

Ask the Expert

Q: What tool will help our managers develop stories out of client experiences, in order to express how we make the client feel?



A: The best means that I know of for eliciting stories is "Behavioral Event Interviewing" (BEI), a technique designed for interviewing job candidates but one that works equally well for pulling stories out of people whatever the circumstances.

The standard methodology for BEI dates back to a research technique developed by psychologist John Flanagan during World War II. Flanagan pioneered the critical-incident method of personnel selection.

In an early application of this technique, he asked bomber-crew members to describe their actions, thoughts and feelings during in-flight events. Flanagan then analyzed whether personal characteristics of bomber crews correlated with casualty rates. He found there was indeed a linkage.

Delving deep

Psychologist David McClelland went on to adapt the critical-incident method to study management behavior. Through a series of in-depth interviews with outstanding and average performers, McClelland and his colleagues sought to reveal the underlying factors that make someone successful in a job.

Managers can use the same basic approach to elicit stories from colleagues. Here's the typical line of questioning:

- Ask the person to recall an event, such as a time when a client seemed particularly pleased with an outcome.
- Ask for a 30-second overview of the story – how the situation began, what transpired and how it concluded – so you know where the story is heading.
- Have the person recall the story from the beginning.

- Probe to determine the person's thoughts, feelings and actions. For example, you might ask: "What was going through your mind when that happened?" "How were you feeling at that point." "Do you recall what you said? What did the other person say?"
- Keep the story moving along by asking, "So, what happened next?"
- Be sure to ask how the story ended.
- Don't ask "why" someone did something. It can put people on the defensive and encourage them to supply a rationale response when perhaps the reason for their action wasn't all that rationale. Instead, ask what they were thinking and feeling at the time – this gets at the same information, but in a neutral manner.

With some practice using this technique, managers can become adept at eliciting stories, going far beyond "just the facts" to the thoughts and emotions surrounding an event.

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