

INTERVIEWING

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AN ATTEMPT to discuss interviewing always raises the immediate question whether one person can tell another how to interview. It should be obvious that this is not possible. All one can do is give a few useful hints on points that may be helpful, in the hope that each person will then work out his own method. Interviewing is an art, which one learns only by doing. A knowledge of certain psychological principles, however, should be helpful and make the job easier. The thing to remember is that you will inevitably improve as you continue to talk to people.

When we are working on a busy job we often lose track of what it is we are really doing. If we know what we are doing it is much easier to develop a way of doing it. We are concerned here with a program which provides benefits for aged retired workers and their dependents and survivors. It is about people and for people. Its purpose is to meet their needs. I am going to discuss the people you are interviewing, and yourselves, since any interview obviously involves not only the person who is giving the information but also the person who is trying to get the information. While you are of course interested in thinking of the widow, the wage earner, or whoever has come in to talk to you, you must also learn to think of someone else—yourself and what you are bringing to this joint effort.

I am going to make two authoritative statements about people. You may not believe them immediately. But I should like to ask you to question them, test them on yourselves, and—if they appear to have any validity—see how they can be helpful in getting facts from people with whom you must talk.

People always do what they want to do. Under no circumstances whatever do they do anything else. This statement expresses an idea with which people usually take strong issue. It seems amusing if not quite ridiculous. You will think, "I never have a chance to do the things I want to do." And yet I still say that within the given setting in which he finds himself each of us does the thing he wants to do. Suppose, for example,

that you were walking on a dark street and a robber with a gun jumped out and said to you, "Your money or your life." Even in such a situation you have two courses of behavior—you can hand over your purse or you can refuse to do so. The price of refusal may be your life, but you do have a choice.

In this limited sense, that is, within the limits of possibilities of behavior, we must realize, people do what they want to do. Almost never do we have a wide variety of choice, nor can we always understand why we select one course of action as against another. It will be very useful to keep this idea firmly in mind. We will see subsequently what it has to do with interviewing people in order to fill out forms in connection with their application for benefits.

The second statement is that we always do whatever we do because of our feelings. These feelings are frequently opposed to our intelligence or our brain—the organ we use, for example, to do arithmetic problems. Life would be simple if each of us did what seemed to him the right thing to do. Most people have fairly good brains and should be able to figure out what they ought to do. But why do they not more frequently do it? Most of us have had the experience of thinking to ourselves, "What a stupid thing I did this morning; quite senseless; I don't know why I did it." The reason you did whatever you did was tied up with something we may understand and define to ourselves as feelings or emotions. These feelings really govern our conduct, even though we cannot always understand them nor are we always aware of them.

Let me try to give you a simple illustration of what I mean. Suppose you are on an ocean-going liner and see an iceberg, moving along in the water. You see a towering mass of ice which appears to be floating along; what you do not see is that it is actually steered by the part of itself which is under the water line. Eighty percent of the iceberg is under water, and all you can see is about twenty percent; yet the whole course of the iceberg's progress is determined by the part you cannot see. In the same way, an individual's course of action in whatever situation he finds

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himself is determined by his feelings, most of them buried under the "water line" of consciousness. They are there, however, and we are all motivated by these buried feelings.

I stress these two points because I believe we must recognize them before we can learn to get people to give us facts. Of course many people will come into our offices, give whatever information is needed, and depart fairly quickly. It is to the few who cannot do this that we need to give thought. Interviewing these more difficult few will be time-consuming indeed, unless the interviewing is done efficiently. Understanding how we can best adapt our methods to meet individual peculiarities should help us get our job done more expeditiously, and also—and this may be even more important—more sympathetically.

The Effect of Emotion

If we can accept the fact that people are activated by their emotions, we must realize that feelings of discomfort of any sort often prevent people from thinking clearly. Let us take a common example of the effect of feeling on thought. Suppose you are to take a written examination and know your subject well. Let us also suppose that you are, nevertheless, "nervous" and upset at the idea of an examination and fear you may fail. You may get into such a state of discomfort or nervousness that you are really unable to answer the questions. This is not a rare occurrence.

It is of course obvious that we must have clear thinking if we are to get the necessary application forms filled out carefully and accurately. Wrong answers double the work to be done. The purpose back of our method of interviewing, therefore, is to get people to want to give us necessary information and to have them able to give correct information.

