interview may be yourself, someone else, or a group of philosophy with which you are associated. When the anger is directed at you, it is important to avoid the very human tendency to “respond in kind”. This will allow the interview. After the angry person has calmed down (which invariably they will if you remain in control), strive to understand the nature of the anger or complaint - restate in an effort to get clarification. If the anger is focused on your behaviour, you may be able to either:

1. See their point of view and rectify your own behaviour or,
2. Provide them with your own interpretation and intent of the behaviour.

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Dealing with the Anger of a Hostile Person *continued*

Help the person to see that the conflict is not between the two of you but rather between two points of view regarding a specific action or behaviour. An area of objectivity may begin to develop within which actions are seen as divorced from personalities. Rational discussion can then replace the emotional exchange.

When the interviewee's anger is directed at someone else, it is again important to remain calm and to probe for understanding and clarity. The greatest pitfall during this kind of interview is to "line up" on the side of the person to whom the anger is directed, especially if the anger is directed at a fellow union member.

If, during the course of your conversation, you and the interviewee agree on interpretation of events, determine precisely what should be done about the problem, immediately and in the longterm. If such planning requires greater investigation, that process should be decided upon and future appointments made.

Summary

As a Steward, your role in an interview is to maximize the positive forces to communicate while at the same time reducing the negative forces or barriers. This means that the effective interviewer must recognize potential barriers and biases, and should be aware of communication strengths and weaknesses. Being flexible with different types of questions should enhance your interviewing skills. Opportunities to challenge those skills will appear daily. As a Steward, your members see you as the face of the union. You have a unique opportunity to help build the union simply by your positive approach in dealing with the members at your worksite.

Keep up the good work!