Critical Decision-Making Among Interrogators: A Practitioner’s Guide

The purpose of this guidebook is to characterize interrogator and interviewer decision-making across military and law enforcement domains. To gather this information, several groups of military interrogators and law enforcement agents were provided with a simulated interrogation and asked to provide their insights and commentary as they viewed the simulation. Other groups of military interrogators and law enforcement agents were asked to reflect on difficult interrogations they had conducted and to answer questions about their decisions at critical points within those interrogations. Their responses are summarized here, with a focus on “best practices” for practitioners.

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Introduction

Military and law enforcement personnel who attempt to elicit information from uncooperative subjects must make decisions in dynamic, time-pressured, ambiguous situations characterized by uncertainty, competing goals, stress, and high stakes. Making decisions in such conditions requires the simultaneous processing and interpretation of information, story building, strategizing, goal setting, and action choice selection. Much is known about the tactics and strategies interrogators and interviewers use. However, this knowledge provides minimal insight into the complex cognitive processes that warfighters and crime fighters engage in to elicit the vital information necessary to defeat enemies and lock away criminals. By understanding these cognitive processes, interrogators and interviewers can gain insights that inform training and practice.

The purpose of this guidebook is to characterize interrogator and interviewer decision-making across military and law enforcement domains. To gather this information, military interrogators and law enforcement agents (see Table 1) participated in Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA) interviews designed specifically to elicit information about the cognitive complexities present in dynamic decision-making environments (see sidebar). The data from these interviews provide insights into the decision requirements, strategies, and challenges present in the interrogation room. Several quotes from interview participants are provided throughout this guidebook.

Table 1. Participant Sample

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Avg. Yrs. Experience</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Military Interrogator</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.66</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Federal Investigator</td>
<td>18</td>
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The objectives of this guidebook are to:

- Present the decision requirements of military and law enforcement personnel who interview and interrogate detainees and criminal suspects in operational environments.
- Identify the key cognitive factors and environmental characteristics that facilitate optimal decision making and information elicitation.
- Provide practical information about the decision strategies and challenges present during key phases of interrogation and interview sessions.

Interviewing and interrogation take many forms and have many purposes in military and law enforcement contexts. Rather than focus on one specific specialization, this guidebook presents information applicable across military branches and law enforcement agencies and departments. Because the research sample was diverse, participants used diverse terms to describe their duties.

Data Collection Methods

Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA) consists of a family of tools used to elicit the experiences, cognitive demands, and skill requirements for a specific task or domain. CTA uncovers the cues, expectancies, goals, strategies, and typical actions taken by domain experts. Eliciting this information provides researchers and practitioners with the detailed knowledge necessary to develop research, create training, and shape tactics, techniques, and procedures in a way that matches domain decision requirements.
as interrogators, investigative interviewers, etc. For clarity, this guidebook uses standardized terms that encompass a broader meaning than is typically used by practitioners in each individual field. See sidebar for guidebook terminology.

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**Information:** Any information that interviewers and interrogators may seek from another human being. This can include alibis, confessions, admissions, denials, intelligence that is either actionable or not actionable, and information about events, persons, locations, etc.

**Interviewer:** The person collecting information, or the receiver of information.

**Subject:** The person possessing information sought by the interviewer. This includes persons who are detained in the custody of military or law enforcement personnel and persons not detained, such as sources, informants, or persons of interest who are free to remove themselves from the interaction at any time.

**Interview:** The process of engaging another human being to gather some type of information. This can include screenings, interviews, debriefings, interrogations, etc.

