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ACCIDENTAL CONVERSATIONS: ELICITATION TECHNIQUES AND THE SCIENCE BEHIND THEM

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THE STORY/SCENE

Nicholas, a senior project manager at a defense contractor, is attending a major industry conference...

He manages to find a moment to sip his coffee during a mid-day break when a friendly attendee strikes up a conversation, mentioning she works for a research institute. The conversation flows naturally from the keynote speech to industry trends, and finally to Nicholas' current project challenges.

"The integration issues sound frustrating," she sympathizes. "We faced something similar last year, as we wrestled with some incompatibility issues with the XR-7 system."

Nicholas feels a sense of relief that he met someone who was actually on the same wavelength as him. Nicholas expands, saying, "Yep, XR-7 was where the problems started, and because of those problems, we moved to the XK-9 platform, which is supposed to provide better encryption and compatibility with data transfers. Unfortunately, some of the issues still persist."

The female attendee then casually jokes that at least the fancy touch screen menu system being used at the dining area was nicely integrated. They both top off their coffees and chat for a few more minutes about preferences in dark versus light roast before wishing each other a productive week and parting ways.

Only later did Nicholas realize what he accidentally revealed. He replayed the discussion a few times in his mind, trying to convince himself it wasn't sensitive, but there was no denying it. He had revealed the specific technology platform his organization uses for all classified data transfers.

But what he would never realize is the "accidental conversation" had been a carefully orchestrated elicitation.



Everyone is Involved.

Understanding the subtle art of extracting information from seemingly casual conversation is important. Human intelligence (HUMINT) professionals regularly apply elicitation techniques as an effective means to collect sensitive or non-public information from unsuspecting individuals. Counterintelligence (CI) professionals are similarly well-versed in elicitation often, so they can effectively identify and mitigate foreign collection efforts. However, in between are the other 99.5% of people who as potential targets require effective training and awareness to minimize the risk.

DEFINITION: *Elicitation* is the acquisition of information from a person or group in a manner that does not disclose the intent of the interview or conversation.

ELICITATION TECHNIQUES

Assumed Knowledge

"I mean, you're the head of Project Alpha, you must be feeling these recent integration challenges..."

[Provokes acknowledgment or prompts correction of assumption]

Bracketing

"Does your data refresh take place every 2 hours or every 2 weeks?"

[Provokes corrective answer somewhere in the middle]

Confidential Bait

"Just between you and I, our project recently encountered some serious supply chain issues. Have you been facing the same issue with counterfeits?"

[Cues reciprocal sharing]

Criticism

"These Government systems always seem outdated compared to commercial solutions."

[Cues defensive correction]

Deliberate False Statements

"I heard your organization still uses the bug-prone XR-7 platform."

[Provokes corrective response]

Direct Question or Questionnaire / Survey

"How many full-time employees do you have working on the development of Project Alpha?"

[Immediate bluntness cues unguarded responses]

Feigned Ignorance

"I really don't have a great understanding of how those protocols are applied. How do they inform your work?"

[Cues knowledge sharing]

Feigned Disbelief

"There's no way your system could process that volume of data security!"

[Provokes detailed, reaffirming explanation]

Flattery

"I'm sure you've got things locked down. It takes a creative thinker to solve the data transfer issue while not negatively effecting business operations."

[Inflates ego, encourages more sharing]

Good Listener

[Attentive nodding, follow-up questions, remembering details from earlier]

Leading Questions

"Is this just a complicated logistics or is there a bigger trust issue with the supplier?"

[Provokes acknowledgment or prompts correction of presumptive options]

Macro to Micro to Macro

[Gradually steers conversation from general topics to more specific target topic and then back out]

Mirroring

[Discreetly matching body language, repeating certain phrases back to show engagement, subtle rapport building]

Mutual Interest

"Our research institute also works on secure data transfer but from a different perspective, I think. What angles are you finding to be the most promising?"

[Highlights common challenge, encourage cooperative exchange]

Oblique Reference

"I've heard some folks at this conference talking about the next steps for Project Alpha..."

[Tests to see if there's any recognition of the topic, cues elaboration]

One-upper

"5,000 units in total? We just recently shipped more than 7,500 processors just this year to that country."

[Provokes revealing escalated response]

Provocative Statement

"Private sector programs are always more robust and innovative than Government programs."

[Provokes emotional corrective response]

Quote Reported Facts

"The recent press release stated the new aircraft uses advanced encryption to communicate with each other. I assume it's quantum resistant?"

[Uses published data to provoke response with unpublished details]

Target Associates

"You must be very proud of your son for his contributions on Project Alpha."

