

## Conviction Response

It matters not how straight the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.  
- Wm Henley (1988)



Perfecting your ‘**conviction speech**’ can turn shame on it’s head, showing you how to discuss poor choices from your past in ways that can actually provide a *positive* impact your job search - seeing it as a seed, which when nourished by your effort, helped you to discover and become the competent & trustworthy person employers hope to hire—and the person you are today.

### WHY LEARN THE CONVICTION SPEECH:

*First*, many potential employers intuitively understand that the best general predictor of a person’s future behavior is whether they have “crossed that line” in the past. In fact, research confirms that a person’s criminal history is the most accurate single predictor of whether they might do the same thing in the future. For this reason, some employers will ask on your application if you have ever been convicted of a felony and if selected after interview, may do background checks including reviewing your publicly available criminal history as well as the record of values and attitudes you leave in places like social media. It is therefore most important, that you take the opportunity to set the tone during your interview, before they see or hear that information. If they learn of your conviction without your input at the interview, you may only be left to wonder why you were not selected.

*Second*, if you are hired, learn to love your new job and later this information becomes known - ANY time afterward - you may still be terminated from your position, sometimes without ever knowing why. Many organizations require employees be fired if it is discovered that they misrepresented themselves during the application process.

*Third*, in many organizations, the interviewer (often your new boss) may be expected to explain to his boss, human resources and/or the agency executive, how & why he decided that your current attitude and potential are more significant than your past mistakes; in the absence of that information, the supervisor may be left looking embarrassed when others find out they hired someone without really knowing or considering all the facts.

If you *learn and practice* this skill during this class, you may still choose to “roll the dice” and hope that the employer will never learn about your past, but you will be able to make that decision with the experience of having another option, and perhaps one that supports renewed pride and integrity in yourself that will help you thrive.

## **FOUR PARTS OF THE CONVICTION SPEECH**

The recommended RET method of presenting your conviction history has four parts.

***The introduction*** may be the most important as it “sets the stage” for the interviewer to see that the real impact or result of your conviction was something that you are excited and proud of. Excited and proud because it planted a seed that changed your life. We all know that big, positive changes in our lives are often the result of mistakes made. You may have heard it said that mistakes are just opportunities to learn. We tend to learn life’s lessons even more deeply when they leave a scar of emotional pain on the soul for us to remember. In your case, whether it took one cut or many such cuts, when we “squeeze that lemon,” if we truly made a decision to improve our lives, the change becomes far more important and meaningful than that poorly considered bad choice or even prior lifetime of choices. If you cannot find the pride we are talking about, then it is highly likely that you are only considering making a change in your life and even though you may have an idea that you’d like to change, you have not really made that solid commitment to yourself or the people you love. We encourage you to think of those you love, especially those who have been victims of your past- your family, your children, your friends...yourSELF. We want to you to make this “speech” to them, with unwavering conviction, as evidence of the change you have made:

“Before we get started with the interview, I want you to know that three years ago, I was arrested for selling drugs, but it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened in my life!”

*Fake it 'til you make it. Say it 'til you mean it. Say it with the pride and conviction that making big changes in life deserves!* Interestingly, the more we speak our truth, the more we are likely to live it. This is your opportunity to learn to speak your truth. Kick the shame of past experience to the curb and start to experience the new, fearless woman you have become! **Take yourself off the discount rack and put yourself back behind glass on the counter where the valuables are kept!**

***Description of the conviction*** The introduction is immediately followed by a short description (usually two or three sentences) describing **why, when & what** behavior the employer may hear about from others or see when they look at your criminal history.

The “**why**” of your speech is often a good way to follow your introductory commitment, as it shows that you have developed some insight and perhaps provides a reason or context for the poor choices you made that most people can relate to.

### **WHY:**

“ I grew up in very (abusive/difficult/dysfunctional) family circumstances,

“I guess I raised myself on the streets, learning some pretty destructive behavior from (both) friends (and family).

“I used my anger (and feelings of being a victim) to justify taking advantage...

### **WHEN:**

The “**when**” of your speech can be handled next. If you only have one conviction, we recommend you start with the number of years since the incident. For example, (following the “why” statement) you might say “Three years ago....”

If you started getting in trouble at age 13 and are now 22, you might say “Starting about nine years ago...” or “From the time I started my teen years....”

“About three years ago”.....“Starting about age 14...”

### **WHAT:**

Then you describe “**what**” you actually did. We recommend your behavior be described in common terms, not legal jargon, as that may make you look criminally experienced. Since everyone’s history is different, you will have to work on developing this description to fit your own situation in your own words. Remember to ask yourself, “if someone just read my criminal history, would they think, ‘yes, she already told me that?’”

The information should be detailed enough that they could tell if the crime might directly affect their employees or their business/organization; If your explanation is too general, they are more likely to continue to probe to resolve those fears/concerns. On the other hand, if your explanation is too detailed it may paint a more negative ‘picture’ than is best to leave in their mind.