**Tactics:** The various strategies, techniques, and approaches that interviewers use to gather information. This can include general information gathering techniques and established approaches, such as those specified in the U.S. Army Field Manual 2-22.3 (Headquarters; Department of the Army, 2006).¹

Interviewer Decision Making

At the highest level, the decision-making processes of interviewers are no different from those of decision makers in other time-pressed domains. Decision makers must use context and cues to assess situations, achieve an adequate understanding of the situation (situational awareness), make a decision, take an action, and then reassess and start cycle over (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Basic decision process.](image)

Throughout this decision process, interviewers make subtle perceptual judgments, assess complex and changing information, form assumptions, solve problems, detect anomalies, and engage in real-time planning. Interviewers must make decisions as interviews unfold, which requires them to manage attention, sort and filter information, and make quick decisions without considering all options. These activities place heavy cognitive demands on interviewers, but as interviewers gain experience they develop the decision-making skills that enable them to manage these demands and more efficiently and effectively assess the situation and take actions that lead to the elicitation of critical information.

Interviewers have domain-specific decision requirements, strategies, and challenges at each phase of the decision process that enables them to engage these complex decision processes. The remainder of this guidebook describes the decision requirements, strategies, and challenges present when assessing situations and when making decisions and taking actions during interviews. Tips for developing expertise are at the end of this guidebook.
Situation Assessment

To facilitate situation assessment, interviewers monitor subjects’ behaviors and verbal responses while also monitoring their own behaviors and managing information flow. While managing information, interviewers assess information relevance and credibility. They also incorporate contextual cues and background information into their interpretations of information. While engaged in this continual monitoring process, interviewers gather and interpret additional information until they acquire enough understanding to make a decision (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Situation assessment process.](image)

Experience influences how interviewers assess situations and interpret information. Interviewers leverage past experiences to process the range of information revealed during interviews. They map incomplete information to existing knowledge and interpret the situation by incorporating a variety of factors.

“The cultural understanding, the language, it all plays a role. It’s never one thing, it’s all a combination of many things that play together, and I come to a decision. I never rely on one thing, some things are more heavily dependent or are more obvious, but it’s always a combination of the three things that you mentioned: the body language, the culture, and your gut feeling or experience from doing so many [interviews].”

Interview Context

In addition to experience, several contextual factors influence interviewer assessments. External elements such as the physical setting, time, and background information play a role in how interviewers assess incoming information and decide which actions to take.
Setting: Includes elements both within and outside the interviewer’s control, such as the geographical location of the interview, the room layout, temperature, time of day, etc.

- **Impact on Subject:** Influences subject comfort levels, demeanor, and responses.
- **Impact on Interviewer:** Interviewers often manipulate setting to elicit information.

Time: Time is a constraint in most interviews, either because interviewers have limited time with the subject or because information collection is time-critical. Time requirements are a significant consideration in the decision process.

- **Impact on Subject:** If subjects realize that interviewers have a limited amount of time, they may attempt to use this constraint to their advantage.
- **Impact on Interviewer:** Lack of time influences how much information interviewers seek and they ways in which they elicit information. They make strategic use of time constraints and seek to leverage time pressure as a way to gain subject cooperation.

Background Information: Includes case-specific information such as subjects’ biographical data, connections with individuals and organizations, actions at time of capture, and previous interview interactions. It also includes general information such as criminal and terrorist activities in the area, political climate, economic health, cultural information and social customs, historical trends.

- **Impact on Subject:** Shapes motivations, attitudes, willingness to cooperate.
- **Impact on Interviewer:** Influences initial actions and shapes expectations and perceptions of subjects.

Other Personnel. Interviewers often work with teammates, such as other interviewers, analysts, and interpreters.

- **Impact on Subject:** The presence of an interpreter may change the dynamic with the interviewer and provide a way for subjects to convey cultural information.
- **Impact on Interviewer:** Analysts may improve interviewers’ situation awareness. Interpreters provide valuable language and cultural interpretation. Another interviewer may ease cognitive load by taking notes or filling gaps in follow up questions.

Monitor Subject

Interviewers factor subject background and characteristics such as age, culture, family history, organizational and religious affiliation, education level, and community status into their assessments. In addition, interviewers continually monitor what subjects say and how they say it, how they present themselves, and how their behaviors change over time. This information offers clues to their emotional states, motivations, and willingness to engage with interviewers.

