

Getting Open Participation in Incident Analysis: Interviewing Tools and Strategies

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Introduction

Many organizations approach incident analysis with one goal in mind, when in fact, there should be two. One goal is to determine the immediate causes and root causes including management system failures, which allowed the incident to occur so effective countermeasures can be taken to reduce future injury risk. Many organizations do not realize there's a second goal. The second goal is to encourage full and open participation of all employees involved in, witness to, or with pertinent information for any incident on site. To accomplish this, organizations need to create a non-adversarial atmosphere around reporting and analyzing incidents. They need to create an atmosphere free of blame and discipline. There are many characteristics that impact our ability to meet these two goals. One characteristic is the degree of employee involvement during analysis and follow-up.

So, how do we get those line workers openly participating in incident reporting and analysis? One place to start is to create a non-adversarial atmosphere during the interview phase of the incident analysis process. The interview phase is often where employees develop the perception the incident analysis process is faultfinding. Organizations need to remember that the interviewing phase of the process is crucial for information gathering and for perception management. This paper will include ways to get better information and make the process a more empowering event for all involved. In particular, this paper will review the nuts and bolts of witness interviews (the why, who, when, where, and how), how best to communicate (i.e., the interview sequence), and how to enhance the memory of witnesses. Safety managers should take a leadership role in their organization's incident reporting and analysis process. This paper will help safety managers evaluate their own incident analysis process and to make suggestions for process changes.

Mechanics of Interviewing for Incidents

First, the nuts and bolts of witness interviews will be discussed. Why conduct interviews? Employees will have information of significance to all incidents whether or not they involve injury or human error. This information is important to the problem solving aspect of incident analysis. The more employees get involved in problem solving, the better job they do in fixing system problems before they reach the incident stage. Additionally, including employees in decision-making, recommendation of corrective actions, and other activities of the incident analysis team enhance team

building. This involvement in turn, increases employee ownership of safety, another route to improving safety in the workplace. So, when incidents occur, we want to involve witnesses and others to get information from them, but also to engage them in developing solutions and to build buy-in and ownership. However, an important issue organizations must address is whether or not employees want to participate.

There are multiple factors that inhibit 'willingness' and 'ability' to participate in interviews. One factor that inhibits the willingness of employees to give complete and accurate information is the time or amount of effort required. When employees feel a need to protect self or to protect others (e.g., peers, supervisors) from any blame or disciplinary action, they may not provide complete information. If an incident was traumatic, employees may have no desire to relive the incident (Gorden 99). Finally, another factor that sometimes inhibits employees' willingness to provide information is a desire to punish management.

There are also factors inhibiting the ability of employees to participate in interviews. The moment we begin to deal with the facts of an incident, we're in the past and there's a natural fading of our memories over time. Confusion is also a factor that inhibits an employee's ability to participate. One example is chronological confusion where the witness is unsure of the sequence of events. Current knowledge acquired after the incident can affect a witness' memory (e.g., a witness discusses the incident with a coworker). Another type of confusion is inferential confusion caused by biases (Gorden 100). For example, if you believe that rescue personnel are professional and heroic, then you may be biased toward saying during the interview that the response team acted that way. In other words, when we assume things *should* happen a certain way, we may assume they *did* actually happen that way. The interviewer can use techniques, which avoid the necessity of the respondent's making inferences, or that help the respondent make them accurately. Instead of asking the respondent, "How did the rescue team respond?" use questions like, "How long did it take for the rescue team to get to the scene?" and "What did the rescue team do first?"

Unconscious or automatic behavior is also a factor that could affect a witness' ability to provide accurate information (Gorden 103). For example, could you tell someone which sock you put on first? Putting on socks has become an automatic behavior for most of us, and we don't think about which one goes on first. In the workplace, tasks are often highly repetitive, so a slip may not even be recognized. When the witness doesn't remember, s/he may rely on the routine to recount what happened (e.g., "I always close the valve before..."). Whether the task is routine or not, many behaviors performed under great stress are later forgotten. Memories may be blurred by the speed and frenzy of events. Often, victims who experience a disaster (e.g., tornado) can't recall how they responded. Finally, lack of technical knowledge will impact a person's ability to give accurate information.

