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Questions from the Email Bag

Part 3

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.

This column is the third in a series to address the question above. In the last two columns we discussed the background strategies necessary to handle the subject's assertion he is being interviewed only because he is...black, Hispanic, gay, female, or whatever.

Part 1 dealt with predicting a likely outcome, either because of the interviewer's or subject's pattern of behavior. You may remember the idea of cause and effect allowing the interviewer to predict an outcome based on reoccurring patterns, either his or those of the subject.

Then in the second column, we suggested ways to avoid this problem by using interviewer and witness selection, evaluation of the subject's personality, and closing the investigation at an opportune moment, all of which might mitigate the problem posed by the writer.

Nice stuff, but... While all that preplanning stuff may be useful, what do you say if the subject says he is only being interviewed because he is [insert here]?

Anger

If the subject is angry when he makes the statement, there may be a variety of reasons for his anger. It could be legitimate anger because of an intentional or unintentional slight by the interviewer. Or the subject might be reliving past treatment by others, anticipating it will occur again: "You're only saying that because..."

If the interviewer believes the subject's anger is legitimate, he might use the following strategy to handle the situation. It begins with a simple chair shift by the interviewer. Let's use the points of a compass to clarify the interviewer's shift of position. Assume the subject is in the south position and the interviewer sits to the north. When the interviewer recognizes the beginning of the subject's anger, he can shift to the east or west position,

sitting at a 90-degree angle to the subject. The interviewer now points to his original north position to direct the subject's anger there. Effectively, the interviewer has taken the position of mediator.

While making the chair shift the interviewer says:

"I understand how this makes you feel. When people are judgmental and don't recognize the value of the person or the work he performs, it leads to frustration. It is a frustration that builds, adding emotion to a situation that needs to be talked out. But when those people [gesturing to the north] don't let up, the problems only build. That's why we sit down and talk with people who may not have had the benefit of a conversation like this, not like those others [gesturing to the north] who just don't seem to want to understand."

The interviewer's gestures and associated comments make it more difficult for the suspect to direct or sustain his anger at the interviewer since there now seems to be a common opponent.

Sometimes a subject will use mock anger to gain time or control the situation. Most often, mock anger will be missing appropriate behavioral clues in the face or a logical point of origin in the conversation. When faced with mock anger, the interviewer can also use the chair shift to move into the mediator position.

Attempts to Delay or Control

There are a number of reasons why the subject might use accusations of this type. It can be used as a delaying tactic to allow the suspect time to think while turning the pressure to the interviewer. It is now the interviewer who must defend himself against this innuendo. If the interviewer shows weakness, the suspect will press ahead with further unsupported claims of prejudice.

Many people use this type of statement because it has worked successfully for them in the past. Returning to strategies that have worked in the past, the subject uses them to buy time to evaluate his position. If the interviewer can be sidetracked into a discussion of prejudice, the suspect has taken control of the interview. It is also virtually impossible for the interviewer to prove that he is not prejudiced, as the suspect has alleged.

Responses to Use

There are several replies the interviewer might make to this type of statement.

"I agree that some people could think a conversation might take place because of someone's [age, race, or sexual preferences]. There is no question at all that some people are prejudiced and would love to act unfairly toward those people they dislike. However, in this instance, because of the way the case is supervised, developed, and documented, this could not happen. The organization demands that the personality, race, or the preferences of the individual be ignored while only the facts are considered. What we are really concerned about is the reason why an incident occurred, because it is only fair to see if there are mitigating circumstances that can help people understand the why. Sometime the frustration of being held back because of another's perceptions..."

The interviewer handles the subject's statement as an explanatory denial. An *explanatory denial* is a reason or excuse why the subject could not or would not be involved in the incident. To handle an explanatory denial, the interviewer agrees fully or in part with the suspect's assertion, prejudice exists, then the interviewer retakes control of the conversation.

The interviewer, after agreeing about prejudice, talks about the safeguards of supervision and then moves to develop a new rationalization. One rationalization that would fit in the context of this statement is an individual's frustration of being put down and held back from succeeding, causing him to make bad choices. The interviewer has now taken the suspect's statement and turned it into a face-saving device to support the suspect's self image.

Another possible way to handle the subject's claim of prejudice is to turn it back at the subject.

"You talk about prejudice, but you make statements about me without knowing anything about my personal beliefs or me."

This reply can be used if the relationship between the interviewer and suspect has been previously respectful. The strength of this response lies in the relationship and rapport developed from the onset of the encounter. The interviewer goes on to develop a rationalization about it being human nature to think the worst about a situation. Coming full circle, the interviewer ties this unfairness into a discussion of the importance in understanding why things happen the way they did, so there can be a fair assessment of the individual.

Another tack might be:

"My wife is [black, Hispanic, white]."

"My [son, daughter, nephew, niece] is gay." Or,

"I am a woman so I know exactly what prejudice and the glass ceiling is about. So I know personally the difficulties and emotions people face on a daily basis."

We suggest using this response only when it is true. Nothing can be more powerful than a softly spoken truthful statement of having walked in another's experiences personally. The interviewer then expresses the feelings and emotions from a personal point of view showing understanding and using his own personal experience as a rationalization.

These replies to the suspect are not the only things that might be said, but each response by the interviewer develops the suspect statement into a reason why someone might have made an error in judgment. The interviewer should not take the suspect's attack personally, but rather view it in the appropriate light of someone struggling to escape a difficult situation. ■

On a Personal Note...

As many may already know, Doug Wicklander was diagnosed with a brain tumor this August. The operation was a success, and the tumor was removed after a lengthy surgery at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. The non-cancerous tumor was the cause of Doug's double vision, which first alerted doctors to the problem. Doug has since been released from the hospital and is undergoing rehabilitation near his home. The entire Wicklander-Zulawski family would like to thank all of you for your thoughts and prayers during this difficult time.