“I had a general psychological review of him, based on intelligence, not on meeting him. The review was spot on. I knew this because of his statements. He made a lot of statements about his financial problems. His body language when talking about religion cued me that he didn’t know much about religion. He didn’t know basic stuff. He didn’t know why he chose his path beyond money.”
Strategies for Monitoring Subjects

Monitor Verbal Behavior

Interviewers rely on what subjects say and how they say it to make assessments. They use vocal behavior to assess subjects’ emotional states and cooperation levels and to judge the effectiveness of their own actions and demeanor.

“You started to see a difference in his tone of his voice as well as the stress level in his voice, the change from when he was angry to more of a defeated kind of a stress level.”

Monitor Body Language

Interviewers pay attention to the subject’s eye contact, posture, breathing rate, perspiration, face flushing, fidgeting, and grooming behaviors. While these behaviors are not foolproof indicators of any particular attitude or thought process, they can indicate a change in state, for instance from cooperative to angry or relaxed to tense. Interviewers monitor these non-verbal behaviors so they can leverage changes in state to gain information or cooperation.

Determine Tactics

A key reason to monitor subject behavior is to determine which tactics to use to elicit critical information. Interviewers also monitor subject behavior after they try a tactic to judge effectiveness.

“Oh this guy, we had to use all of these different things on him. This was not a guy [on whom] you used the same thing every single time. You kind of had to pick and choose, based on his emotional state at the time, which [tactic] would be better for you to utilize to get him to cooperate.”

Challenges when Monitoring Subjects

Interviewers convey interest when they allow subjects to articulate their thoughts and tell their stories. Frequent interruptions and accusatorial comments can cause subjects to stop talking and cooperating.

“So you shut them down early, and you’re going to be sitting there for four hours reading a book because they’re not going to tell you anything.”

Interviewers sometimes focus on only one or a few select behaviors to assess subjects, which may lead them to miss important cues. Constellations of cues displayed by subjects provide a more holistic view that enables interviewers to better guide information elicitation and fill in more gaps in their assessments.
Monitor Self

Just as interviewers monitor subjects, subjects monitor interviewers. Subjects attempt to determine if interviewers believe their stories, empathize with them, and respect them. Subjects attempt to read interviewer emotions through their verbal and nonverbal language. They also look for signs of insincerity, deception, and cooperation. Because of this, interviewers must monitor their tone of voice, their style of questioning, and their body language to assess how their behaviors influence subjects.

Interviewers consciously manipulate their own behaviors to present personas that are complementary to subjects’ personalities and current emotional states. For instance, some subjects prefer formal or professional interactions, while others are outgoing and informal. Interviewers try to adapt to these tendencies even when their projected persona is different from their usual personality.

“I’m more of a gregarious person; I use humor to lighten serious moments. It was completely against my personality, but I learned very quickly, that for him I could not make jokes.”

Strategies for Monitoring Self

Keep Emotions in Check

Interviewers try to control their anger and frustration or they risk losing control of the interview, damaging rapport, and breaking lines of communication. Subjects may deliberately try to elicit emotional responses in interviewers as a way to distract interviewers and discontinue conversations.

“There was definitely a failure on my part. I let them create an emotional response in me…And then, I took it on a personal level and didn’t realize until afterwards… I [thought], ‘You have to watch this. I’m the one trying to evoke emotional responses and he evoked an emotional response in me.’”

Sometimes interviewers avoid conveying any emotions by controlling their facial expressions, body language, and speech. This tactic is useful when interviewers are trying to maintain a high degree of control over the interview or when they want to cut off subjects’ attempts to manipulate interviewers’ emotions.

“No matter how upset I was or frustrated, I think you just have to be a good actor and not show [emotion] because they pick up on that.”

Challenges when Monitoring Self

In adversarial interactions, it may be difficult for interviewers to present themselves as sympathetic or caring. Interviewers must overcome their dislike and hostility toward subjects to convey sympathy and friendship. To do this, interviewers often search for one commonality that they truly have with subjects, such as children, travel, or sports. When interviewers try to act in a
way that is too different from their natural personality, subjects are less likely to feel trust, be receptive to rapport, or share information.