While many factors inhibit witness participation, there are also factors that facilitate it. If the interviewer uses appropriate techniques and has credibility with the interviewee, s/he can increase participation using several techniques. First, it's important to remember all humans need recognition and the esteem of others, so the interviewer must praise the witnesses for participating. In other words, people will participate in exchange for recognition and other social rewards. Respondents may be flattered when they are selected because the information needed makes them unique. Since most people want to help, the interviewer must appeal to a person's altruistic needs. Let them know that participation may prevent other injuries or incidents from occurring. There seems to be a human need to identify with some high value beyond immediate self-interest, so respondents may volunteer information that is painful to give if they feel it is of value to others.

Often, a person needs to talk about an incident to help release it, especially if it helps release unpleasant emotions or tensions (Gorden 109). People have a need for meaning (why did it happen?, why wasn't I hurt?). When disasters happen, psychological tension often results because there's an incongruence of facts, so people have a desire to talk about what happened. People also need the sympathetic response or understanding of others. Interviewers who reflect a sympathetic attitude and who know how to direct it toward the objectives of the interview will be more successful at getting the information needed.

Who is interviewed? Clearly, the number and length of interviews will vary based on the level or potential severity of the incident, but interviews need to be conducted with anyone who has relevant information including victim(s), emergency responders, co-workers, supervisor, eyewitnesses from other work areas, employees on previous shifts, maintenance employees who most recently worked on equipment, and employees in adjacent areas who may have smelled or heard something. Since the team needs to reconstruct what happened, some of the interviewees may be on the team. However, it is probably more appropriate to interview the victim one-on-one, and you may also want to interview others one-on-one.

Who conducts the interviews? Interviewers should be selected based on the skills and knowledge needed. The interviewer should always have an understanding of the technical aspects of the incident. The interviewer must convey a non-threatening image and therefore should have an appropriate relationship with the person to be interviewed. Often, it's easier when the interviewer is of higher status because the interviewee is more likely to feel a moral obligation. But, if the person feels threatened to tell the truth, it doesn't always work. If the interviewer/interviewee relationship is equal, there's no competition or conflicting goals (Gorden 187). If the interviewer is a technical expert, it may be appropriate for the interviewer to be a subordinate as long as there's also no threat to the interviewee's ego. But remember the most important criteria is that the interviewer have credibility with the witness because the credibility of the interviewer heavily influences the *willingness* of the interviewee to openly participate and give information.

When and where should the interview take place? Because our memories fade and talking to others influences us, the interview should occur as soon as possible. How soon may depend on the degree of existing risk, seriousness of the injury, time of day, mental/emotional state of witnesses, and the number of witnesses to be interviewed. Ask any witness who cannot be interviewed immediately to refrain from discussing the event with others until they can be interviewed. Inadvertently, details of the event may change after discussing the event with others. Having a lengthy interview at the end of a graveyard shift may bias witnesses against the investigation process by demonstrating the incident investigation team's lack of sympathy or daylight mentality. In terms of where to conduct the interviews, there are many advantages to going to the actual site of the incident. Proximity to the scene of the incident will aid in recall. However, the actual site may not be practical or safe. Consider using the employee's break room or another area near the employee's workstation. It can be very intimidating to be called into the boss's office and to be talked to by a room full of suits.

Interview Sequence and Communication Techniques

Incident interviews should follow a basic seven-step sequence. The first step is for the interviewer to develop rapport with the interviewee, which occurs throughout the interview session, but is very important in the opening of the interview (Fisher and Geiselman 21). Personal style is important. It's good to start with a friendly greeting and handshake. Always express appreciation for his/her assistance and provide empathy for injuries to the witness or coworkers. The interviewer should use

clear, simple language and avoid jargon and technical terminology that the interviewee may not understand. It's important for the interviewer to demonstrate s/he is unbiased and nonjudgmental through out the interview process.

