



NTSB TRAINING CENTER

Q & A with Ron Fisher, Ph.D. The Cognitive Interview

NTSB Training Center
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You developed the cognitive interview back in the early 1980s. How did that come about?

The genesis of the cognitive interview was almost accidental. On several occasions, friends who had come to visit me at my apartment would misplace something. They would call me up later and ask me if it was in the apartment, and invariably, it was not. But through conversing with them and asking questions to help trigger their memories, they would then recall where they had misplaced the item.

I realized that through these casual conversations on the phone, I was using, although informally, the principles and theories that I was teaching in my memory course at the university. Not surprisingly, the techniques derived from these principles worked.

I then contacted a colleague, Ed Geiselman at U.C.L.A., and asked him who could use this skill of helping someone to remember details. His first response was police, since they spend much of their time solving crimes by getting witnesses to remember details about an incident or series of incidents.

Ed and I then went to the Los Angeles Police Department and spoke to people in their behavioral sciences division about the kind of training police get in interviewing cooperative witnesses. We were surprised to hear that they receive very little training in this area. They do get some formal training on interrogating suspects, but relatively little on interviewing cooperative witnesses.

Then we checked other police departments and found that they, too, received little training on interviewing cooperative witnesses. So we thought that this would be an interesting opportunity to apply memory theory to police interviews. And that's what we did.