If you can think of the emotions I have talked of as getting in the way of thought, I think you will understand what your job is in interviewing. Think of the feelings as a barrier stretched across a street down which you wish to walk—a barrier which prevents your going any further. You will have to remove it before you can proceed; and in the same way you will have to remove the uncomfortable feelings which prevent people from giving the required information.

I have stressed the effect of uncomfortable

feelings—perhaps overstressed it, you may think—because, as time goes on, more and more people will be coming into our offices who have particular reason to be upset. You will have to interview women who have recently lost husbands, children who have lost parents, and aged people who have recently lost jobs because they were considered too old to work. None of us really likes to grow old; and in spite of the fact that our program benefits the aged former wage earner, the day he applies for insurance benefits may be painful for him.

How is one to recognize discomfort easily? How does one know when people are upset? Actually, we see such situations every day but fail to notice or understand them. One of the functions of a trained interviewer is to pay trained attention to what is before his eyes, noticing everything and understanding what he sees.

The thing we see oftenest is "nervousness." Each of us has a notion of what is meant by that term. If we tried to describe it, we would each say something different; but we would all have in our minds a picture of the person who fidgets, who walks around when he should be sitting still, who moves his hands and feet, who has difficulty in talking. Actually, all sorts of behavior are described by this general term. It is something you will learn to watch for and be aware of.

Another symptom—all these kinds of difficult behavior are merely symptoms of emotional discomfort—is anger. Each of us must have had the experience of talking to someone who comes into the office showing irritability or anger which appear to be inappropriate to the occasion. He may speak loudly, may bluster, and in general be very rude. You undoubtedly wonder what you have done to occasion such an outburst. You must realize that you have done nothing to occasion it and that it really has nothing to do with you.

People will act this way merely because they are in a new situation which makes them uncomfortable and even really frightened. Once you are aware that behavior of this sort is merely evidence of reaction to a difficult situation and can train yourself not to respond to irritability with irritability, you will soon be able to get these individuals to feel at ease so that they will no longer need to exhibit anger. Thus you will be able to cut down the time in which it will be possible for such individuals to make a different response. Con-

sider for a minute what a visit to a Government office may mean—and all offices to which our applicants must apply for benefits are “the Government” to the persons applying. It is not an uncommon thing for people to be somewhat fearful of the “Government,” and such a visit may be a really frightening experience, particularly for persons who have come from foreign countries.

Many of the aged, too, have certain physical disabilities which cause them to show great irritability when they are doing something to which they are not accustomed. Applying, no matter for what benefit it may be, is not always easy. The applicant may not fully understand his rights and may expect to meet difficulties. It is your job to make such persons feel that this is not at all a hard thing to do.

When you begin to talk to applicants, you must remember too that you will have to get them to tell you about things which may be painful to them. To a woman who has just lost her husband and is worried about what will happen to her and to her children, discussion of his death must be anticipated as painful. You must be prepared to meet tears and, in many instances, an inability to tell you the story which you need to know. If there has been trouble in the family, it will be hard to talk about it.

Let us take one example from the application form which will have to be filled in by widows who are applying for insurance benefits. One of the questions (and there are many others equally delicate) is: “Has your husband been required by court order to support you?” We have to ask this question because the answer may be pertinent; but we must remember that it is a very personal question, as are all the other questions in the same group. They all relate to the most intimate relationships of life—the things that every one of us would find difficult to talk about to strangers. They are questions that you would not dream of asking your most intimate friend; your friend might discuss her troubles with you, but you could never ask such questions. Because every question on the form in this group relates to matters about which we all have deep feelings, we must expect people to be upset when they are discussed; and we must learn how we can talk about them. I assure you that anyone can discuss anything if he knows how to do it.

So much for the people that are to be inter-

viewed; let us now talk a little about the interviewers. We too are people and we have feelings; and it is entirely natural to feel anger when we are treated rudely, especially when there seems to be no reason for such treatment. When we are interviewing, however, we must learn that, since the things that are said to us have nothing to do with us as individuals, any intrusion of personal feeling is a great waste of time and makes our own job harder. We will soon cease to respond emotionally in such situations.