When trying to develop rapport, remember nonverbals can sabotage or strengthen the interview process. There is a tendency to overestimate the effect of verbal communication and to underestimate the effect of the nonverbal. There are four nonverbal communication modes interviewers can learn to use as conscious techniques (Gorden 314) to help strengthen the interview and develop rapport. The interviewer must learn how to use interpersonal space (proxemics) to convey meaning. Correct conversational distance varies from one culture to another, but also varies based on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. If the interviewer is the interviewee's boss, too close could be threatening while too far away could imply you don't want to associate with the person being interviewed. For example, if using a table for the interview, it may be best to sit on the same side of the table with the person. However, different sex combinations and large age variations may also impact the space required for comfort during an interview. Be aware of the interviewee's body language and adjust if needed.

Chronemics or the use of time in interpersonal relationships can enhance an interview session. If the interviewer is late, this may convey a lack of interest in the interview. The most important chronemic technique the interviewer can control is the length of pauses and rate of speech. The interviewer should pay close attention to the length of time s/he waits after the respondent has finished before asking the next question. The interviewer must establish a relaxed, deliberate pace, free from competing time demands. Interviewers should allow long pauses (also called a silent probe) because often pausing forces the interviewee to think more deeply. The silent probe is an important technique and will be discussed again later in the paper. Interviewers should also be aware of their rate of speech because rapid speech increases anxiety.

Kinesics or the use of body movement such as eye movements, feet movement, posture, hand gestures, and facial expressions have all been studied as techniques to enhance communication during interviews. Communicators tend to focus more attention on the face where the central focus is on the eyes. When the interviewer is listening, s/he should use more eye contact, but look less if the issues are very personal. The interviewer should also use eye contact to pick up on the interviewee's body language.

Paralinguistics or the use of volume (loud or soft), pitch, accents, inflectional patterns, and voice quality are more intertwined with the verbal than are the other nonverbal modes of communication. The same sentence can be delivered with different stress and intonation patterns in a way to change the meaning. For example, we can recite the alphabet to show various feelings (e.g., sarcastic, angry, happy). Using the appropriate stress pattern can help the interviewer give the intended meaning to a question. The interviewer can listen for subtle paralinguistic communication, which may help interpret the meaning of the interviewee's responses. A verbal "yes" could mean "maybe" or "no" depending on the tone of voice or other nonverbal cues. The interviewer should be enthusiastic about the interviewee's insights and never use a condescending tone. A condescending tone by the interviewer may result in biased information from the respondent. Remember, voice characteristics can change the meaning. Although interviewers can learn to use these four communication modes as conscious techniques, the nonverbal communication does not occur in only one of the four modes in a given moment.

To develop and maintain a good rapport, effective interviewers need to learn how to guard against demonstrating certain attitudes (bored, apologetic, surprised, morbidly curious, inappropriately amused, and disapproving) because the interviewee cannot distinguish between attitudes toward them as a person versus the information they are giving (Gorden 326). Successful interviewers learn how to display a nonjudgmental attitude, which means refraining from agreeing or disagreeing with the witness. A nonjudgmental attitude allows the respondent to be free from ego threat, taking him/her off the defensive and allowing for candid responses. Interviewers can show interest, sensitivity, and understanding without passing judgment. One way is to use reflective listening by saying things like “That sounds terrifying, how did you react?” or “That’s exactly the kind of information that will help us prevent this from happening to someone else. Tell me more.” Bored can be demonstrated through tone of voice, posture, and facial expressions. Apologetic may be demonstrated by asking questions like “Would you mind if I asked you...” or “You probably don’t remember...” The interviewee will stop being candid if the interviewer acts surprised or is morbidly curious (e.g., “That sounds horrible, tell me more”).

