

The Investigating Committee

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This months Short Talk Bulletin was written by Bro. Zelwin H. Eaton, P M. of Adair Lodge #366, Kirksville, Missouri, who is also a member of the Grand Lodge of Missouri Committee on Masonic Education. Bro. Eaton is an administrator at Northeast Missouri State University. We appreciate his comments on how to conduct an interview with an applicant for Masonic membership.

After the reception of a petition, the single most important event in the life of a Masonic Lodge is the function performed by the committee on investigation. It is impossible for every member of a lodge to personally know all of the potential petitioners to the lodge. In these days of declining membership, the Brothers who sign the petition of a prospective member may be blinded by friendship, a concern for the shrinking membership of their lodge or, very simply, they may not have sufficient concern for their lodge to see beyond the surface of the potential initiate whose petition they are signing.

It is the duty of the committee appointed by the Master to be unbiased by improper solicitations and uninfluenced by mercenary motives of Brothers, well meaning friends, and relatives of the prospect. The committee must seek the truth about the depth of the character of all whom they investigate. Just as importantly, they must consider the financial circumstances of the petitioner, the organizations he is already involved in, the kind of company he keeps, the reputation he has in the community, in his work place, and with the general public he comes in contact with every day.

The above answers can be obtained very simply. Ask questions, lots of them, of everyone it is possible to contact. Start out by talking to the Brothers who signed his petition. Ask them why they signed his petition. Require answers beyond, "He asked me to". Find out what they really know about him, how long they have known him, who introduced them to him and why. Ask them for names of people they know who are associated with the petitioner or know him personally.

Go to the men who the petitioner gave as his references. First, see if they knew they were being used as references, then find out why they think they were given as references. What commitments do they have about the petitioner? Are there any ties that would suggest their

assessments of his character would not be completely honest and straight forward? What would they have to gain by his membership in a world wide Fraternity? Note carefully the responses to your questions. Are they given quickly, in a straight forward manner while they look you in the eye, or are their hesitations, shuffling of feet, and side wise glances. Do they give you a long detailed answer and say nothing or is the answer brief and to the point, clearly answering your inquiry? If you get too many evasive answers, take this as a sure indication the committee needs to dig further and ask more probing questions.

The last step in the process of investigating a prospective candidate should be the personal interview with the petitioner in his home, WITH HIS FAMILY PRESENT. Note carefully, does the petitioner welcome you unhesitatingly into his home. Does his wife greet you warmly and make a genuine attempt to make you feel at home or is she merely tolerating your presence? Any one who is expected to spend many hours and a sum of money with a Fraternal organization must have the support, with little or no reservation of his wife and family. Any man who is torn between two commitments, especially when one is wife and family, is going to solve his problem by negating one of his commitments and it is likely to be the Fraternity. Spending many hours initiating a man, teaching him the ritual, and developing a reliance on his contributions to the lodge is a useless expenditure of time and money if there is doubt from the beginning that he will be a committed member.

Now to the most important part of the committee's work, the interview in the home. Obviously, there will be as many settings for the home interview as there are homes in which interviews are conducted, so we will speak in terms of the ideal interview setting. Good manners dictate that you will interview the petitioner in the room of the house into which he invites you. This will probably be the room he and his wife feel most comfortable in or are most proud of. If possible, however, conduct your interview in the living room or the family room. Try to stay away from the dining room or kitchen. The living room is less likely to have distractions. If there is a TV, if at all possible get it turned off. You do not want to compete with a soap opera or Monday night football. By the way, make it a rule not to ask for an appointment to visit with the petitioner when there is the obvious possibility of a conflict. In other words, don't schedule interviews on Monday night during football season. Neither the petitioner's heart nor his mind are likely to be on the interview, and yours probably won't be there either!

Always have three members of the investigating committee present for the interview with the petitioner. The chairman of the committee should assume the leadership role in the interview and should ask the major portion of the questions. The second man on the committee should join in answering any questions the petitioner or his wife might have, watch the petitioner for his reactions to questions, and basically act as a resource person. The third man on the committee should spend the majority of his efforts observing the reactions of the petitioner's wife and any other members of the family that may be present. This man should pay particular

attention to the wife. She, in the opinion of the author, is the key to the husband's retention in the Masonic Fraternity.

Observe closely her reactions to questions and to the general conversation and make careful mental notes of her reactions. At appropriate pauses in the flow of the interview, attempt to address any concerns the wife might have that have become evident by her responses or reactions. I define responses here almost entirely in terms of body language. It is unlikely that she will verbally object to her husband's interest in the fraternity in front of the committee. However, she may very likely show her feelings strongly by her nonverbal reactions. This is the time to address her concerns and/or reservations. Do not wait until her husband has spent both money and time with the Fraternity. Waiting will allow opinions and feelings to solidify and become irreversibly set.

At the same time, don't forget the petitioner. If he displays adverse reactions at any time during the interview, use this as a key that the committee needs to explore the topic under discussion in greater depth or reassure the petitioner of the support, friendship, and brotherhood the lodge extends to its, about to become, newest member.

The chairman of the committee should control the time spent on the interview and should not overstay the committee's welcome. He should be aware of any signs of restlessness on the part of any of the participants and, should the interview become lengthy, he should take steps to bring it to a smooth and natural conclusion. The chairman should poll his committee prior to closing by asking, in an offhand manner, if he has neglected to mention anything important and/or ask if anyone has a final comment he would like to make or a final question he would like to ask. This will give the third member of the committee a natural opportunity to address any problems he has observed, if he has not had an opportunity to do so up to that point.

The petitioner and his wife should be asked if they have any final questions or observations they would like to make before the committee departs in order to consider their recommendations on the petition.

In closing, the author would like to remind investigating committees that they too are being observed by the petitioner and his family. Their body language and responses can also be easily read. If the committee members rush through their questions, shift about in their chairs, drum their fingers on the arm of their chair or sit with their toes pointing toward the door, they will communicate, unconsciously, their lack of interest in their mission and their obvious desire to be somewhere else, doing something else.

Dress also plays a part in the impression the lodge and the Fraternity will make on the petitioner and his family. Dress appropriately, but don't either overdress for the interview or underdress. Make it obvious that care has been taken to make a good impression. This will tell the petitioner and his family, in a subtle way, that the lodge members are proud of their fraternity and are particular about who gains admission to its society and its customs.

One final thought. Do not neglect to extend the right hand of friendship to the petitioner and his family prior to departing from their home. A warm and friendly grip is the one form of body language, when used in conjunction with a sincere smile, that overcomes reservations and encourages a positive relationship.

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