

Professional Perspective

Avoiding Inertia, Resistance & Reactance in Investigation Interviews

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Avoiding Inertia, Resistance & Reactance in Investigation Interviews

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When coming to an interview, several studies show that most witnesses have not yet decided on a specific strategy for the interview or whether they will be cooperative. No conflict between the interviewer and the interviewee has yet had an opportunity to arise. Still, the interviewee may be conflicted about what to say, how to behave, and how to react to questions an interviewee anticipates being asked.

Our experience over thousands of interviews has shown us that you can take steps to overcome an interviewee's internal uncertainty about whether to be forthcoming. Such steps can help to avoid affirmatively creating potential roadblocks to a successful interview.

In this article we specifically discuss interviewees' inertia, resistance, and reactance and how to avoid each.

Uncertainty

Many interviewees show up for an interview wondering, why do they want to talk to me and what is this all about? It is not uncommon for an interviewee to be very hesitant about and sometimes even suspicious of an internal investigation. That uncertainty may manifest itself in an initial reluctance to be forthcoming. Whether the interviewer meaningfully addresses the interviewee's trepidation and internal conflict about how to proceed can impact whether the interviewee feels comfortable sharing meaningful information.

As the interviewer, you should take the first few minutes to explain the process and purpose of the interview. This goes beyond providing *Upjohn* warnings that, while important in many instances, may increase rather than decrease anxiety. Time spent putting the interviewee at ease and seeking to build rapport is generally well spent. Providing clear context for the interview can help the interviewee resolve any internal conflict in favor of cooperation.

Inertia

Beyond an interviewee's own uncertainty, many other factors can result in a less-than-forthcoming witness. The interviewee may think: What are they going to do with any information I give them? Does this investigation matter? Am I going to get someone in trouble? Those questions often manifest in a feeling that there is no point in providing information and a resulting lack of engagement with the interview. This is inertia. Inertia can also arise if the interviewee doubts the intentions of the interviewer, lacks trust in the process, or, worse, thinks it could be harmful.

A skilled interviewer can avoid inertia by clearly communicating positive intentions and setting the right tone. Focusing on objective fact-finding and the integrity of the investigative process can go a long way to addressing concerns that the interviewer is simply looking for someone to blame. Being forthcoming about where the investigation process will lead, what you are going to ask about, and why you are asking can go a long way to demonstrating positive intentions, developing trust, and avoiding inertia.

Resistance

Just as we can create inertia, we can also create active resistance. If through our actions and words we give people something to push back against, they most often will. That something can be as general as trying too hard to control the interview, or it can be as specific as challenging the person's knowledge, authority, integrity, or credibility—whether directly or indirectly. That is not to say you should never ask tough questions or directly confront a witness, but such techniques should be used intentionally, strategically, and sparingly.

Both inertia and resistance can also stem from outside sources, separate from anything the interviewer has done or said. For example, an employee may have a preconceived notion about internal investigations stemming from a prior bad experience or a negative view about the subject matter. The employee may also be concerned that providing certain information will cause trouble or personal repercussions, even if the employee has done nothing wrong. Others may just prefer to keep their heads down and avoid anything perceived as potentially confrontational.

In these cases, the skilled interviewer may be able to identify the outside source of the interviewee's unwillingness to share information and talk through it. What you need to avoid doing, however, is trying to convince the interviewee that this time will be different or that his or her concern is not real. When you try to convince someone, you create another force working against you called reactance (discussed below). Rather than convincing, try to talk through the interviewee's past experience and ask, "What would have made that experience different?" "What can you and I do to address your concern?" Or ask, "What would make things look different moving forward?" In doing so, you can work with interviewee to clear away the inertia or resistance, rather than trying to break through it by force.

Reactance

Interviewers can also unintentionally create a type of resistance known as reactance. Reactance can be defined as a subconscious, psychological defense mechanism that arises when we feel a threat to our sense of self or sense of personal agency. That means when we take away someone's feeling of autonomy, reactance sends a subconscious warning that it's probably not safe to provide information. It doesn't matter that the two things may not actually be linked in any way.

It can start with something as seemingly benign as ushering someone into a room and saying, "Please sit here." The interviewee may well have chosen to sit there anyway but doesn't like it now that you have suggested it. It doesn't seem like that would be related to whether they talk, but it may be.

If we start the conversation with something along the lines of "I need you to tell me exactly what happened," we further limit sense of agency and, quite probably, create reactance. Instead of such a pressuring question, change it a bit to something like "These are the things that would be helpful for me to know, but where would you like to start?" Changing your approach can avoid turning the interview in the wrong direction.

A sense of being judged can also quickly create reactance and drive the interview far off course. When we are labeled, we don't like it. Imagine interviewing fraud suspects and saying something along the lines of "You defrauded these people out of their hard-earned money." It is not likely that you are going to guilt them into talking.

More specifically, there are two problems with this approach. First, it frames things from the perspective of the victims, not the interviewees, so you've reduced their motivation to trust your intentions and to talk to you. Second, you have essentially labelled them as "fraudsters," which quickly creates reactance. To avoid all that, you could say, "There came a point where people were not going to get their money back, and I'm trying to understand how things got to that point."

Another way we judge people, unintentionally, is through the use of "why" questions, such as "Why did you write him such a large check?" Recipients of that question are likely to feel you are questioning their judgment, intelligence, or intentions and shut down in response—or go on the defensive. Reframing the question to something like "Can you help me understand the circumstances that led you to writing the check?" keeps the door open and leaves the judgment out.

Achieving the Best Possible Result

Ralph Waldo Emerson said that a "foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." We know that there are exceptions to what we have described. Our experience tells us, however, that taking steps to avoid inertia, resistance, and reactance is a smart bet every time. Obtaining information from witnesses can be challenging, and it is not always successful, but taking the time to understand whom you are talking to and avoiding known pitfalls will help achieve the best possible results.

See the related article ["A Roadmap for Advanced Investigation Interview Techniques"](#)