[Provokes acknowledgment or elaboration; enables indirect collection]

Volunteer Info / Quid Pro Quo

"...so that's how we handled that challenge with quantum-resistant encryption. How are you approaching it on your end?"

[Cues reciprocal sharing]

THE SCIENCE BEHIND HOW ELICITATION TECHNIQUES WORK

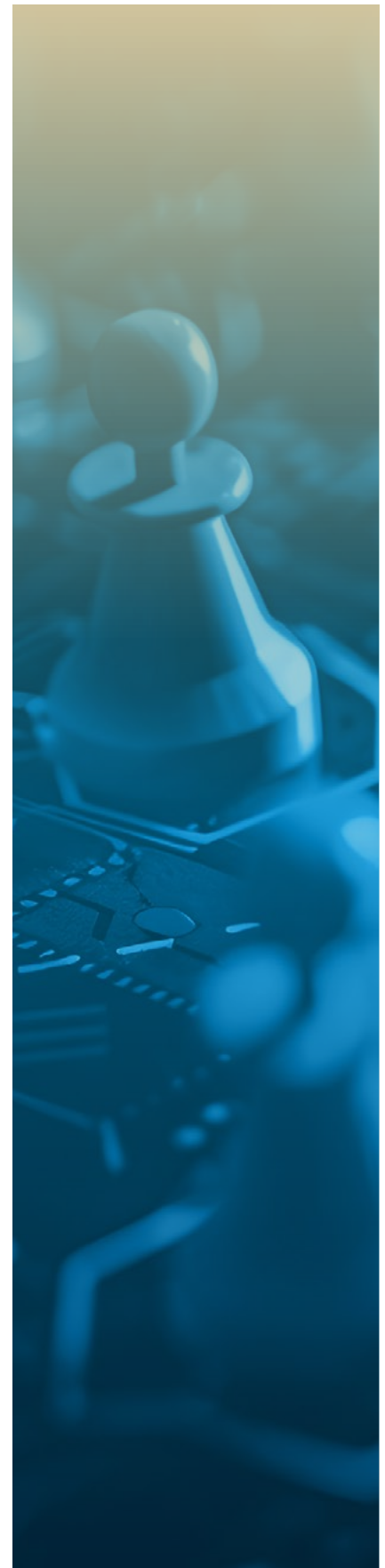
There are dozens of ways in which an individual can elicit information from another, ranging from direct questioning or aggressive criticism to very subtle steering of conversation or intentional ignorance. Beyond simply knowing the techniques, there are some more strategic ways to establish better defenses.

One way to better recognize and counter elicitation efforts is an awareness of the broader human tendencies being exploited.

Ego

These techniques target the natural desire to appear knowledgeable, respected, competent, and authoritative.

- Criticism
- Deliberate False Statements
- Feigned Disbelief
- Flattery
- One-upmanship



Reciprocity

These techniques rely on our natural inclination to return favors and maintain balance in social exchanges.

- Confidential Bait
- Good Listener
- Mirroring
- Mutual Interest
- Volunteer Info / Quid Pro Quo

Social Pressure

These techniques exploit our need to conform to certain social expectations in conversation.

- Direct Question or Questionnaire / Survey
- Feigned Ignorance
- Provocative Statement
- Target Associates

Cognitive Cue

These techniques take advantage of the inconsistent ability to identify assumptions, artificial parameters, or recognize errors in logic.

- Assumed Knowledge
- Bracketing
- Leading Questions
- Macro to Micro to Macro
- Oblique Reference
- Quote Reported Facts

A second way to identify and counter elicitation is to visualize the mechanics of the exchange, specifically the directional flow of information.

Information Pulling Techniques

These techniques often entail the elicitor to come “empty handed” and the targeted individual responding to a perceived gap in knowledge. For example:

- Feigned Ignorance
- Direct or Leading Questions
- Flattery

Information Pushing Techniques

These techniques often entail the elicitor coming with their own carefully selected data or opinion, which they make known in order to provoke a response. For example:

- Provocative Statement
- Feigned Disbelief
- Criticism
- Deliberate False Statements

A third way to recognize elicitation is an awareness of certain characteristics of conversational control patterns.

- Disproportionate interest around certain topics
- Efforts to bridge from current topic to topic of interest
- Density/number of questions, especially revolving around same topic
- Unusual persistence, including circular conversation that returns to a singular topic
- Reformulation of prior questions that weren't answered
- Attempts to steer conversation, including using mirroring to encourage or linger on topic of interest



BACK TO THE STORY



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Center for Development of Security Excellence (CDSE)

- [Counterintelligence Glossary](#)
- [Online Elicitation and Recruitment \(poster\)](#)
- [Elicitation / What to Report](#)

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

- [Elicitation Techniques](#)

National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC)

- [Elicitation](#)