Since we are human, we are all subject to prejudices, no matter how tolerant we like to think ourselves, or how well informed or broadminded. Usually, the particular prejudice relates to some intimate relationship of life. As you talk to people, you are going to learn many things about them. These are not about impersonal matters; they are intensely personal. When anyone discusses with you a person as important to him as husband, wife, child, father, or mother, attitudes may be shown with which your disagreement is so strong as to constitute a prejudice on your part. You have a right to feel as you wish about these matters, but you have no right to allow your feelings to affect your conversation. I mention this point because our feelings are usually shown immediately, in our face, manner, or voice. If the person to whom you are speaking feels that you are no longer sympathetic to him, he will immediately stop talking. The quality of feeling is as contagious as any germ, and if we show our own feeling we are going to prevent ourselves from getting on with our job.

This does not mean that we should be withdrawn and impersonal when we talk with applicants. In fact, we must attempt to cultivate a sympathetic manner. You will soon learn to recognize subjects of conversation which will be embarrassing for you to discuss, and you will learn to guard against embarrassment. You will be surprised to discover how soon this feeling will disappear. Actually, the reporting of facts is our whole concern, if we can learn to distinguish what facts are.

Minimum Essentials for Good Interviewing

Since complete attention to the person you are talking to is necessary, what we might think of as “trained attention” is very important. Inability

to pay attention may result from fatigue and the tensions which affect the interviewer in the routine of a busy office. If we have a big job planned for the afternoon, a lot of work piled up on our desk, and perhaps a personal appointment which requires us to leave the office promptly, it is easy to see how all these pressures may serve to distract us when we are talking to people. We may find that we cannot remember important information the applicant has given us. To ask him to repeat what he has just said is embarrassing. It is true that the conditions under which we must carry on our work are often beyond our control. We can, however, when we sit down to talk, make an effort to clear our minds of everything that may distract from the business in hand. If you will do this deliberately, you will find that it will shorten the time you will need to get facts.

The mention of sitting down to talk brings us to an important point—the setting for the interview. The daily business of issuing account numbers can be handled in your offices satisfactorily as people lean on the counter. I feel quite sure that an attempt to get personal information from people in this fashion will not be so successful. I doubt very much whether people will talk intimately, leaning on their elbows in a large room. Some consideration, therefore, must be given to the question of privacy. Obviously, we cannot all have private offices; but if the idea of quiet and privacy is accepted, some arrangement of offices can be made to achieve these conditions. The public-assistance offices have had this problem in the past, and with a minimum of expense they have been able to arrange for private interviewing by careful planning. Files may be arranged to make a sort of alcove where two chairs may be placed, desks may be separated, and other workable arrangements can be made.

Allowing sufficient time for interviews is another point to consider. With the pressure on all our offices, it seems rather absurd to mention having enough time for anything. In the end, however, planning for sufficient time will prove the most efficient way of handling applications. One useful method is the appointment system. If some initial separation of people is made at the counter, it will frequently be found that some people can come in another day for a regular appointment to talk things over, and the office will know just what hours to leave for this particular job.

The Interview Itself

Sufficient time, trained attention, and privacy appear to me to be minimum essentials for good interviewing. They are, however, the background rather than the actual process of interviewing. I intend to say little about the actual process because, as I said before, I do not believe anyone can tell another how to do a job of this kind. However, let us look at the application forms which must be filled out. You will notice that you are required to get what is apparently simple factual information. It is, however, far from simple. After many of the questions the form says, answer "Yes" or "No." We could attempt to get the information by simply reading off the questions and asking people to answer them. A few people would, of course, be able to give you the right answers. For reasons which I have tried to point out, however, others will not be able to do so. When people come into our offices, they are prepared and ready to talk about jobs or anything which in their minds relates to insurance; they have paid in tax money, and they expect to discuss things that relate to that payment. They do not expect, and will frequently resent, discussion of what they believe to be personal information. You must be prepared to have people say to you, as they have said in some of our field offices, "What business is that of yours, young man?" You will have to learn to recognize the people who can answer questions exactly and the others who will have to have help.

One way to get a correct picture of the situation is to let them tell you their own stories in their own way. You will then be able to select for them the answers to the questions with some certainty that the facts are more or less correct. In other words, you will have to get more than "yes" or "no" answers. If you have heard people testify in court you know the technique of the questioning lawyer who says to the witness, "Give me an answer to this question, yes or no." We know that his intention is to limit conversation; he does not wish the witness to tell any more than he has indicated. Another lawyer who really wishes to bring out the facts of the case will say to the witness, "Will you please tell us the story in your own way?" It is exceedingly difficult to learn real facts by a "yes" or "no" method. It is like attempting to show everything in black or white, when gray may be the reality. Letting

the applicant tell his story in his own way may appear to take longer, but it is actually more efficient, and we approach the truth more readily this way.

