

THE COMPASSIONATE INTERVIEWER

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Take a moment to think about a time when you did something wrong. Do you remember the person who confronted you about it? Did you tell them the truth? How did you decide what information to share? Compassion can be an important component to assist people when they decide to tell the truth.

The dictionary defines compassion as a feeling of deep empathy for another's suffering or misfortune. So how might interviewers apply this definition of compassion to their conversations?

Our research has shown the three biggest reasons people confess are: 1) they believe they are caught 2) they can relieve feelings of guilt and 3) they can offer explanations allowing them to save face. Although loss prevention professionals wear many hats the most rewarding part of the job occurs at the conclusion of the investigation when we interview the dishonest employee. Finally we sit down with the employee, but we must remember they are people facing real challenges and an uncertain future. An interviewer who exhibits empathy can touch the individual's true feelings of guilt which were buried deep inside.

The interviewer's compassion extends into the very structure of the interview itself. Beyond following the Golden Rule of treating others as we would like to be treated we need to fashion an approach which infuses empathy to help the individual come to grips with the consequences of his illicit actions.

Some think this means being a good actor in the interview room. It can be tempting to put on a false mask of compassion or use an authoritarian aggressive approach by speaking in a condescending tone. This does not touch the individual's feelings of guilt or allow the person to preserve his self image. What it does do is create an adversarial environment counterproductive to the entire process.

Interviewers can show compassion non-verbally through their calm demeanor, open posture, empathetic eye contact, and tone of voice. During this difficult time it is important the individual be supported emotionally so he can decrease his internal feelings of guilt. Interviewers spend time evaluating the associates' verbal and non-verbal behavior and should not forget our subjects are interpreting our behavior to assess our trustworthiness. The compassionate demeanor of the interviewer is important because it compliments the powerful structure of the introductory statement.

Expressing interest in another is part of the compassionate process which most of us would recognize as establishing rapport. The beginning of an interview with a dishonest employee begins by finding some common experience or interest to initiate the relationship with the associate. The initial rapport is more of a social obligation each party has after first meeting, but it lacks the more open sincerity of a long term relationship. Expressing interest opens both parties to explore common experiences and creates a curiosity to engage the subject more fully.

The first three parts of the introductory statement combine to convince the individual his guilt is known, but it does so in a gentle fashion slowly using curiosity to buy time as the words build an awareness of his situation. The indirectness of this approach softens the impact psychologically on the individual allowing the interviewer to maintain rapport and smoothly move into expressing empathy.

While the individual comes to grip with the fact his dishonest activities have been discovered the interviewer attempts to soften the shock by shifting to an expression of understanding. Showing compassion at this point is critical to begin allowing the individual to save face and relieve guilt. In most cases the person appears panicked wearing a hunted expression of fear matching their underlying uncertainty of the situation.

To help the individual find his way the interviewer takes the lead offering a summary of rationalizations to reframe the person's motives into more socially acceptable reasons for his dishonest actions. Expressing these understandable reasons helps the person to begin moving toward a resolution of his current situation. The interviewer's compassionate offer of face saving explanations helps the panicked mind of the person begin to organize his confused thoughts.

Some interviewers fail to take the step of offering rationalizations to help the person find his way instead ramming directly into the dishonest activity and leaving the individual emotionally wounded. The truly compassionate interviewer helps soften these emotional bumps to encourage the individual to purge themselves of their guilt. The summary of rationalizations provides the first step in the face saving process at a point where the subject feels he is a victim.

Showing understanding the interviewer offers empathetic statements in the form of rationalizations to assist the associate in saving face. The structure of each rationalization is crucial to conveying a compassionate message. These rationalizations are further softened for the person when the interviewer relates them in the third person so the subject does not have to reject them because they are too personal. But this also does something much more powerful; it shows the person he is not alone, others have similar problems. By telling the story in the third person we allow our subjects to identify with the main character of the story. This emotional bond with the individual in the story removes feelings of alienation, begins the process of transferring blame and relieving guilt.

When an interviewer expresses understanding of a person's life challenges it removes the individual's feeling of being judged. The interviewer is suggesting he deals with good people who have made poor decisions. People generally do not do things they can not rationalize so the empathetic interviewer supports the positive view people have of themselves.

The interviewer must now deal with the person's feeling of being victimized. Regardless, of what the individual has done he visualizes himself as the victim in this encounter. The empathetic interviewer offers a more compassionate view of the situation reframing it so the individual has the sense of power of choice and his actions can affect the situation's outcome. This is done by allowing the person to view another's actions with the subject as the decision maker. By understanding the subject's situation the interviewer moves him into a more rational frame of mind to look at an incident through the eyes of a decision maker.

Next, the interviewer assists the dishonest associate in making his first admission. To assist the employee the interviewer must deal with the final internal conflicts and suspicions the individual has. As the interviewer handles these final barriers he cements rapport with the subject and sees the individual's behavior mimic his own.

Finally, to assist the subject over the last hurdle in the conversation the interviewer asks for the admission assumptively, then supports the admission. As the development of the admission begins the interviewer again uses rationalization and empathy statements to encourage the conversation to continue.

All too often we hear stories from the field involving interviewers still applying scare tactics and intimidation that Hollywood feeds us on a regular basis. As interviewers, we need be able to show compassion to employees who have made poor decisions helping them through a difficult time in their lives.

Take a moment to reflect. Does your interview delivery show compassion? If we recognize the human side of each individual, select an approach which treats the person with respect, and provide a sincere delivery we can achieve success through compassion.

L. Wayne Hoover, CFI

Chris Norris, CFI

Wicklander-Zulawski