“So, I’m having this conversation with the guy and I’m thinking, “He’s going to look at me and be like, ‘there’s no way THAT guy knows what the hell he’s talking about.’ And the whole time I remember thinking that the spotlight was doubled on how inauthentic I was being at that moment.”

**Manage Information**

To manage information received during interviews, interviewers assess information relevance and credibility, and incorporate the information into the bigger picture. Managing all the information that flows during interviews requires interviewers to sort and prioritize information so they can determine what information to seek next and which tactics to apply. They do this as subjects reveal additional pieces of information and while managing the other facets of the interview.

**Strategies for Managing Information**

**Fill in the Story**

Interviewers attempt to make sense of subjects’ stories by filling in pieces of information as the interview progresses. In their initial assessments of subjects’ stories, interviewers must identify which pieces of information are relevant to the overall story and worthy of follow-up. They also must identify gaps and incongruous information. While subjects tell their stories, interviewers evaluate credibility and identify contradictions. Interviewers can leverage contradictions and incongruous information when confronting subjects about their lies or when increasing pressure on subjects to reveal information.

“I remember thinking that the details don’t make any sense, or in the timeline, that the times don’t make any sense. Or, it was the bigger gaps in the day, like, ‘woke up and went to work, got home.’ I was like, ‘well, what the hell did you do all day?’”

**Strategic Information Presentation**

Interviewers present information to subjects strategically in an attempt to surprise subjects, gauge their responses, confront them about their lies, and elicit more information. Interviewers often give the impression that they have more information and know more about subjects than they actually do.

Subjects tend to assume that interviewers have a greater access to information and more knowledge about subjects’ activities and plans. Interviewers can leverage this assumption to gain information, for instance by convincing a subject to talk because the interviewer already knows everything.
Challenges in Managing Information

Interviewers must manage information strategically by recognizing when to reveal or withhold information, or when to pursue specific information.

“Like ‘The missiles, where did they come from? Where were they going? Who were you taking them to?...’ Jumping into that too quickly gave [the subject] that alert... I self-assessed and said, ‘You know, you didn’t really plan out how you were going to be smoother about doing this.’”

Managing a significant amount of information while monitoring subjects’ behaviors and self-presentation strains interviewers’ cognitive resources. Interviewers sometimes take actions that might reduce cognitive load, such as taking notes or breaks.

“The problem is you have so much stuff going on in the booth, trying to read the guy and figure out where he’s coming from. You’ve got the basic techniques and you can maybe apply one or two techniques a session. You’re trying to figure out ‘is this guy lying to me?’ You’ve got so much going on.”
Decision Making and Actions

Interviewers reach points during interviews where they have enough information to achieve enough situational awareness that they can make targeted decisions about which actions to take (see Figure 3). Some decisions are instantaneous, while others require further information gathering and assessment. Information seeking is, itself, a decision; interviewers must decide to seek more information or determine they have enough information to move onto other activities.

While making decisions and implementing actions, interviewers continue to assess the evolving situation. Often, interviewers proceed with new courses of action even if they are uncertain about the situation or if information is missing or ambiguous. In these instances, they may test out various courses of action to determine which yields desired results. Because interviewers’ actions influence the situation, as do subjects’ actions, interviewers must adapt their interpretations and remain flexible in their action choices.

Three main types of decision interviewers make involve choosing:

1) Strategies aimed at building rapport.
2) Strategies aimed at eliciting general information.
3) Tactics aimed at gathering critical information.

Each of these decisions is shaped by different goals (see Figure 3). These goals, along with interviewers’ current interpretation of the situation, influence their action choices and their implementation of the actions. During rapport building, information gathering, and tactic application, interviewers must decide:

- How to present themselves.
- What information to focus on.
- Which questions to ask and how to ask them.
- When to increase pressure.
- What information to disclose.
Interviewer expectations and assumptions influence their interpretations of information, decisions, and action choices. As interviewers gain an understanding of subjects, they identify leverage points that guide them to new courses of action.

