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### Interview Tips: Asking Questions Effectively

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Here's an excerpt from the interview tips in the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's Investigation Toolkit.<sup>[1]</sup>  
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- Silence is golden. Many people cannot stand silence and will fill up the void with talk, often saying something they had no intention of revealing. The average person expects no more than seven seconds of silence during a conversation. If you do not say anything after the interviewee answers a question, the interviewee will frequently give you more information than they intended to give you.
- Ask questions in chronological or systematic order, not randomly. Make your questions straightforward. If the questioning is confusing, you will lose the interviewee's train of thought and risk missing information. Avoid questions that are cute or tricky because you will lose the interviewee's trust.
- Ask one question at a time and get specifics. Do not move too quickly from one point to the next. Be methodical about pinning down all the surrounding details and asking follow-up questions. Be sure to ask whom? what? when? where? how many? and how often? Details that may appear insignificant at first glance often lead to discovery of highly significant evidence.
- If you ask a question that causes obvious high stress, you should consider noting that issue and change the topic. Continue with less stressful items to get all the information you need first, then return to the high-stress item and pursue it to its end.
- Explore the attitudes of the interviewee, looking for bias. Think about what the interviewee is saying—or not saying.
- Consider the manner, or demeanor, of the interviewee. How does the interviewee react? Are they straightforward or evasive? Cooperative or defensive? Confident or nervous? Does the interviewee tend to exaggerate for the sake of emphasis? Are they offering excuses and justifications when asked for facts?
- Be alert for answers that may suggest facts or issues you did not anticipate. Do not be so tied to your list of prepared questions that you fail to pursue other potentially significant points that come out during the interview.
- Do not settle for answers phrased in vague language or broad generalizations. For example, if an interviewee tells you that an employee "never gets to work on time," ask further questions to understand what they mean: How often? How late? Can they describe any specific instances? Are there any documents recording this information?
- Probe the issues using open-ended, non-leading questions. A leading question is one that suggests the answer that you want the interviewee to give. A blatant example would be: "You never sexually harassed the complainant, did you?" Answers tend to be more revealing and reliable when they originate with the

interviewee:

- **Leading:** “Did you see Sam grope Jean behind the beverage machine?”
- **Open-ended:** “Have you seen or heard any conduct in the workplace that you think may be sexually intimidating or embarrassing?”
- **Leading:** “Wasn’t Terry standing right beside them?”
- **Open-ended:** “Was anyone else present at the time of the incident?”
- **Leading:** “Did Sam tell you to forget you saw anything?”
- **Open-ended:** “What, if anything, did Sam say to you?”
- Avoid asking pointed and “why” questions until the end or until you think you may have exhausted the interviewee’s initial recollection. When you sense that you may have as much information on a given point as you are likely to get from the interviewee, switch from open-ended questions to specific questions. As a general rule, everyone has more information than an interviewer obtains the first time through, so refresh the interviewee’s recollection with specifics.
  - **Pointed:** “Oh, come on now, you don’t expect me to believe that!”
  - **Specific:** “Do you know of anyone who can confirm what you have told me?”
- Probe the key factual issues more than once in different ways; people often remember things in waves, and this approach may bring out additional details.
- Press your interviewee to give general ranges when they are uncertain.
  - **Example:** You may ask: “How many people were there at the meeting?” If the individual responds, “I don’t know.” Frame the next question with a range such as, “Was it more than two, less than five?” Alternatively, “Was it less than 50?”

If the interviewee is giving a physical description of someone, you may ask: “How tall was the man?” If the individual responds, “I don’t know,” reframe the question to something relatable, such as, “Was he as tall as I am?”

- If a person does not remember, try to help by asking questions that help recreate the situation.
  - **Example:** If it is alleged that one employee falsified his vacation records to have more days off, you need to know who is involved in the process and how the process works. You might begin by asking the interviewee to describe the vacation approval process. If the answer is vague or inaccurate, you might break the process into parts and ask specific questions about each part. For example:
    - How many vacation days are you entitled to per year? When are vacation requests submitted? How are they submitted? Whom are they submitted to? Who approves a request? How do you amend a request?
- Explore answers that seems odd, unlikely or conflict with each other. If an interviewee tells you something you find hard to believe, follow up with probing questions. If information the interviewee is providing contradicts either something they said earlier or a piece of information gathered from another source, you should note the contradictions and then, at the appropriate point, ask the interviewee how these

contradictory facts could be true. However, be careful not to call something a lie unless you have proof.

- Don't let the interviewee use legalistic words to answer your questions.
  - **Example:** "Assault," "hostile work environment," or "embezzlement." The interviewee likely does not know the true meaning of the words. Your question should probe to describe the situation or action without the use of these words.
  - **Example:** When asked whether or not the interviewee has witnessed any behavior that they believe to be unfair in their department and the interviewee responds as follows, "Oh yeah, all the time; it's really a hostile work environment," you might begin by asking the interviewee to describe the environment, drilling down further in each answer.
    - **Interviewer:** "Can you tell me why you would describe your department in that manner?"
    - **Interviewee:** "Because my boss is unethical."
    - **Interviewer:** "Can you give me examples of situations where you disagree with the behaviors of your manager?"

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