The Art of Elicitation

Elicitation is the acquisition of information by a person who does not disclose the real intent of the interview or casual conversation. Its purpose is to collect sensitive information about an organization and/or personal information regarding an individual target. The elicitor controls and steers the conversation to topics which he wishes to collect upon.

Here are 11 of the most successful elicitation techniques:

1. **Closed versus Open Questioning:** Closed questions are those which typically seek a very short response such as a “yes” or “no." For example: Question: Does your current position require you to travel overseas? Response: Yes, I travel periodically for my job.

   Open questions are asked in such a way to elicit responses that will go beyond a few short words. They will require the target to go into detail. Example: Question: What would you say are your favorite and least favorite overseas places that you have had to travel for your job? Response: My favorite is travel to Turkey. I love the food and the Turkish people. It also allows me to practice my Turkish. My least favorite are trips to China. It takes so much longer to get there. Unfortunately, I don’t speak any Chinese and I really have not had any opportunity to sight see. I spend all my time in meetings or at the hotel.

2. **Flattery:** We all love to be complimented, whether on our clothing, appearance, professional success or our family.

   Example: Question: Wow, you appear to have progressed very well in your position and could serve as a great inspiration for those just getting started in this profession. What would you say were your main keys to success? Response: Oh, you are so kind. I would like to attribute it all to my own efforts. However, I was very lucky to work several years under the tutelage of Mr. Brian Williams before he moved onto GeneralmElectric as CEO. He is brilliant.

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3. Exploit their Instinct to Complain: Everyone has pent up frustrations whether they be with their co-workers, bosses or significant others. They will unlikely go directly to their boss and tell him what an idiot he is. However, they will welcome a release. If probed, they are likely to share their frustrations with someone who they believe they can trust not to disclose their comments. Question: What are some of the frustrating challenges you have when working with your senior management? Response: I generally get along with everyone, except with my direct supervisor. She seems to take direct personal credit for any success by our unit and shifts blame to her subordinates for any failures. I'm sort of tired of making her look good.

4. Word Repetition: Here the elicitor will repeat back the same word or phrase that the target has stated. It will usually create a need by the target to provide further elaboration. Target: "Last year our sales were down by 54 percent." Elicitor: "Down 54 percent?" Target: "Yes, this is very unusual after 6 straight years of strong growth and is largely attributable to the roll out of a similar product by Chinese firm Huawei.

5. Quotation of Reported Facts: Here the elicitor is drawing upon something which was already reported somewhere in the press. Elicitor: "I read in the Wall Street Journal that several of the largest U.S. banks were having difficulty in complying with the new U.S. Treasury reporting requirements identifying offshore accounts held on behalf of their customers." Response: "Yes. As you can imagine, confidentiality for our clients is a delicate matter. If we cannot ensure confidentiality, some of the clients will look to other financial institutions, which tend to circumvent these requirements."

6. Naiveté: Here the elicitor draws upon something he has experienced or learned about and expresses a lack of understanding. It encourages the target to be helpful as a mentor to the elicitor on the subject. Example: Elicitor: "I just don't understand how trade policy decisions like raising tariffs on imported Chinese goods will help your company increase its sales in the domestic market."

7. Criticism: Here the elicitor will criticize something on which the target will have an opinion. It will allow for the target to share the same criticism or to provide his own view which might serve as insight. Elicitor: The company's extensive research and development activities into self-driven vehicles is an absolute waste of resources. This will never be successful." Target: "Actually, they have conducted a lot of surveys on this topic. The survey results tend to indicate that most people,

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especially those between the ages of 18-35, acknowledge that they would be open to utilizing this technology as long as certain safety standards are met."

8. Feigned or Real Disbelief: While somewhat similar to the quotation of reported facts, here the elicitor will express dismay or disbelief that the reported information is true in an attempt to get the target to explain that it is true and why. Elicitor: "There is no way that the firm's latest acquisition of Alliance Technologies will be profitable." Target: "Actually, it does not appear profitable if we only look at the balance sheets. However, the real goal is to eliminate one of the biggest competitors in our market."

9. Purposefully Erroneous Statement: Here the elicitor will make up a false statement and attribute it to something that he may have heard or read. The target will usually take the opportunity to set the record straight. Elicitor: I heard a news commentator state yesterday that United Airlines was having severe financial difficulty and was in the process of filing for chapter 7 bankruptcy." You must have heard something wrong. This is impossible. United is very healthy financially. In fact, they just placed an order last week for an additional 35 aircraft from Boeing."

10. Talk about yourself and turn it around: This is exceptionally useful when trying to obtain basic information from someone who the elicitor has just met. Elicitor: "I can't wait to get back home. I have already missed my son's last two soccer games and my daughter's piano recital. And you, do you have kids?" Target: "Oh yes, I have two boys and one girl." Elicitor: "Kids are great. How old are they?" (slide with text)

11. "My friend John": Here the elicitor will make up a story that he heard. He will attribute it to a friend or family member who ostensibly made the comment. Elicitor: My brother-in-law John works as a researcher for Magnum Defense Industries. He says that his company recently adopted many intrusive policies affecting their employees. They must receive prior authorization before travelling overseas, they have to report all their foreign contacts, they are subject to random searches of their briefcases and handbags. Is this normal in your industry? Target: It varies from company to company. We don't require employees to obtain approval prior to travel. However, they must file a report after returning from such a trip. It includes reporting any foreign contacts made with whom you plan to have a sustained relationship."

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Note: Additional considerations include choice of elicitation techniques, choice of venue, and whether or not information is considered proprietary. While very effective, no technique should be overused. It is best for the elicitor to utilize a mix of techniques during a conversation in order to avoid any suspicion on the part of the target.

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