Expectations. Based on experience, interviewers have expectations about “typical” subjects and interviews, but they try to be open to new and unusual information and adapt their interpretations to accommodate deviations from typical situations. If interviewers rely solely on previous experiences without adjusting their interpretations to incoming information, they risk faulty assessments that lead to less optimal decisions.

Assumptions. Interviewers make assumptions about subjects based on background information and on the information presented during the interview. Assumptions stem from experiences and the need to make quick assessments even when facing a great deal of uncertainty. Interviewers must act on assumptions while continuing to seek information so they can keep information flowing from subjects. Sometimes interviewers continue to act on assumptions even after gathering information that contradicts these assumptions.

“They assume that if he’s a father, he’s going to miss his kids, and they’ll stress that…They’ll [repeat], ‘Oh, you need to get back to your family, you need to get back to your family, you’re a good father, you’re a good father,’ and [the subject] gets tired of hearing that. Like, ‘who cares?’ So it ends up being a waste of time.”

“I can assume that he doesn't want to go to jail for a long time, but that’d be a dangerous assumption if I go for a full-on, hard sell approach and say, ‘You’re going to jail,’ and he’s like, ‘Thank you, gosh, I don’t want to go [home].’”

Leverage Points. As interviewers learn more about subjects’ personalities, motivations, and backgrounds, they identify information they can leverage when applying tactics. Interviewers also seek to leverage subject comments about non-pertinent information and fortuitous events in the environment.

“He was trying to sell that he was ‘the bomb,’ and the reality is that through our seeking cooperation and acting very interested and thinking, “Wow, you’re the greatest thing since sliced bread, please tell me more!” He admitted to all the evidence of the crime that we needed.”

“So, what ended up actually, literally, conquering his fear was catching those dudes…and I was able to show him, ‘Hey, we caught these guys and you have nothing to worry about, so tell me everything.’”

Rapport Building

Building rapport is a powerful way increase subject cooperation. Rapport builds trust and opens lines of communication. When building rapport, interviewers convey respect, empathy, and interest in subjects’ lives and circumstances. Subjects are often surprised to find interviewers treating them humanely and with respect. Many times, subjects bond with the interviewer to the
point of feeling affinity and friendship.

“I didn’t talk about anything I was interested in, and tried to direct [the conversation] to this guy’s background… talk about hopes and dreams. It’s where I got him talking in general. It was a number of days in, and he viewed me as sort of a friend, at least that’s what he told me.”

In addition to increasing cooperation and gaining compliance, interviewers engage in rapport building to establish common ground and to assess baseline behavior. Common ground establishes mutual goals between two people during an interaction. Interviewers establish common ground by setting ground rules, establishing authority, and creating a climate of respect. The most typical ground rule is that the subject and interviewer will be honest with one another. Interviewers establish their authority while conveying that they will treat the subject with respect and they expect the same treatment in return. Interviewers also try to convince the subject that they are working together toward mutual goals rather than as opponents.

Rapport building in custodial settings is unique because interviewers use rapport techniques for more than opening lines of communication. They also use rapport as a method for choosing tactics aimed at gathering critical information. During initial relationship building, interviewers observe subjects as they discuss innocuous topics in an attempt to identify baseline behaviors. Knowing baseline behaviors allows interviewers to detect deviations from baseline, which they might interpret as increased stress or shifts in levels of cooperation.

**Strategies for Building Rapport**

**Establish Tone**

A key component of rapport building is establishing the tone of the conversation. Interviewers tend to choose a tone that fosters the relationships, most often starting with a kind and friendly tone but sometimes moving to a firmer tone based on their assessment of the subject.

“How do you establish rapport? Be nice. Every interview I ever conducted, I was just trying to be very nice, validate the person, and treat them as human beings.”