Maintaining rapport also requires the interviewer to avoid responses that may encourage the witness to alter his/her account or discourage him/her from telling more. When the interviewer forgets a previous response or neglects to probe in crucial spots, the respondent may interpret the interviewer has a negative attitudes towards them as a person and will stop giving accurate information. If the interviewee feels s/he has given vitally important information, and the interviewer asks the same question again, this is often interpreted as the interviewer’s lack of sympathetic understanding. It’s important to show interest toward the interviewee as a person (e.g., “I want to hear your observations”) and to show appreciation for the witness’s efforts (e.g., “I realize this is difficult for you because you’re worried about Bill’s injury, so I really appreciate all the details you are able to remember. This is valuable information”).

Step two of the interview process is to ‘review the purpose of the interview.’ Reaffirm the mission of incident analysis and acknowledge the importance of the interviewee’s observations. Stress fact-finding not fault finding and affirm confidentiality of any sensitive information. The purpose of fact-finding is to define the most appropriate corrective action plan (Geller 2002, 215). Ask the interviewee to provide the most complete information possible. Explain the need for taking notes and estimate the length of the interview.

Step three is to ask some warm up questions to build confidence in the witness. Ask for things like: name, position, years of service, and experience in incident analysis. Asking some biographical questions and background information first reduces anxiety. Step four is to allow for uninterrupted narrative by being silent and actively listening (e.g., “I see, anything else?” and “What happened next?”). Questioning here should be neutral, unbiased, and non-leading. Core questions should be asked of all witnesses to verify facts and check for inconsistencies. Step five is to ask probing questions to clarify and gain additional information. At this stage of the interview process, the interviewer should probe for who, when, where, how, but not why. Here are some typical probing questions: what was the approximate time of the incident?; what was the condition of the environment before, during, and after the incident?; what was the weather, noise level, temperature, activity level?; where were people, equipment, and materials located?; who else may have witnessed the incident?; what was moved from the scene, repositioned, or changed after the incident to help victims, to secure the area, or to resume operations?; and how long did it take for the emergency team to respond?” Use open-ended questions (e.g., “How did the valve get open?” not “Did you open the valve?”) and maintain an unbiased demeanor. Pay attention to the order of questions. You may refer to drawings

or photos at this point in the interview for clarification and to help the interviewee tell his/her story. Make sure you don't rush the interviewee and don't challenge inconsistencies at this time.

Step six is to close and summarize the interview. It's important to end the interview as carefully as you started it. Interviewees will likely be heading back to the plant after they leave and you want them to go with confidence in the analysis process. Now may be a good time to ask why or ask for the interviewee's opinion (e.g., "Why do you think this happened?" or "What do you think should be done to prevent this from happening again?"). Ask a final question, "Is there anything else you want to add regardless of how insignificant you think it may be?" Encourage follow-up contact by telling him/her to contact you when (not if) s/he recalls additional information. Thank the interviewee for his/her time and information. The final step (step seven) is to document the interview. Take time between interviews to debrief and to identify what was confirmed, what was inconsistent, and what new questions were raised. Note any new information gleaned and allow witnesses to review the interview summary as soon as possible.

Memory Enhancement

If someone asked you what you had for dinner several nights ago or what was a certain person wearing yesterday, you may not be able to remember. However, there are some techniques that may enhance your memory such as someone asking you if you ate at home or out, was it cooked on the grill, was it pasta or sandwiches, who cooked, and were family members present. Memory enhancement is a key to effective interviewing. Interviewers cannot count on complete and accurate recall from witnesses' memories. Memories are not perfect. What can be retrieved from among the vast amount stored is affected by perception, state of arousal, context, and knowledge of related experiences. We can learn how to improve our memories but most of these strategies require us to prepare. Incidents happen unexpectedly, so we can't plan or prepare to encode or store the information in a certain way. Observation and recall is difficult, and certainly recognition is stronger than recall. So, interviewers may prompt witnesses by asking them an open-ended question first followed by a recognition question ("Was it this or this?") (Fisher and Geiselman 20). An example might be to first ask the witness, "What kind of sound did the machine make?" then follow that question with, "Was it loud? Did it last a long time? Did it sound like this?"

