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## Testing Responses Using a Trial Balloon

It is always good to test an idea before suggesting it to avoid potential criticism or ridicule. Politicians do this by “launching a trial balloon.” An unnamed source, talking off the record, offers an idea, potential bill, or action to a reporter who then files a story for the public to read. Sitting back, the politicians can now assess the level of support or outcry over the idea without having it attached to a specific person or administration. When public rejection is apparent, the idea withers and dies, only to resurface later when the timing is better, because *they* know what is best for us.

The obvious benefit of floating a trial balloon provides a snapshot of the public’s willingness to accept or oppose an idea without the administration committing to a particular course of action. The administration can then decide whether it makes sense to proceed in light of the support for the idea. There is no sense in taking the heat unnecessarily when the “unnamed source,” “close advisor,” “top-ranking official,” or “unidentified senior aide” can do it anonymously while the rest of the politicians deny advocating that *terrible* idea.

Is the timing right? Is there support? These are always tricky questions for an administration and the interviewer.

Interviewers can use the old “run it up the flagpole and see which way the wind is blowing” tactic when dealing with dishonest employees as well. There are a number of applications where trial balloons can be floated to determine the individual’s resistance or acceptance to an idea.

### Timing of the Soft Accusation

One of the most difficult points in any interview is determining when to ask the subject to admit his guilt. If the interviewer asks too early or too late, he is likely to elicit a denial from the subject. However, the interviewer, like a good salesman, knows that when asking at just the right moment, he is likely to close the sale.

Salesmen often use what is called a “test close” to determine if the timing is right for the sale or to elicit sales objections from the customer. If the timing is correct, the salesman closes the sale or, in the alternative, he identifies what is preventing the customer from purchasing. Even if the test close fails, it still assists the salesman in selecting product benefits to overcome the customer’s objections.

An interviewer can do the same type of test close or “floating a trial balloon” to determine the subject’s resistance to making

an admission. The interviewer has been rationalizing the inappropriate behavior in the third person (he, she, they, them) offering reasons or excuses why *people* make mistakes. When the interviewer observes body language indicating submission, he may now test the subject’s resistance to an admission by personalizing his statements. For example, the interviewer might lead into the trial balloon test by saying:

*Peer pressure is one of the most important things in a person’s life. As a result of peer pressure, people will often do things that they wouldn’t ordinarily do simply to follow the group. I think at one time or another we have all been influenced in this way. The problem is, Mike, we don’t know what difficulties you faced in your life.*

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Effectively the interviewer has just confided through the trial balloon that he has been talking about the subject all along. The trial balloon, “*what difficulties you faced in your life*” helps to determine the individual’s resistance to making an admission. Carefully observing the subject’s reaction to this personalization of the conversation, the interviewer can often predict the likelihood of an admission or denial from the subject.

This test for submission enables the interviewer to determine his next course of action. If the subject is amenable to making an admission, the interviewer offers a soft accusation such as,

*When was the very first time you took money from the company? Was it your first day on the job?*

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The subject who is in submission will make a denial to the follow-up question, “*Was it your first day on the job?*” However, it is a denial that is actually an admission of theft and begins the process of development.

If the subject was resistant to the test for submission, the interviewer recognizes that his trial balloon has been rejected and returns to the process of rationalization. This avoids denials and allows the interviewer to continue control of the conversation.

### Using Lists as a Trial Balloon

The interviewer can also gauge the reaction of the subject by using a list containing a trial balloon to determine a reaction or resistance to a word or course of action. This is often done in everyday conversation as people discuss ideas or offer proposals. The use of listing enables an individual to offer a variety of solutions while concealing his preferred course of action. For example, consider the following conversation between a husband and wife.

*So, what are we going to do on vacation this year?*

*Oh, I don't know.*

*You know, there are so many things we could do. We could drive out to Mom's for the week, we could stay at home and do day trips, we could take a week's cruise in the Caribbean, or we could just go up to the cabin for the week.*

In the previous exchange the offer of a week's cruise to the Caribbean is concealed within the list rather than being first or last. If the suggestion of a cruise to the Caribbean was placed first in the list, the speaker chances a level of resistance or denial that he or she is unprepared to handle. In the same way, concluding the list with a suggested week's cruise to the Caribbean makes it seem as though this is the preferred preference or is important to the speaker. By placing the cruise within the list, the speaker can avoid criticism by claiming it was included only as a joke if necessary, while still being able to estimate the listener's resistance. However, if the listener seems interested in the prospect of a Caribbean cruise, the speaker can suggest it more firmly as a vacation destination.

So, how might an interviewer use the process of listing to determine a subject's feelings and test resistance? There are several ways listing has an application in the interview process. If the interviewer is using an “introductory statement accusation,” the listing process is embedded within its first two components.

In the first component of the introductory statement, the interviewer offers

*It's my job to protect the assets of the company. These assets could be the building, the fixtures, the merchandise, the money, and, the most important asset the organization has are the employees.*

By placing merchandise and money in the middle of the list, the interviewer is afforded an opportunity to observe the subject's response to these two topics. If the interviewer was to place them at the beginning of the list, it would not be

unusual for a subject to make a denial since they are particularly threatening topics to the guilty.

The next sentence in the introductory statement introduces the concept of how losses occur. Here the interviewer suggests

*Losses can occur as a result of paperwork errors, customers taking things without paying for them, or employees taking things.*

In the opening sentence of the introductory statement, “*the most important asset the organization has are the employees,*” is positioned last, as is “*employees taking things*” in the preceding sentence, this is done because the interviewer wants the employee to remember the final words of each sentence. By placing the most important concepts at the end of the list, it assists the subject in recognizing and remembering their importance.

The second part of an introductory statement lists specific methods of theft. The interviewer lists a variety of theft methods beginning with those he is relatively certain the subject has not used to steal from the company. Then, those methods used or probably used to steal from the organization are inserted in the middle of the list. The interviewer can gauge the subject's reaction to each of the items in the list and often determine which methods were used to steal. The individual's responsiveness to the methods used to steal help direct the interviewer's questioning during the development of the admission.

During development of the admission, the interviewer might also use a list to identify items the subject has stolen. The interviewer begins with items that were unlikely to be stolen by the subject, thus encouraging the subject to shake his head in denial. As the listing continues with more probable merchandise, the interviewer will note that the denial or head shake will stop when an item that has been stolen is suggested.

The interviewer then uses an assumptive question, such as, “*What is the most number of those that you took?*” to obtain the admission.

When reviewing courses of action with the subject, the interviewer may want to consider their position in the list. Does the interviewer want to signify their importance, his preference, or simply test the individual's resistance? Suggestions that are a trial balloon should be embedded within the list, while things the interviewer wants the subject to remember are better positioned at the conclusion of the list. Either way the subject's response can be evaluated and his resistance or acceptance can be judged based on his reactions.

One also might find this valuable when offering a gift list.

*Let's see, I could use some socks, pair of gloves, table saw (or diamond necklace, depending on your persuasion), or a hat and scarf.*

Or,

*Let's see, I could use some socks, pair of gloves, a hat and scarf, or diamond necklace.*

We're sure you get the idea of what should be in the box. ■