

Report on Medicare Compliance Volume 28, Number 19. May 20, 2019 'Challenging Interviews' With Angry, Evasive and Sad People Call for Different Approach

By Nina Youngstrom

For some reason, an employee at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation was evasive in an interview during a compliance investigation, feigning unfamiliarity with health care practices despite her long history. That didn't work for Melissa Edson, standards and compliance specialist at Hazelden Betty Ford, and she called the employee on it. "The person had been in the field 20 years, and we were asking questions about her behavior. She kept telling me, 'I guess I am naive because I don't know,'" Edson recalled. "I said, 'I am not accepting that as an answer,' and I asked the questions in different ways."

Evasiveness is one of three types of "challenging" interviews that compliance officers may experience during compliance investigations, along with crying and anger. They make it harder for compliance officers to get answers to the questions they need to further investigations, she said April 9 at the Compliance Institute sponsored by the Health Care Compliance Association in Boston. Edson and her colleagues suggested ways to address challenging interviews and shared other strategies for effective interviews (see box below).

"The goal of the interview is to get your questions answered, and sometimes you have to manage some of the responses people have," said Jacki Waltman, manager of health information management and corporate privacy officer at Hazelden Betty Ford. "If you can't get people to calm down, you have to hit the pause button and try another strategy because your goal is to gather information."

Evasiveness may indicate that employees are gauging what the interviewer knows so they can decide how much to reveal. "They don't want to tell you more than what they need to tell you or they may have decided being dishonest or not cooperating is more advantageous," Edson said. "Also, sometimes people think if they talk to you they will get themselves or someone else in trouble." Whatever the reason, she says it helps to overcome evasion with open-ended questions. For example, "How did you respond to the situation? How has this situation impacted you? What other relevant information would you like to share related to the situation? Who else may have witnessed the situation or been impacted by it?"

People who cry in interviews may be expressing the stress of the investigation or something unrelated. "The first thing is to understand yourself and what your comfort level is with someone who is becoming very emotional," Edson said. "Maybe sit there in silence and let them process through that, and maybe ask them why they are being triggered with emotion." If they're unable to compose themselves, consider rescheduling the interview and encouraging them to seek out human resources or the employee assistance plan. However, if things settle down, you may be able to ask the questions or infer the tears "are validating facts," Edson said.

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