

# Ask, and Ye Shall Receive

## Auditors can take a page from journalists to get the answers they need

by Natalia Scriabina, Romaine Smith Fullerton, Joel Brinkley and Kim Kierans (Courtesy ASQ)

### In 50 Words or Less:

- While technically proficient, some auditors struggle with the more human side of the auditing process.
- Auditors can apply journalistic techniques to help overcome the difficulties encountered during interviews.
- These techniques can help auditors get the answers they need without making the interviewee feel uncomfortable.

Part of what makes a good auditor is knowing where to find answers. That's as true when it comes to professional growth and development as it is when conducting a thorough audit. It's important, then, to keep an open mind when dealing with a career obstacle many auditors face, because the solution may be as close as the nearest newspaper.

Most quality management systems auditors bring an extensive technical background to their jobs, but the human side of the auditing process can sometimes be a challenge.<sup>1</sup> This can be overcome by adopting a few of the skills journalists use to fill newspapers, magazines and websites every day.

Journalists are experts in managing conversational flow and encouraging people to open up and provide vital information. Some of their techniques can serve auditors well as they navigate the sometimes frustrating quagmire of audit and assessment interviews.

**"The interview is more than a simple process of asking questions. It's a relationship, however brief, between two people."**<sup>2</sup>

A personal interview is different from any other form of information gathering. The relationship starts the moment that you, the auditor or assessor, enter the room.

There is never a second chance to make a good first impression: Did you enter with an expression of interest or suspicion? How confident did you appear? Did you introduce yourself or wait to be introduced? Did you take on the role of host or guest? Did you display enthusiasm? Your answers form the baseline of the interview relationship, and they determine the quality of the information you will obtain.

Let's begin by outlining five underlying principles and techniques journalists use to conduct productive interviews:

**1. Establish two-way trust:** Work from the assumption the interviewee wants to share information and wants to make a valuable contribution to your audit or assessment results. Be professional, open and non-judgmental; try to establish that you share a common goal. While your subject may have his or her own agenda, set aside your concerns about that for the moment and try to put the person at ease. People need to feel confident you value what they offer and believe what they say—and that they can trust you.

**2. Create a comfort zone:** An interview should be relaxed and conversational.<sup>2</sup> Social psychologists suggest we feel more comfortable around people who appear similar to us, with whom we feel familiar, who appear to

like us and whose personalities are inherently attractive.<sup>4</sup> If we try to conform to these ideas, there can be a real improvement in the quality of the interview.

Phrased a different way, people communicate more easily with those they perceive as being like them, so your goal is to almost blend your appearance with your interviewee's. Choose a neutral color of clothing and similar style of dress to what's worn in the interviewee's office, and avoid drawing attention to yourself.

By nature, people are unlikely to be open to complete strangers, so share a bit about who you are from the outset. Self-disclosure is key. Robert S. Boynton, a journalist and director of New York University's magazine journalism program, offered this advice: "How do you get people to talk who have good reasons to be resentful? I tell them about myself, and listen carefully when they talk to me. In combination, those things will usually get people to open up."<sup>5</sup>

Be prepared. Before you meet your interviewees, try to learn about their work and achievements. If you have the opportunity to meet them in their surroundings, look carefully around their offices and note photos, plaques or other memorabilia.

**3. Pay attention:** Ken Metzler, in his book *Creative Interviewing*, suggests that people who make eye contact while speaking are judged to be friendly, self-confident, mature and sincere, while non-lookers are judged as cold, pessimistic, defensive, evasive and immature.<sup>6</sup> Journalist Sally Adams frames it this way: "How much you look at your interviewee matters vitally—look, please do not stare. Whether you realize or not, it affects how much they will tell you."<sup>7</sup>

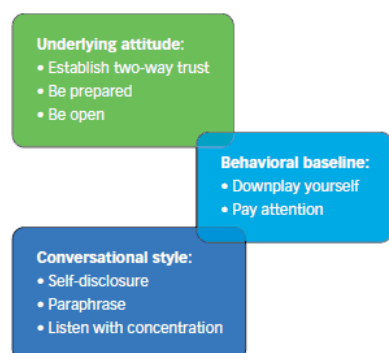
In some instances, people look away when they are being evasive, but sometimes your subject may break the visual connection because he or she is thinking in a more introspective manner. To reestablish eye contact, lean forward as you ask your next question, arrange your face in a quizzical manner or make a hand gesture to draw the person's attention back to you.

**4. Paraphrase:** During the interview, you might include an interviewee's words and phrases in your questions. By paraphrasing, you indicate to your subject that you are listening and following. This technique creates empathy, suggests you are free of preconceptions and clarifies information for others who might be involved in the interview, such as representatives of partners, customers or suppliers. When you paraphrase, you speak the other person's language, and it helps to convey shared meaning clearly.