“If you start nice it’s hard to turn mean, and if you start mean, it’s hard to turn nice. It just comes off awkward. But, if you start neutral, you can go either direction, depending on where you need to go.”

**Shape Subjects’ Thinking and Behavior**

Once interviewers have developed rapport with subjects, they can shape subjects’ thinking and behavior during the interview. This involves motivating subjects to tell the truth and convincing them that their best course of action is to talk about their misdeeds.

“And we’ve convinced him, like a car salesman, that’s what he wants… The thought that’s in his head is he’s going to help me… So I’ve put in his head subconsciously,
‘you’re here to help me today.’ I’m not here to help him, because then it turns into this, ‘Well, what can you do for me’ kind of a thing.”

**Challenges to Building Rapport**

Once rapport is lost with a subject, it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to get it back. Several actions can result in a loss of rapport. For instance, if the subject detects that the interviewer is not conveying genuine empathy there is a chance the subject will refuse to talk anymore. Another interaction that can degrade relationship building is using an aggressive approach at the wrong time.

“So it was basically the rapport part where he was cooperating, he was talking. But once we got into the details as to ‘how much money were you getting paid?’ And into specifics, he was just not saying anything at that point.”

Often interviewers wait to confront subjects about admissions or lies until the subjects have revealed enough information. Yelling at the subject or accusing often results in the loss of rapport and shuts lines of communication.

“And that’s something that you see all the time, especially very brand new interrogators. When they see a lie, they’ll jump on it, ‘why are you lying to me??’ And they’ll risk any rapport that they might have because nobody likes being called a liar.”

**Information Seeking**

Interviewers gain valuable information while engaging in rapport building activities even if that is not their main objective. Interviewers make decisions to seek information to fill gaps in knowledge and to increase understanding. A key goal during information gathering is to identify the motivations that shape subjects’ thinking and drives their behaviors. Understanding motivation helps interviewers gain cooperation, and select and apply tactics. Interviewers often uncover motivations while seeking seemingly non-pertinent information.

“[I would be] trying to keep things as neutral as possible and give the detainee as much rope as he gives himself and then try and assess as much as possible for his motivations.”

“So I’m still going to try and play that professional role in just collecting what seems like non-pertinent information because it’s not the stuff they want to collect on, but it’s things that are of interest and things that lead to motivations for the detainee.”

**Strategies for Information Seeking**

Interviewers use rapport and relationship building to elicit the information that helps them understand the subject, assess credibility, and support their use of particular tactics. They also ask direct questions and control questions to establish baselines and elicit information they can use strategically during the interview. Interviewers may also redirect the conversation to avoid
approaching potentially confrontational or critical conversations before they have adequately established rapport.

_Dealing with Deception_

Interviewers often realize subjects are being deceptive, but rather than confront subjects with their lies immediately, they often simply note the lie and move on to other topics. This keeps lines of communication open until interviewers decide to confront the subject. To assess deception, interviewers look for deviations from baseline behavior. They also ask control questions, which are questions that have verifiable answers, to ascertain truthful behaviors and test if subjects are lying.

“I don’t want to insult him by telling him, ‘Hey, I think you’re going to lie to me.’ I know he is, and it doesn’t bother me.”

_Challenges when Seeking Information_

Interviewers who talk too much do not give subjects the opportunity to divulge information.

“And I just looked at him because when you talk with people, a lot of young interrogators love hearing themselves talk… I love hearing myself talk… but you’re not collecting intelligence if you’re talking.”

Changing topics too quickly or foregoing follow-up questions often results in a failure to collect information.

“If a person is even talking to you in the least, as long as you maintain a conversation and keep going down the tracks they want to go down, you can eventually steer it toward where you want it to go. This individual was at least talking and I got discouraged because he told me he wasn't going to give me anything, because he knew what tricks I was using, so I gave up. I learned that persistence is one of the ways to go. If you don't have persistence, you aren’t going to succeed at all.”