“I destroyed/ruined property that wasn’t mine.”

“I developed a dependency on drugs and/or alcohol”

“My husband/boyfriend was using/selling drugs and eventually I got involved.”

“I got into financial trouble and tried what I thought was the easy way out:  
(selling drugs/using my sexuality).”

“I got into a fatal car crash while intoxicated.”

“My lifestyle put my family/children at risk.”

“I let an abusive relationship escalate until there was a serious physical confrontation;  
my husband, boyfriend, business partner was seriously injured/killed.”

“I used/sold checks/credit card information.”

“I thought I would just use their money and pay it back, but it got out of hand.”

You may want to ask others for help in developing this description. Remember, the idea is not to use technical, legal offense jargon, yet accurate enough that when someone reads your criminal history, they would think “Oh yes, she told me about that at the interview.”

So now we have: “Three years ago, I got into a fatal car crash while intoxicated.”

**The description of what you have accomplished** since your arrest is the third and **most important** section of your ‘speech’ and therefore the most lengthy & detailed.

It helps to make a list of each important person, event or class that you have taken in your personal search for change. You might want to group them by:

Experiences that helped you better **understand yourself**: AA/NA, TC, RET, Beyond Trauma, Moving On, Anger management, Celebrate Recovery, Grief & Loss.

1. Experiences that improved your **academic skills**: Adult Basic Ed., GED, FEPPS
2. Experiences that taught you **vocational/job skills**: Horticulture, PPPP, TRAC, Textiles
3. Experiences in actual work situations / developed **good work habits**: Food Service, CI.

Discussion of these experiences should take at least a minute or two compared with the one or two sentences it took to introduce and describe your crime. You are encouraged to write a list of these experiences and bring them with you to the interview to make sure you include all these positive experiences might help you become their ideal employee.

**The conclusion** is the fourth and final part of the Conviction Speech. Here you want to bring the interviewer back from conviction talk to think about the job you are applying for: “I know that a first and important step for me in getting my life back on track will be to get a good job. As I searched for opportunities, I came upon the position you are offering (as a sales associate). I think it could provide an excellent opportunity for me to demonstrate my work skills.” You may want to finish with some benefits an employer might have for choosing to hire an ex-offender over other people they might interview, including a **\$2,400 tax credit** (would provide 300 hours or 2-3 months of free labor at start if wage of \$8/hr). The state will also provide a **bond (insurance against loss) of up to \$25,000**. You might finish with a strong final personal statement such as “I promise you, that if you give me this opportunity, I will not disappoint you and, as important to me, I will not disappoint myself.”

During class, you will **practice giving this conviction speech at the very beginning** of your interview, right after initial introductions and handshake. We do this because it gets the tension of the situation over with as soon as possible so you can focus on the interview questions being asked. It also leaves the discussion of your conviction farther back in the interviewer’s memory, buried under all the positive things you will described about your accomplishments and job skills.

In summary, your **“Conviction Speech”** may look something like this:

*“Before we get started with the interview, I want to share with you that 3 years ago, I was fortunate to have a major life-changing experience. You see, I came from a very troubled family and started getting into trouble myself during my teenage years. This ultimately led to my misuse of drugs and resulted in a conviction. Surprisingly, this conviction turned out to be the BEST thing that has ever happened to me. As I faced a (another) term in prison, I took a hard look at myself and my life and made some determined & exciting changes:*

- 1. I took a re-entry class that helped me think about & take control of the person I was becoming.*
- 2. I got involved in substance abuse classes and started attending AA, learning how drugs and alcohol were affecting my ability to make positive choices.*
- 3. I realized that I didn’t get as much out of school as I should have, so I sharpened my math, english and science skills, eventually getting my high school diploma.*
- 4. I eventually also completed a couple of college level classes.*
- 5. I improved my work habits by getting a job where I learned how to use and care for commercial cleaning equipment and supplies and worked for the State of Washington learning the Food Service Business.”*

*As I researched career opportunities, I came upon your position as a Sales Associate at the Gig Harbor Target store. I think it would be an ideal chance for me to show my dedication & skills.*

*If you will give me a chance, I know that, with my determination & the skills I have learned, that I will be a very successful contributor to your work team / business.*

*Also, as an added incentive, I understand that up to \$2,400 of my first year's salary can be reimbursed at the end of my first year as a federal tax credit, AND, the State of Washington will insure my honesty with a bond of \$25,000.*

**CONVICTION SPEECH HOMEWORK**

**INTRODUCTION:**

*When:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Why:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*What:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Now, put it together:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**THINGS I DID TO CHANGE MY LIFE:**

*Personal understanding & improvement:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Academic:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Vocational:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Work experience:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**CONCLUSION:**

*Why I applied for this job at your company:* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*What you can expect or benefit from hiring me:* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Draft of your Conviction Speech:* \_\_\_\_\_

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