**5. Downplay yourself:** The purpose of an interview is to gather information, not to talk about yourself. The best interviewers "concentrate on their interviewees so much that they almost become invisible," Adams suggests. "One sign of a good interviewer is that he [or she] is forgotten." Adams also recommends mirroring body language to establish rapport. "If they sit back relaxed, you sit back relaxed. If they lean forward, you lean forward ... It needs to be subtly done."<sup>8</sup>

These five tips can be used in concert and should overlap in the areas of underlying attitude, behavioral baseline and conversational style, as shown in Figure 1.

## Making the interviewee feel relaxed / FIGURE 1



## [Figure 1](#)

### **"A good interviewer is someone who listens for a living."<sup>9</sup>**

How you structure the interview—what kinds of questions you ask and the order in which you ask them—is incredibly important. Journalists generally begin with the easier and more factually based queries to make the subject feel somewhat at ease. They ask a series of open-ended questions—usually these will begin with words such as how, what and why.

Regardless of the type of question, avoid the use of any words that imply a value judgment. So instead of asking, "How good/bad was the experience?" rephrase and ask, "How was the experience?" Always save the toughest questions for the end of the interview; if you have laid a solid foundation with your interviewee, he or she will be more cooperative, and you will have a better chance of gaining the information you need.

The International Organization for Standardization and the International Accreditation Forum suggest that the key elements of a value-added audit include identifying problems, spotting opportunities for improvements and identifying possible areas of risk.<sup>10</sup> None of this information will be readily available to you, and you must remind yourself that most interviewees will have reservations when talking about such material.

Once you have outlined for yourself the order in which you plan to pose your queries, you can consider the following five types of questions, which may help remove barriers and encourage your subject to speak more openly about problems and risks:

**1. Split questions:** With this method, the uncomfortable question is divided into separate, disconnected questions. The uncomfortable questions should be avoided because they break the flow of the interview. Because the goal is to gather information, use the split question to garner material while maintaining trust.

Consider the following scenario: You ask the uncomfortable question, "This technology was changed. Were you trained in the new one?" The interviewee answers "No," and for the rest of the interview, the interviewee is nervous, thinking about the potentially negative consequences of this reply. Instead, split the question:

1. When was the technology changed? (neutral and open-ended)
2. How did the change happen? (neutral and open-ended)
3. Are there any records of the changeover? (neutral, closed question that requires a follow-up question)
4. Is there any relevant record of training? (neutral, closed question that requires a follow-up question)

Now you can obtain the required information and avoid irritating the interviewee.

**2. Balanced questions:** With the balanced question method, the uncomfortable question is prefaced with a positive comment. This emphasizes that there are plenty of good results to counterbalance minor issues. Balanced questions soften difficult ones when it is impossible to split the question into several parts. They change the auditor's outlook from an investigative to a contemplative one.

Working from the assumption that everything has at least two sides, start with the positive and then move to the problem area. For example, "This is a thoroughly developed plan. How was it reviewed?"

**3. Stupid questions:** In the news business, there is no such thing as a stupid question. As journalist Gail Sedorkin says, this is because these questions "can work very well, particularly in getting the interviewee to explain something in simpler terms and to reveal more information."<sup>11</sup>

Stupid questions start with a preface such as, "I can't understand this," or "Can you clarify this?" Questions that follow the preface should be very short and simple, such as, "Why was it selected?" or "How was it used?"

**4. Protected questions:** With the protected question method, build questions on the circumstances of a situation.

For example, instead of asking, "Why did you miss the deadlines that were established by stakeholders?" frame the question as, "How were deadlines determined?" Or, instead of asking, "Why do you use incomplete requirements?" try, "How do customers provide you with requirements?"

Reframing the questions creates a nonthreatening environment in which the interviewee can give information about problems, challenges and concerns. This information helps reveal process breakdowns and missing links within the scope of the audit or assessment.

**5. Loyal questions:** The loyal questions method builds on questions such as, "How do you cope with this?" Using this approach, you can change a potentially threatening question into a benign one:

- Threatening: "Why don't you keep evidence of ...?"
- Nonthreatening: "One of the toughest jobs is to keep all of this evidence. Tell me more."
- Threatening: "Why is your review log half empty?"
- Nonthreatening: "Is it a manageable task to maintain so many review comments?"

This style of question asks you to consider the situation from the interviewee's perspective. Attentive listening, as well as your sincere desire to understand his or her position, is generously rewarded, and the interviewee will start to see you as a partner instead of an examiner.

Figure 2 outlines when and how these five types of questions can be used.

### Five types of questions / FIGURE 2

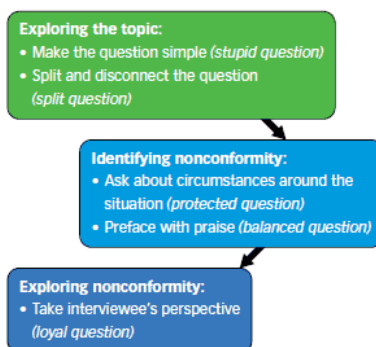


Figure 2

**"It's income, not privacy, that often makes a source evasive."**<sup>12</sup>

People avoid answering questions for a variety of reasons. Perhaps they are nervous, they misunderstand the questions or don't know the answer, or they could be trying to avoid revealing something unpleasant. Along with being a keen listener, a good interviewer must also consider the subject's speaking tone and body language.