_Tactic Selection_

Interviewers use tactics to elicit the critical information that subjects seek to conceal. When interviewers transition from rapport building to specific tactics, they usually increase their pressure on subjects to reveal critical information.

To select tactics, interviewers match the tactic to subject characteristics for maximum impact. For instance, interviewers might convince subjects to talk by leveraging their love for their family or country. They might focus on the ego of a subject motivated by status or use incentives with a subject motivated by money. Interviewers might downplay the consequences of involvement with subjects focused on punishment and their bleak future. Ultimately, subjects’ backgrounds, demeanor and responses will guide how and when interviewers apply tactics and approaches.
After applying tactics, interviewers assess how the tactics affected the subjects. Often, interviewers will test out tactics by applying them in a subtle way and then increasing intensity as they determine effectiveness. They might do this when they identify the time as right to apply a tactic, but they have yet to determine which tactic might work, or when their preferred tactic failed and they are unsure about the next best tactic.

**Strategies for Selecting and Implementing Tactics**

**Using Rational Approaches**

In some instances, interviewers treat the interview as a business-like transaction, where each actor has a role to fill if they are to complete the transaction. Interviewers identify similarities between themselves and the subject, for instance, by pointing out that they are both Soldiers carrying out orders, or everyday guys just trying to make a living. This tactic can establish respect and elicit cooperation.

“[I said], ‘…what you and I are doing is a business transaction of sorts. In this case, the compensation involves your freedom. So let’s try and be professional about this.’”

**Using Emotional Approaches**

Subjects also respond to emotion-based tactics. For instance, interviewers might appeal to the ego of an arrogant subject. Variations in application of the tactic depend on the subject’s confidence level. Interviewers should consider these factors when determining whether the subject would respond better to flattery or insults to one’s ego.

After the interviewer establishes the ground rules of mutual respect and trust, they sometimes use guilt as a strategy after subjects have broken trust. Often interviewers detect deception but do not confront the subject until it is clear to both parties that the subject is lying. At this point, the interviewer can leverage the broken trust to prompt the subject to tell the truth.

“So I have to connect with him on some level and then after that, I make him feel guilty for lying to me because I’ll be that good friend he hadn’t known that long, that kind of stuff, that’s what I’d go after.”

**Challenges when Selecting and Applying Tactics**

Applying tactics in a general or textbook fashion often does not work. Instead, interviewers try to take into account the context, including the area’s political situation and unique characteristics of each subject.

“You can’t just say, ‘We know all.’ A guy like that will be like, ‘well, prove it.’”

“Sometimes the detainee becomes desensitized to it. Like here, ‘You love your son so much.’ [The subject thinks], ‘Hey dude, yeah, I love my son but I hear it over and over again.’”
again. I got it, you’re trying to make me talk.’ Now you have to use a different approach.”

When interviewers implement specific tactics, they risk losing some rapport because these tactics tend to increase the adversarial nature of the interview and heighten negative emotions. Because of this, it is important for interviewers to employ tactics at the right time during interviews. Applying harsh or confrontational tactics too soon may shut down the subject.

“Just keep slowly escalating the detainee’s stress level but don’t really challenge him in such a way that it’s going to make him back track or retract away from the interrogator.”

“Young interrogators would just go after; “Well you need to tell me!” And they’ll go after it and then they lose rapport. They start running approaches on just one piece of information…Just let him dig his grave first, once he’s dug his grave, you’ve got him.”

Reassess and Adapt

A key component of the decision-making cycle is interviewer ability to continually monitor incoming information and assess the subject. A selected course of action will remain the same as long as the interviewer is satisfied with the results. Often action choices remain fluid, with interviewers shifting between multiple actions based on the immediate information they receive. They adapt tactics and questioning techniques in response to subtle changes in subjects’ demeanor, body language, and verbal responses. Several factors necessitate the need to adapt:

- Initial actions lead to unexpected outcomes.
- New information changes interpretation of the subject and situation.
- The subject’s behaviors or motivations change, requiring the interviewer to adapt.
- Incoming information leads to a reinterpretation of existing information.
- A conclusion about the subject leads to a shift in goals.