Interviewers can't be stumped by, "I Don't Know." "I Don't Know" is not necessarily a form of resistance, but may indicate the person doesn't want to tell, isn't certain, or needs more time or help remembering. Rarely does it mean, "I Don't Know." Questions dealing with the future or quantitative questions are most likely to get the response, "I Don't Know." There are some techniques to help the interviewer get past this situation (Gorden 397). Although it may be awkward, the most successful tactic the interviewer can use is a long pause or period of silence because this will allow people to think. The interviewer should also use nonverbal expressions indicating the assumption that the respondent is thinking. This long pause prompts the respondent to fill the silence. The interviewer can supply some cues to aid the respondent's memory. For example, if you don't get any results, ask for an educated guess. Be clear that you want only factual information, but sometimes telling the interviewee, "I know you can't be sure but I want you to tell me as best you can. Since you know this equipment better than anyone, what would you guess happened to cause the failure?" will get them to begin giving you information.

There are certain laws of learning that affect memory and should be considered when conducting interviews for an incident analysis. *Primacy* is the first law and means we learn and remember best that which happened first. Our recall of information is most accurate about those things that occurred first. The law of primacy may inhibit our ability to learn and remember later in the sequence of

events. The second law is *intensity*, which means the more intense the experience the more detailed the recollection. Serious highway crashes typically fall into this category. Interviewers should be cautious of potential harm to witnesses made to recall gruesome or tragic events. The third law is *recency*, which is a natural complement to primacy. We also remember well that which happened last or most recently. This law explains the importance of gathering information from witnesses as soon as possible while memory is vivid.

There are three basic techniques interviewers can use to enhance the memories of witnesses (Fisher and Geiselman 95). One technique is *context re-creation* because memory is easier to retrieve under the same psychological, physiological, or emotional states it was stored under. For example, have you ever been working on a project in your office and discovered you needed to ask a coworker a question? After getting to the coworker's office, you forgot what the question was. Often, you have to go back to your office and the project you were working on when the question originated in order to remember. In other words, you have to go back to the original context. Interviewers can encourage witnesses to put themselves back in the location, time, temperature, and so forth the incident occurred in to aid recall. Perhaps even visit the actual location if appropriate (e.g., location secured, won't be traumatic or harmful to the witness).

Another technique is *focused concentration*. When witnesses are really concentrating, they often close their eyes. They often make the comment, "This is hard work." The interviewer can help participants focus their concentration by eliminating or lessening distractions and interruptions (including themselves). Retrieval of specific information can be very difficult work and some interviewees, initially, may not be willing to expend the energy required. The witness may need encouragement and motivation.

A third technique is to encourage *multiple retrieval attempts* and *a variety of different retrieval approaches*. People with good memories may just be those who try several times and several different ways to recall information (Fisher and Geiselman 97). The more attempts a witness makes, the more information s/he will recall. Interviewers can suggest the interviewee try again by thinking about the memory a different way (e.g., ask the witness to describe the incident in reverse-recall order or opposite of chronological) (Fisher and Geiselman 110). Peripheral action is retrieved more readily in reverse. This is also a method to check for inconsistencies.

Another 'multiple retrieval attempt' is to ask the witness to describe the incident from someone else's perspective or by using different sensory modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, touch, smell, taste). Use phrases such as, "Picture the equipment," "Feel the heat of the room," "Hear the noises in the processing area." Use these techniques especially when the witness believes s/he knows something but cannot recall it at the time.

Having covered the nuts and bolts of witness interviews, how best to communicate (i.e., the interview sequence), and how to enhance the memory of witnesses, information gathering or interviewing witnesses is crucial to the success of the incident analysis process. Interviewing is crucial not only for problem solving but also for perception management. Without accurate information, it's not likely the appropriate corrective actions will be implemented. A key principle to remember is, 'don't count on common sense for safety improvement' (Geller, 1996). This key principle applies to conducting interviews for incident analysis as well. We can't count on 'common sense' when seeking valuable information regarding incidents. Our interviewers need to be trained. Whether we meet the two goals for the incident analysis process depends on the information we collect during the interview phase.

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