Strangely enough, it is not an easy thing to do. It requires a "listening attitude"—complete and close attention, with the interviewer always ready to encourage the speaker to elaborate any given point which would seem to clarify a needed fact. The interviewer must really be in control of the interview, ready at any time to draw the speaker back tactfully to the point if he should tend to wander too far afield. You may find yourself suddenly eager to talk, even when you have a plan clearly in mind to let the applicant tell his story. This is a common experience in interviewing, and it is something to watch for and to control. It is well to realize that the most natural method, however, and the one which makes the interviewer feel most comfortable, is the one which should be selected. Each person must work out these details for himself.

Encouragement of the applicant's talking and sympathy for the story he tells are essential attitudes for the interviewer. It may not be necessary to say much. Your feelings may be expressed by your tone of voice, facial expression, and general attention. Such encouragement succeeds in making people feel free to go on with their story. We may have to explain in the beginning the kinds of questions we are going to ask or the kind of information we may wish to have. If time is taken to explain why a question is asked, there is usually no difficulty in getting the answer that is required. A few explanatory words are often helpful—a preface to your remarks, as "I am sorry I am going to have to ask you such a personal question but I need to know—" If the applicant can understand the requirements and the necessity for his replies, and if he is put at ease by your manner, attention, and sympathetic interest, you will have little difficulty in getting information.

It is frequently possible to tell by the way they sit whether people are sufficiently comfortable to talk freely. Try to observe people carefully. You have undoubtedly noticed people, in situations which are strange to them, sitting perched on the edge of a chair, with a foot so balanced that they are ready to jump up at a moment's notice. If you can get your applicants to sit back in their chairs, moderately relaxed, you will know that

they may be ready to talk to you. It is not difficult to train oneself to watch for these little evidences of greater ease.

You must consider, too, if you have been successful in getting people to talk freely, how to get them to stop talking. The greater your success in the earlier part of the interview, the more difficulty you may have in terminating it. One simple way is to get up politely, possibly while you are still listening. Collecting your papers may be another helpful way of bringing to their attention the fact that their time is up. It will be easy for you to find some manner to show people politely that the interview is over. I mention this point because you will have to be the one to do it. People rarely have the chance to tell their stories to attentive, sympathetic listeners, and they are usually ready to run on at length unless interrupted.

Summary

I should like, in summary, to stress once again that people do what they wish to do and that their emotions control their behavior. We shall have, therefore, to persuade people to wish to talk to us and give us necessary information, even when what they are doing is for their own benefit.

Sympathy is our greatest tool in achieving these results. The interview may be thought of as dividing itself into three parts: the introduction; the body—which is fact-finding; and the conclusion. A little time taken in the introductory part of the interview may save time in getting facts. You will wish first of all to attempt to remove any uncomfortable feelings people may show—such as fear, indignation, or anxiety. It is useful to take a few minutes to tell the applicant why you need to ask certain questions or need certain information. Our object is to get the applicant calm and comfortable, which is frequently achieved by a reassuring manner. Having succeeded in this effort, it is usually better to have the applicant tell his story in his own way. It may be necessary at the end of the interview for us to terminate it tactfully.

In closing, I should like to give two notes of warning which I am sure are really unnecessary. It is important to guard against an attitude which in its worst phase we might call patronage. We all enjoy the feeling of giving something to someone. I know it is unnecessary to remind you that this type of enjoyment is out of place in our

offices. We are all engaged in assisting people to get their rights, and an attitude that smacks at all of the "Lady Bountiful" is most unwarranted. We are only instruments through which insurance benefits come. Any other attitude will merely succeed in making it more difficult for us to get information.

The other point I would like to stress is the confidential nature of the stories which are told us. We are all familiar with Regulation No. 1, and none of us would intend to violate it. The

surest way not to do this inadvertently is never to mention anywhere the stories, no matter how interesting, which are heard in the office. It is surprising how easily such stories are identified, even in large cities. As time goes on, you will be so used to the stories that you won't even remember them. We must remember at all times, however, that we have a right to hear such personal facts about people only because it happens to be our job to help them get the benefits to which they are entitled.