



FIRE LINE DO NOT CROSS

THE ART OF INTERVIEWING

MARIO DELORME: CFEI

An interview, at its core, is a search for answers. What happened? How did it happen? Where? When? Who was involved? The answers to these questions can help reveal important details related to an accident or criminal act, but the amount of information you get, and quality of that information, can vary greatly based on the skill of the interviewer.

Successful interviewing has come a long way from the basic question and answer format. In fact, the methodology and thought process used in an interview has changed dramatically with the development of the cognitive interview. A cognitive interview reliably enhances the process of memory retrieval, and has been found to elicit memories, providing interviewers with more information – in greater detail – from eyewitnesses.

There are several techniques used in cognitive interviewing, but its main purpose is to create mental activity in a “pure version” format in order to obtain as much information as possible. When done properly, it avoids leading questions that can seriously jeopardize the validity of a statement, and increases the number of correct details gathered from a witness.

MIND BODY LANGUAGE

It is incredibly important to show the person that you’re interested and engaged by making eye contact and providing feedback, either with a smile or a follow-up question. Your body language can give them an idea of how comfortable – or confident – you are with the situation. This can be key to building mutual confidence leading up to the interview.



BUILDING RAPPORT

When performing a cognitive interview, it’s important to first develop rapport with the witness. Situations that require an interview are often the result of a traumatic, or even tragic event in someone’s life. The witness may have lost property, sustained injuries or even lost a loved one. Developing rapport can help relieve anxiety, which may otherwise distract them. Rapport can be based on a shared hobby, talking about children, pets, and so on. Really, it’s a matter of making them feel comfortable, opening the doors for communication, and treating them as a person who has undergone a traumatic experience, rather than evidence in an investigation.

The other person’s body language is equally important. A sudden change in demeanour may indicate that they’ve become upset. Crossing their arms over their chest, clenching their fists, a change in their skin complexion or in the tone of their voice may be signs that your interview has taken a turn. Emotions are also strongly expressed in people’s eyes, and you may be able to judge whether these emotions are appropriate to the event that just occurred. However, it’s important to understand that all people react differently to a situation, and that the reaction you’re seeing may be normal for them.



COGNITIVE INTERVIEW

Once you've built rapport, it's time to take a statement using a basic cognitive interview technique involving context reinstatement. Have the interviewee form a mental picture of the environment where the event took place. Next, have them revisit their own mental state at that time. Finally, ask them to describe the event in detail.

If the incident was very traumatic, you may want the interviewee to begin some time before the event. If you are attending a fire scene that started at 11:00 a.m., have them start from the time they woke up, when they were in a calmer state of mind. Additionally, earlier details they remember can be

as important as anything observed during the actual fire. For example, if they used any appliances that morning. A coffee maker, stove, or curling iron are all potential ignition sources.

Allow the witness to control the flow of information and the pace of the interview. Encourage them to report everything they can remember, no matter how insignificant it may seem, regardless of when it took place chronologically, and even if it contradicts an earlier statement. Witnesses often withhold information – not because they're trying to hide something, but because they don't know what's relevant to an investigation.

Refrain from interrupting the witness. The open-ended narration will result in a more complete recollection and give you time to develop follow-up questions.

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Don't waste all of your hard work by asking leading questions. These can create confabulated (or fabricated) memories, and may also reveal too much of what you already know. For example, if you ask, "were you cut off by the man in the red Ford Mustang?" You could also lay a blueprint for lying by providing a potential answer: "Were you at a friend's house when this happened?"

When it comes to asking questions, after having gone through the context reinstatement, there are a couple of big "no-no's" that you should be careful to avoid. First, keep the questions to what has not been answered in the statement. Asking questions about information that has already been provided will only frustrate the witness and make them think you weren't listening. Secondly, be prepared, and have clear, open-ended questions that require the witness to elaborate. Once the interview is finished, thank the witness for their help and encourage them to contact you if they remember anything else.

Conducting a witness interview and extracting information is by no means an easy task. Every interview is different, depending on the witness and the circumstances, so it's vitally important to come prepared to take a statement, and have a consistent methodology to ensure the accurate reporting of facts and a maximum extraction of data in that first sitting.

Building rapport, focusing on body language, using the context reinstatement method, and going at the pace of the witness are fundamental methods used by the pros that you can count on when speaking with insureds or claimants in any scenario. This methodology is designed to enable the interviewee, while empowering the interviewer by providing the widest range of information documented for their investigation.



MARIO DELORME,
CFEI

Mario specializes in fire and explosion investigations and has completed over 1,300 fire and explosion investigations. He has over 20 years of policing experience, including nine years as a criminal investigator and two as a detective sergeant with the Kingston Police, as well as two years as a fire investigator with the Ontario Fire Marshal's Office.

 1 888 624 3473

 902 719 9061

 MDELORME@ORIGIN-AND-CAUSE.COM

 INFO@ORIGIN-AND-CAUSE.COM
