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Power. Control.

During the last few months we have dealt with a number of cases where our clients were convinced their employee would not talk or cooperate during the interview. The managers based their opinions on the personalities and management style of the individuals we were going to speak with. All of the employees were people with “type A” personalities who dealt with conflict in an aggressive manner. In short, these were valuable, but difficult employees during the best of times.

While the associates’ ultimate cooperation was not surprising to us, our clients were amazed each agreed to be interviewed. Later, we talked among ourselves about this difference of opinion and felt it might be interesting to share our thoughts with you.

A Matter of Degree

Interviewing revolves around the concepts of power and control. All the parties involved in the interview have some degree of power and control, which they may use at their discretion during the encounter.

There is a significant difference between the concepts of power and control. *Power* is commonly defined as the ability to do or act to accomplish something; even through the use of might or force. *Control* differs in that it relates to the exercise of restraint or direction over another; although in a harsher form it could be used to dominate, command, or constrain someone.

A police officer has both the legal power to detain and the power to control someone through force. This may be done confrontationally to affect an arrest and detention of an individual unwilling to comply with the officer’s directions or lawful order of the court. In the police example it would seem there is a strong disparity of power and control between the officer and arrestee, but the individual still has some power in the event.

While the suspect will ultimately be forced to comply with the arrest, he has the power to refuse to speak or cooperate in the investigation. He can even refuse to identify himself to police. Unfortunately, this may result in his detention until police are satisfied of his identity. A suspect acting in this manner ultimately controls the actions of the police, forcing them to use the power of detention to get his identity. If the suspect had produced identification,

he may have been able to pay a bond and go home...a very different outcome.

A Change in Management Style

The difference between using power and the influence of control can be seen in the difference in management style over the years. During the 1950s and 1960s, management was very autocratic—“my way or the highway” was the way of doing things. It was very much the end of our grandfathers’ generation that bore the baby boomer generation after World War II. Parents, and the fathers in particular, were the ultimate unchallenged authority. Children were expected to listen and respond unquestioningly to their elders’ wishes.

The autocratic management style was a reflection of the way parents raised their children. Power was used to control and lead. Power to make commands was followed and questioning orders brought firm retribution. Today this kind of manager leaves a wake of personnel problems with the new generations.

The generations have changed. Effective management and interviewing have changed with the needs of the Generations X and Y. Instead of using power, the effective manager and interviewer of today uses influence to lead and control the actions of others. Collaboration and a common vision are more important than power in reaching the ultimate goal. Resistance is reduced when people make the decision of their own free will to take a particular course of action. The end result is achieved by controlling the probable outcome without exercising power, which is a more elegant solution than ordering.

The Role of Confrontation

How power and control are used by the parties can be dependant on a variety of factors; some subtle, others less so. Type A personalities will often play a heavy hand using their power to attain their means, leaving the more subtle methods of control to others. This may work, but if power attacks a strong-willed individual under the right circumstances, there will be an equal and opposite reaction resulting in conflict.

We often hear people propose strong confrontation as a means of gaining compliance from difficult subjects. This

supposedly increases the subject's level of stress while holding him in absolute control. In this strategy the interviewer is all knowing and all powerful and the subject is a victim, who is powerless to change circumstances. This is supposed to provide the interviewer the leverage he needs to overcome the subject's resistance. What this does in actuality is to force the "victim" to resort to the only power he has—resistance.

Putting aside the strong confrontation for a moment, let's examine the problem from the employee's side of the encounter. If the associate refuses to cooperate, he faces the loss of his job and maybe much more. If he is unsure of the circumstances, curiosity will come into play buying the interviewer time to spin his web.

An employee's greatest fear is typically losing his position and its financial benefits. In the big scheme of things for most people, it is better to try to save their job. "If I am fired, how will I pay my bills" goes the reasoning.

The difficult associate has to decide if he wants to play his bit of power at the beginning and not cooperate, or see if he can hold it back and control (manage) the situation while he gains information. This is not necessarily true for people who are working in a marginal job. They may be willing to give up a small salary of a job they are not committed to in exchange for playing the bit of power they do have. Often these types of subjects have dealt with conflict in this way in a variety of contexts because it may have been successful for them or they were incapable of devising an alternative strategy.

In our experience the more valuable the employment, the less likely someone will act in a manner that may cost them their job without knowing all the facts. An exception to this might be if the individual believes the interviewer knows only something small. In that case the person may walk away from his job believing he has concealed a much larger criminal act.

Managing the Interview

So how might the interviewer use power and control to his advantage?

First, the interviewer should plan the employee will not walk away from his way of making money. Second, there is a desperate need for the individual to get information about his situation and what the company knows. Third, as long as the interviewer controls the situation, the process will likely move forward as any other interview.

Control can be established by the restrained use of power. It may be as simple as determining who the witnesses might be during the interview. With senior executives it might be the people present when he arrives that sets the stage for cooperation. It is difficult for someone to object to joining a meeting of peers even if he is suspicious of his surroundings. It is also more difficult for someone to lie about policies and procedures when his peers know the job as well as he does. The real power

lies in the interviewer's information and how he conceals what he knows from the subject.

Control can also be established through the individual's indecision. When a subject is in a position where he has to make a decision without information, it creates curiosity and procrastination, which works in the interviewer's favor.

While some interviewers incorrectly assume a subject's resistance must be strongly overcome to establish and illustrate their power, this is rarely so. Control can often be simply used by understanding the individual's mindset and the social constraints in place already. Look for non-confrontational ways to use power and control and even difficult interviews can be handled as routine.

In our next column we will examine how non-confrontational interviewing uses the concepts of power and control to manage the subject's responses to influence cooperation during the interview. ■

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