



by Douglas E. Wicklander, CFI, CFE and David E. Zulawski, CFI, CFE

Wicklander and Zulawski are partners in the investigative and training firm of Wicklander-Zulawski & Associates, Inc. (www.w-z.com). They are also the authors of *Practical Aspects of Interview and Interrogation 2nd Edition*, CRC Press, 2001. They can be reached at 800-222-7789 or dwicklander@w-z.com and dzulawski@w-z.com.

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## Questions from the Email Bag

From time to time we receive questions from the field that seem to have broad application and may be of interest to more than just the writer of the email. So we thought we would answer this one in a column. Plus, since other columnists in the magazine have used letters in their columns, it is only fair to show we get emails as well.

*Dear Dave and Doug,*

*I read your articles in **Loss**Prevention magazine and find them extremely helpful for enhancing interviewing skills.*

*Over the years I, along with some of my peers, have encountered interviews that were very difficult to conduct because of different problems. You may have already done this, but I was hoping you could write an article to address some of these "sticky" topics. I am looking for ways to counteract what the interviewee is alleging.*

*The topics we find that are troublesome are as follows:*

*1. The interview begins with a racial allegation. They claim the only reason they are being interviewed is because they are (black, white, Hispanic, etc.). It is very difficult to move away from this because in the back of your mind you are thinking about lawsuits. The other issue is that they tend to not let you move away from the topic.*

*2. Right in the beginning of the interview, the interviewee claims that you have a personal vendetta against them for something. Do you ask what they are talking about or do you just ignore the entire statement. If you ask, like I did, and they make up something, where do you go from there?*

*3. The person you are interviewing has been the witness for other interviews you have conducted in the past. They know the strategy and how the entire process works.*

*Thanks.*

These types of difficult interviews should, for most of us, be a relatively uncommon occurrence. The writer did not specify the frequency of these statements, so we will presume they do not occur often. However, when subjects use them, they can prove vexing nonetheless.

Before we consider the questions, we should make several points about problems in interviews. There are always going to be difficult interviews and people who are resistant to making an admission. However, we should not overlook the impact an interviewer may make during the conversation.

### People Always Do This

During breaks in our interview and interrogation seminars, attendees often approach the instructors for advice on how to handle specific people or cases. It is not unusual for them to begin, "People always do [insert problem here]."

This statement would seem to indicate that it is human nature for all people to act a certain way; or could it be they were encouraged to react in a particular way by the interviewer? Since the people are different in each of the encounters, the one common denominator would be the interviewer. Rather than it being a universal response of all people to the situation, it is more likely the result of something the interviewer has done to precipitate the reaction.

Cars are designed to stop when the brake pedal is pressed. They do so universally and reliably. Manufacturers are encouraged by federal and state departments of transportation to make them stop when the brakes are pressed, and the public seems pleased as well that cars can stop.

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**Whenever you hear "people always" or "this always happens," look for a triggering event or causation based on the strategy, words, tone, or actions of the interviewer. We can be our own worst enemy at times.**

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But what if a car didn't stop when the brake was pressed? There is probably not a week that goes by where somewhere, a car has leapt forward and crashed through a building. Those universally reliable brakes failed, causing untold damage and injury. Yet, when the experts examine the brake system, it is almost always found to be working in a remarkably fine manner; one capable of bringing the car to a complete and full stop by simply depressing the brake pedal.

So what is the problem? Driver error—confusing the gas and brake pedals. It has to be. If cars only stopped occasionally when the brake pedal was pressed, then there would be no reliability, and maybe it could have been the brakes' fault.

## People Always...

- Lie to me
- Deny
- Never tell me all they took
- Get angry
- Accuse me of prejudice
- Tell me just what I know they did
- Insert your own here.

Whenever you hear “people always” or “this always happens,” look for a triggering event or causation based on the strategy, words, tone, or actions of the interviewer. We can be our own worst enemy at times.

So, how can we identify the cause of the problem? Well, sometimes it helps to sit back and reflect on where things went wrong and what preceded them. For example, a person becomes angry and passions run high. What happened just before the subject got angry?

*“Well, I was getting frustrated. He just wasn’t doing anything but denying. Even when I showed him some evidence, all he could do was sit there smirking and saying, ‘Did not.’ So I said something like ‘listen here you pinhead’ and he just sort of went off on me.”*

Interesting how calling someone a name can trigger a negative response. Cause and effect?

If an outcome is  
predictable and  
undesirable, try doing  
something different.  
Try the brake,  
not the gas pedal.

Now some problems are not so easily solved by looking just prior to the problem. Some situations are caused by things the interviewer has done fifteen or thirty minutes before. These problems may require examining the entire interview and strategy to identify the cause of the problem. Sometimes it might require another person to help identify the cause of the problem.

In our next column we will offer suggestions on how to handle the three questions posed in the email above. Until then, consider how you have handled similar situations and what went right and what went wrong. If you have an idea or comment to share on the topic, drop us a note at [dzulawski@w-z.com](mailto:dzulawski@w-z.com), and we will try to share them as space allows.

In the meantime, if an outcome is predictable and undesirable, try doing something different. Try the brake, not the gas pedal. ■

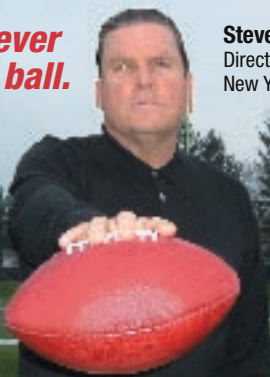
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