When someone looks away, moves around, coughs or changes voice pitch, it can mean an interviewee is evading your question. Here are five types of evasive replies and some tactics auditors and assessors can use to get the information they seek:

**1. Bridging replies:** Interviewees are often tempted to speak about what interests them rather than providing the specific requested information. Subconsciously, they create a bridge between the question and topics about which they want to talk.

In this scenario, the interviewee gives short answers, such as "yes," "certainly" and "probably" before moving on to some larger topic he or she wants to discuss. After giving a bridged reply, your subject may feel the question is fully covered.

To counter this situation, note that the question wasn't properly answered. Ask a loop-and-circle question, neatly returning to points you want to have answered.<sup>13</sup> Questions of this type can be started with one of the following phrases:

- "That's great information, but first I would like to clear up ..."
- "Impressive, but what I really want to know is ..."

**2. Misunderstood replies:** The interviewee finds something unclear in your question and asks for an explanation. For example, "How does this question pertain to what we are discussing? Can you elaborate?" or "What do you mean by inspection?"

In extreme scenarios, the interviewee wants to clarify more things, and the roles between an auditor or assessor and an interviewee reverse. But it's very important to stay away from explanations when you receive a misunderstood reply. If you start explaining, you lose valuable time and control over the interview.

Instead of an explanation, ask another question using different words, or structure the sentence or level of detail in a different way. Start your next question with, "I am sorry for not being clear. What I wanted to ask was ..."

**3. "As I said before" replies:** In some cases, people believe your question has already been answered. Replies of this kind usually combine a phrase such as, "As I said," and add very brief information. For example, "We review it monthly in the manner I described before."

The fact that the answer was or wasn't given previously doesn't matter. What matters is you don't have the answer. Stay calm and don't move to the next question until you are satisfied with the answer to this one.

Acknowledge the given reply and then split your original question into a set of smaller ones. The small questions can be especially helpful if they are requests for facts and data. For example, "Right. Can you show me the review records?" or "Agreed. Who were the participants of the review?"

**4. Yes-and-no replies:** In this scenario, the interviewee gives answers such as "yes," "no," "occasionally," "in some cases" or references a procedure. For some people, this pattern is just a natural way of talking, but the concern is that the interviewee's attention may not be fully on the interview.

Try to use open-ended questions (beginning with what, how and why) to which a person can't reply with a single word. In some instances, you might try using the power of silence, but be careful with this tactic. Use it judiciously.

While silence can make people uncomfortable, and they will speak to fill it, it can seem like a hostile act on the part of the interviewer. To use this technique effectively, look at the person and smile. If this isn't successful, ask for an example or say you do not really understand. That way, the onus is on your subject to speak.

**5. Waffled replies:** In this scenario, interviewees answer the question by providing too much information, usually because they are nervous. As a signal to the interviewee, raise a finger and your head just enough that it will impede the flow of conversation. Try reverting to bridging and say, "That's very interesting, but what I want to know is ...". Or, after an interruption, ask easy yes-and-no questions.

**"Ultimately, by looking for chances to practice doing interviews in nonthreatening settings, accepting small failures as part of the learning curve and building up your skills to observe, record and participate in conversations, you will be able to approach interview settings with less anxiety."**<sup>14</sup>

While the jobs of a journalist and an auditor are not identical, both are trying to procure valuable information from sometimes reticent sources. The craft of journalism is more than 300 years old, and there is much auditors can learn from those who have perfected the art of interviewing.

The best interviews do not just happen. They are the result of careful and conscientious preparation by the interviewer. Auditors must spend a great deal of time learning about the organization, the employees and the processes involved before asking the first question. Once the background material is collected, spend time organizing your questions into a coherent outline that follows some or all of the earlier suggestions.

Make time to consider which questions you will use to open the discussion, which ones will flesh out the details and which ones will extract material from an evasive subject. During the interview, listen actively to seek clarity and detail in a neutral, nonthreatening manner.

The best way to improve your interview skills is to practice—the more opportunities you have to ask questions, the better you will become at procuring the information you seek.

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## References and Note

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**Natalia Scriabina** is managing director of the Quality Professionals' Resource Center in Waterloo, Ontario. She earned a master's degree in engineering sciences from the National Technical University of Ukraine. Scriabina is an ASQ member and author of *Quality Management Basics* (Interregional Academy of Personnel Management, 2000).

**Romayne Smith Fullerton**, Ph.D., is an associate journalism professor at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. She is also director of communications at the Quality Professionals' Resource Center.

**Joel Brinkley** is a journalism professor at Stanford University in California following a 23-year career at the New York Times. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Brinkley has authored several books, including *U.S. vs. Microsoft* (McGraw Hill, 2001).

**Kim Kierans** is a professor and the director of the school of journalism at the University of King's College in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She earned a master's degree in Atlantic Canada studies from St. Mary's University in Halifax.