

General Loss Interviewing: Part Three

In our last two columns we discussed the application of general loss interviewing and some of the preparatory work necessary to make it a successful endeavor. As we mentioned previously, there are a variety of ways to schedule the associates for the interviews. The most successful investigations generally identify those most likely to be involved in theft activity and schedule them for interviews early in the investigation. This can be done using psychological testing or examining the employees' backgrounds using a data sheet to collate areas of high risk in their background to create a general risk assessment.

The Behavioral Interview

Our first experience with general loss interviewing began as polygraph examiners doing routine periodic polygraph testing of employees for companies in the 1970s. During the '70s the polygraph was used by many organizations to identify dishonest associates. The tools we have today to mine data as well as digital cameras with zoom lenses didn't exist as a resource for loss prevention at the time. Especially in specialty operations, general loss interviewing was used to resolve high shrinkage in target locations. The structure for these general loss interviews varied greatly between companies and interviewers.

In some instances the interview was nothing more than a fact-gathering conversation in hopes of identifying the causes of the shortages. In other cases employees were actually interrogated and accused of theft even though there was no basis for the accusation.

The first formalized general-loss interview came about when Douglas Wicklander began using a behavioral interview without the polygraph to investigate specific issue losses and high-shrinkage locations in the mid-1970s.

The initial strategy he employed was to use a behavioral interview as a screening device to identify truthful employees and eliminate them from the investigation. This allowed him to focus on those employees most likely to be involved in counterproductive behavior at the facility.

The behavioral interview was a series of 18 to 20 non-accusatory questions asked of each associate. This interview was essentially a polygraph pretest that

by David E. Zulawski, CFI, CFE
and Shane G. Sturman, CFI, CPP



Zulawski and Sturman are executives in the investigative and training firm of Wicklander-Zulawski & Associates (www.w-z.com). Zulawski is a senior partner and Sturman is president. Sturman is also a member of ASIS International's Retail Loss Prevention Council. They can be reached at 800-222-7789 or via email at dzulawski@w-z.com and ssturman@w-z.com.
© 2013 Wicklander-Zulawski & Associates, Inc.

was predictive of how an individual would do on a polygraph when asked if he had stolen from the store. Through thousands of these interviews, examiners were able to determine how truthful people would most likely respond to the questions, and how the untruthful would respond in a different manner. Based on the individual's verbal/physical behavior and content of the answers, the interviewer could successfully eliminate truthful associates from the investigation while focusing their attention on those most likely to be involved in counterproductive behavior.

Wicklander successfully used the behavioral interview as an investigative tool in specific-issue cases where a polygraph either could not be used or was too expensive, as well as in general-loss investigations where there was no information to focus the investigation on the guilty parties. The protocol that he used to conduct these interviews varied somewhat, but generally began with talking to those employees who were the least likely to be involved in dishonest activities. These were the long-tenured, older, and most competent associates at the location. Using information gleaned from their interviews, he was able to identify the employees most likely to be involved in dishonest activities.

Problems with the Early Protocol

Each of his interviews began with obtaining biographical information from the employee, which established a behavioral norm for comparison against the individual's responses when asked about theft activity at the location. Initially, the employee was told there was an investigation relating to shortage at the facility and then a direct question was asked whether or not the associate had stolen money or merchandise from the store. This was followed by questions relating to knowledge and/or suspicions the individual may have about other employees stealing from the organization. The remaining questions of the behavioral interview were asked and then the interviewer made a determination whether the person could be eliminated from the investigation.

If the individual was determined to be deceptive, the interviewer would attempt to obtain an admission of

continued on page 14

continued from page 12

theft of money or merchandise or some form of policy violation. The interviewer then developed the admission and obtained a written statement to substantiate the loss. This was the general practice we used in general-loss investigations until the early 1990s, when we began to focus on an entirely different structure to the interview.

We had noticed several consistent problems with organizing the interview as it was first conceived by Wicklander. First, the interviewer was often left knowing the individual was deceptive, but not specifically knowing whether the employee had stolen money or merchandise or whether it was some other policy violation. Second, using the interview first seemed to indicate to the associate that the investigation had not identified those involved, and the investigator was merely looking for leads as to which employees were stealing. Finally, the level of denials was often difficult to overcome because the interviewer was uncertain of the individual's actual guilt.

The general-loss interview can be a productive tool in resolving high-shrinkage problems, but it requires planning, preparation, and excellent interviewing skills to be most effective.

Recognizing these difficulties led to rethinking the general-loss interview and overall structure of the approach. It was apparent that using the behavioral interview first gave the individual the impression that the investigation was a fishing expedition. From our conversations with people who had confessed, we knew that the primary reason a person made admissions was because he believed he was caught. So it was apparent using the interview first was counterproductive.

The second issue that needed to be addressed was the lack of information about the ways in which the employee was stealing from the store. That led us to the use of the non-confrontational introductory statement which could help the interviewer resolve how the associate was stealing.

A New Approach

The new organizational structure begins with the use of either a psychological test to assess risk of dishonesty or identifying likely dishonest associates through the use of the data sheet to organize the employees into a hierarchy of most to least likely to be dishonest. Then we begin the interviews with those most likely to be involved in dishonesty, based either on their psychological assessment or the high-risk categories identified by the data sheet. This change allows the interviewer to act as though the employee's guilt is certain because the person is interviewed early on in the investigation.

Next the interviewer obtains biographical information to establish the individual's behavioral norm and does a short rapport-building conversation before moving on to the introductory statement. The introductory statement is about a five-minute monologue that addresses what loss prevention is and does, identifies how losses commonly occur, and finally discusses how investigations are conducted by investigators. The short statement says two different things to the innocent and guilty.

First, the innocent associate looks interested and comfortable during the discussion because he has not involved himself in counterproductive behavior. On the other hand the guilty employee hears the same words and has an elevated fear of detection because of his theft activity and now his belief is that he may have been caught.

Second, the discussion of how losses commonly occur allows the interviewer to assess the behavior of the associate as each of the methods are presented. Often, the guilty associate will respond behaviorally to the methods he has used to steal from the organization. This gives the interviewer potential intelligence information to assist in the discussion of the methods used to investigate internal problems.

If the behavior associated with the introductory statement is deceptive, the interviewer then adds rationalizations to show understanding for an individual's mistakes and to minimize the seriousness of what has been done. This builds to a test for submission followed by an assumptive question, such as, "Mark, let me ask you this. What would you say is the most amount of money you took in any single day?" If the employee hesitates, the interviewer offers a follow-up question, such as, "I mean it wasn't as much as \$5,000 at one time was it?" A denial here is the first admission the employee has stolen from the organization, just not \$5,000. The interviewer now moves to development of the admission to identify the full scope of the associate's involvement in theft activity and to substantiate these admissions.

If the employee makes a strong, adamant denial of involvement, the interviewer then finishes the behavioral interview asking about associate's knowledge or suspicions of others stealing from the company. The interviewer simply completes the rest of the behavioral interview to confirm his original suspicions or correct his assessment.

While he did not obtain an admission, he now has two tools that separately confirm his belief that the individual was involved—the introductory statement and the behavioral interview. Effectively, the introductory statement takes the place of the behavioral interview, allowing the interviewer to assess the individual's concern and potential methods of theft while reserving the behavioral interview as a means of backing out of the conversation.

The general-loss interview can be a productive tool in resolving high-shrinkage problems, but it requires planning, preparation, and excellent interviewing skills to be most effective. ■