

# Interview Techniques for Assessing Safety Culture

# What's different about interviewing for the safety culture assessment?

- The focus is on
  - Perceptions
  - Beliefs
  - Attitudes
  - Opinions
  - Values
- Self-reports of these subjective factors may be more easily biased by the interview process itself than reports of events or “facts”

# What is the goal of applying safety culture interview techniques?

*To establish a balanced relationship between the interviewee and yourself as an empathetic, friendly individual who is not too different from the interviewee but who is also an independent, unbiased, and honest collector of data*

# Why are “friendly” and “empathetic” important?

- Because the questions you ask may
  - Require interviewees to reveal personal feelings about work situations or co-workers
  - Require interviewees to discuss work situations that are (or were) personally distressing
  - Cause the interviewee to fear reprisal, if there is a chilling effect
- A friendly, empathetic approach encourages complete answers

# Conveying a “friendly” and “empathetic” approach

- Encourage the interviewee to answer fully by
  - Using encouraging statements, such as “That’s important to know” or “Thanks, that’s useful information”
  - Using the active listening technique, such as “Let me make sure I have this right,” then paraphrase the interviewees’ response
  - Nodding to indicate understanding, with a clarifying statement, such as “Got it” or “I see”

# Why are “independent,” “unbiased,” and “honest” important?

- Because the questions you ask and your behavior will be discussed among plant personnel, which may affect how subsequent interviewees approach their interviews
- Any bias that interviewees perceive may be used to question the results of the assessment

# What is bias?

- Bias occurs when an interviewee is influenced to respond to questions in a way that does not reflect his or her true position on an issue
- Interviewees may be –
  - unaware of the bias and influenced to respond in the way that is directed by question wording,
  - aware of the bias and either deliberately answer in a way that does not reflect their opinions, or
  - refuse to answer because the question is biased

# What are the consequences of bias?

The assessment results may be  
incomplete or inaccurate



# Types of interview bias

- Bias in the design of the questions asked during the interview
- Bias introduced by nonlinguistic cues from the interviewer

# Bias in interview questions

Bias may result when –

- A question carries an implied “right” answer
- Choices between answers are unequal
- “Loaded” words are used, or
- A scaled question is unbalanced

## Example: An implied “right” answer

The question is worded to indicate a socially acceptable answer –

*Most nuclear utilities send their personnel to on benchmarking trips to identify good practices they can adopt to improve their operations. Do you believe that benchmarking is useful?*

# Example: Choices between answers are unequal

In a structured question, one or more characteristic of the possible answers makes it “stand out” from the others –

*If you are performing a task and discover that the procedure that is out-of-date, what would you do?*

- Stop work and tell your supervisor*
- Stop work, tell your supervisor, and take ownership for getting the procedure changed*
- Rely on your knowledge and experience and complete the task the way you know it should be done*

# Example: Using “loaded” words

When used in almost any context, some words nearly always evoke strong feelings with results that may be difficult to predict –

*Some of your local officials here seem to feel that this plant has the potential to cause a **nuclear holocaust...***

# A scaled question is unbalanced

The answers from which the interviewee must choose do not include the full range of possibilities –

*Some of the people we've interviewed so far have said they are dissatisfied with the management here. In your view, about what percent of the time does management "do the right thing?"*

- Now and then, usually by accident*
- Never*

# Nonlinguistic Sources of Bias

Half or more of the communication in an interview occurs without words

# Nonlinguistic Sources of Bias

Nonlinguistic sources of bias include your

- Appearance
- Verbal mannerisms
- Body language, and
- Tone of voice



# Appearance

- Dress to fit the interview situation and the interviewees
- Emphasis on not appearing too different from the interviewee

# Verbal mannerisms, body language, and tone of voice

- Can give strong indications of interviewer
  - Impatience or continuing interest,
  - approval or disapproval,
  - agreement or disagreement
- Emphasize conveying a “friendly,” “empathetic,” “unbiased,” and “unhurried” approach

# Role of humor

- Double-edged sword
  - Can establish greater rapport
  - Can be disconcerting (unexpected from the NRC)
  - Easily misinterpreted
- Don't begin the interview with a joke
- It's ok to smile or laugh at the interviewee's jokes
- Gauge the interviewee before making your own jokes

# Situations that can try the interviewer's patience

- The “hostile witness”
- The “wanderer”
- The “motor mouth

# The “hostile witness”

- Some interviewees will be uncomfortable, up to and including, hostile, as a result of being interviewed
- If an interviewee appears uncomfortable or hostile, spend some additional time asking about whether the individual has specific concerns
- If the individual is unresponsive after gentle probing, expedite the interview

# The “wanderer”

- Some interviewees have trouble focusing on the questions
- If an answer doesn't address the question, wait it out
  - don't interrupt, remain attentive
- Rephrase the question and try asking it again
- If the question isn't answered on the second try, depending on its importance, consider
  - Using active listening
  - Moving on
  - Coming back to the question later in the interview

# The “motor mouth”

- Some folks like to hear themselves talk
- Some will give you all the information you need in the answer to your first question
  - Your job then is to go back and confirm what you heard
- Consider the purpose of the interview and readjust
  - If you have time, go along with the conversational style
  - If you have specific information you need, explain your time constraints and apologize, then revise your questions to eliminate any that are open-ended

# Steps to effective SC interviews

## 1. Plan the interview

- Your purpose and the time you have to spend should determine
  - The amount of structure (proportion of closed- vs. open-ended questions)
  - Amount of time you'll spend
- Identify your interview partner and plan together
- Determine whose style is most easily adapted to the “friendly” and “empathetic” goal
- Plan to ask the safety culture questions first



# Steps to effective SC interviews

2. Prepare and practice your introduction
  - State the purpose of the interview
  - Describe how/why the interviewee was selected
  - State the topics you will cover and those of your partner
  - Cover the topics in 2.4.1 of Enclosure C (i.e., attribution, allegations, retaliation)
  - Ask the interviewee whether s/he has any questions and understands the process
  - Gauge the interviewee's level of discomfort

# Steps to effective SC interviews

## 3. Prepare and practice the interview

- Select and adapt questions from Enclosure B or develop new questions
- Think through how you will clarify or rephrase the questions, if the interviewee does not understand them
- Practice asking the questions aloud before the interview
- Obtain feedback from your interview partner or another team member
- Avoid reading the questions