

“WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD I ASK”?

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In the article by Mr. Joop Taylor under Training and Education located on page 9 of the March 1999 issue of The Canadian Association of Fire Investigators The/Le Journal, arson and fraud indicators were discussed. Mr. Taylor closed his article with the following statement, **“REMEMBER, FRAUD OR ARSON CAN BE PROVEN ONLY THROUGH INVESTIGATION. INVESTIGATION WILL START ONLY IF SUSPICIONS ARE AROUSED”** This statement says a great deal about the roles of all people involved in fire investigation. It is a terrible misconception that only “fire investigators” obtain information to lead to an investigation. Fire fighters and police are in an excellent position to begin the investigation if and when they identify concerns regarding any incident. You do not have to be a trained investigator to develop the gut level feelings about the honesty and integrity of a witness. The first contact with victims and witnesses is very important, and obtaining information at this stage could impact greatly on a successful conclusion to the investigation.

The fire service, generally speaking, do not spend enough time speaking with owners, occupants or witnesses at fire scenes. There is a feeling that this is not their role, however who is better to begin the process. Being on site, immediately after or during an event can result in the obtaining of much needed information, but more importantly, establishing early specific points of information that are very important.

With discussions with fire service personnel the one question raised is **“What questions should I ask”?** Initiating a conversation with the owners or occupants of a building involved in a fire is usually not difficult, but like most people they will only tend to answer the questions that are asked. Don’t expect long rambling responses to short easy questions. If you do get these types of responses, pay particular attention to the answers as it is important to this individual to make those specific comments at that time. This could be a method of establishing an alibi, or they may offer their opinion as to the cause. This may be their first opportunity to tell their story to a person whom they see as important. If this person is a truthful person they will likely be very co-operative and will attempt to assist you as much as possible. If they are creating a story they will also appear very cooperative. You must evaluate the person and rely on your gut feelings, they are usually right. If the fire was created, the story being told to you will also be created. This is the first step by the person to see if their story will work. You as the first responder are about to be told the first version. The person has run this story through their minds and now you are supplying the first major test. Is the story going to be believed?

Start with questions that these people know the answers to, such as their name and birth date. If they are not residents of the premises obtain home and business addresses. Also ask for home, business, and cellular phone numbers. Don’t forget to ask for a family member’s phone number in the event you have to contact them at a later time. Ask them who was present at the time of the fire and if they have seen everyone since the fire. By asking this type of question you should find that the individual will relax somewhat and you will then begin to develop a rapport with them.

Ask questions about what they saw, heard, smelled or felt. Don't ask their opinion especially as to how the fire started. Ask them if they saw the fire, and if they did, ask them what was burning. Ask them if they heard the smoke alarm activate and if they smelled smoke before or after the alarm activated. A difficulty with asking their opinion is the subconscious attempt to locate information to support what has been told to you, rather than taking the observations and applying them to the scene. Don't forget, take the information you have received and compare it to the scene. Don't take any unsubstantiated information as gospel. Check it out first.

Under normal circumstances, victims of a fire will be helpful. Giving the fire fighter's information to assist them in establishing what happened is an indicator of a helpful witness, but more importantly a truthful witness. Be careful of the witness who offers too much information, they may be trying to mislead you and send you in the wrong direction. Depending on the answers you receive, you may begin to doubt the truthfulness of the information, especially if the information received does not fit with the fire scene you are dealing with. Don't challenge the person at this point in time. Don't offer your opinion as to how the information given to you does not fit what you have in the scene, and don't offer your opinion as to how the fire started. You may want to clarify the information you received so ask the individual the same questions again. If you are not satisfied with the response advise the police on scene or the Provincial fire investigator. This might just be the point that will arouse suspicions, and then the investigation will start.

Don't take the individual back into the scene to "*show you what they saw*". If this is a fire by design you have given this person the opportunity of seeing how their creation worked out. Not only will this person know what happened, they now have the opportunity to change their story to fit the scene. Any interview conducted afterwards will be contaminated. The witness will be responding to questions from knowledge of the scene rather than from knowledge prior to the fire. This can not be stressed too strongly. No potential witness, owner, or occupant should ever be allowed to re-enter the fire scene until they have been interviewed by fire personnel, police, insurance and/or fire scene investigators. Keep in mind; you are the first of many people who will be involved in the scene investigation. Help construct the basis for a good investigation by being aware of the witnesses and what they have to say. Don't create road blocks for those who will be following you, as they, like you are all part of the team trying to solve a complex puzzle.