Strategies for Adapting to Changing Conditions

Interviewers assess evolving situations continually without becoming rigid in their interpretation of the incoming information. To help with adaptability, interviewers actively monitor subjects’ reactions and seek to confirm or disconfirm their assumptions.

“I’m going to continuously assess and I’m going to assess before I run the approaches. Even though I assess on paper, based on the circumstances, this is what should work, I’m going to assess again in the booth before I run this approach strategy. And we’re going to talk, and we’re going to build a little rapport, we’re going to get to know each other. Now, I’m going to confirm, or refute, the approach strategy I determine. And if it changes, I can’t be afraid to change it; I have to adjust to the detainee.”
**Challenges to Being Adaptable**

If interviewers do not adapt their assessment of the situation, their actions choices, or their goals they may:

- Fail to recognize opportunities to gather new or unexpected information.
- Disregard information that would advance the correct understanding of the situation.
- Waste time taking ineffective actions.
- Take actions that hinder progress toward the goals.
- Neglect to anticipate the unintended consequences of new courses of action.
- Strive to achieve goals that are no longer relevant.
Tips to Develop Expertise

“The very first interrogation I did…I was absolutely awful. You go in trying to use what you’ve learned and the book knowledge, but you have no practical knowledge.”

Practical knowledge gained in the field is imperative for conducting effective interviews. However, simply conducting interviews does not guarantee that interviewers go from good to great. To achieve expertise in any domain, decision makers must engage in deliberate activities aimed at improving their assessment skills, decision-making processes, and action choices. Experts tend to engage in deliberate skill improvement activities. To improve the cognitive skills associated with interviewing, interviewers can:

- Seek opportunities to learn from experienced interviewers. Discuss how to handle subjects who violate expectations and situations when common tactics fail to produce the expected results. When possible observe senior interviewers in action.
- Mentally rehearse prior to starting an interview or while thinking of hypothetical scenarios. Practice asking questions with teammates and think through various possible outcomes to questions and tactics and envision how to respond.
- Seek feedback from peers about actions taken during interviews. Brainstorm about assessments of subjects or various tactics to use with different types of subjects. When possible, engage in role-playing exercises or visualize various scenarios, ask hypothetical questions (what-if questions) and discuss the pros and cons of various courses of action.
- Engage in self-assessment by reviewing actions that produced desired responses, actions that produced unexpected results, and missed opportunities for information gathering. By evaluating their own decisions, interviewers gain a better understanding of why they focus on specific information and choose certain actions. Self-assessment builds a larger storehouse of information that interviewers can draw upon to assess situations and builds a repertoire of action options moving forward.

To continue developing skills, interviewers should strive to be lifelong learners. Every outing is an opportunity to observe peoples’ actions, reactions, and demeanor. Interviewers should note the range of typical behaviors across cultures, social groups, ages, and professions to develop a greater repertoire of what is generally customary and acceptable within groups. Interviewers can incorporate experiences from all aspects of their lives into their craft, such as learning to control emotions as a parent, enhancing self-awareness by observing personality traits and reactions to daily events, or taking advantage of opportunities to be an active listener and questioner.
Conclusion

The insights provided by interviewers in this guidebook illustrate the complexities associated with making decisions during investigative interviews. The strategies and challenges presented throughout this guidebook provide only a representative sample of the myriad aspects of interviewing that interviewers confront and deal with as they attempt to uncover information critical to the safety and security of U.S. citizens. The aim of this guidebook is to provide information that new and seasoned interviewers can use to understand and, perhaps, improve their decision processes. The information provided might also assist trainers with course content by providing insights into the decisions and reasoning behind interviewer actions. The overall goal of this guidebook is to contribute to interviewers’ ongoing efforts to improve their craft and, ultimately, save lives.