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**CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

**WHAT IS AN INTERVIEW?**

When you're watching the news at night or reading the paper in the morning, you'll notice that all the stories have a point in common: They all contain interviews. No matter what subject is being tackled, there'll always be people willing to be interviewed about it. And that's great, because that way we can get a sample of what people think and feel about different issues.

Interviews are usually deﬁned as a conversation with a purpose. They can be very helpful to your organization when you need information about assumptions and perceptions of activities in your community. They're also great if you're looking for in-depth information on a particular topic from an expert. (If what you really need is numerical data--how much and how many--a written questionnaire may better serve your purposes.)

Interviewing has been described as an art, rather than a skill or science. In other cases, it has been described as game in which the interviewee gets some sort of reward, or simply as a technical skill you can learn. But, no matter how you look at it, interviewing is a process that can be mastered by practice. This chapter will show you how.

**WHY SHOULD YOU CONDUCT INTERVIEWS?**

Using an interview is the best way to have an accurate and thorough communication of ideas between you and the person from whom you're gathering information. You have control of the question order, and you can make sure that all the questions will be answered. In addition, you may beneﬁt from the spontaneity of the interview process. Interviewees don't always have the luxury of going away and thinking about their responses or, even to some degree, censoring their responses. You may ﬁnd that interviewees will blurt things out that they would never commit to on paper in a questionnaire.

**WHEN INTERVIEWS ARE NOT THE BEST OPTION**

Interviews are not the only way of gathering information and depending on the case, they may not even be appropriate or eﬃcient. For example, large-scale phone interviews can be time-consuming and expensive. Mailed questionnaires may be the best option in cases where you need information form a large number of people. Interviews aren't eﬃcient either when all you need is collecting straight numeric data. Asking your respondents to ﬁll out a form may be more appropriate.

Interviews will not be suitable if respondents will be unwillingly to cooperate. If your interviewees have something against you or your organization, they will not give you the answers you want and may even mess up your results. When people don't want to talk, setting up an interview is a waste of time and resources. You should, then, look for a less direct way of gathering the information you need.

**PROBLEMS WITH INTERVIEWS**

You must also be well prepared for traps that might arise from interviews. For example, your interviewee may have a personal agenda and he or she will try to push the interview in a way to beneﬁt their own interests. The best solution is to become aware of your interviewee's inclinations before arranging the interview.

Sometimes, the interviewee exercises his or her control even after the interview is done, asking to change or edit the ﬁnal copy. That should be a right of the interviewer only. If the subject you're addressing involves technical information, you may have the interviewee check the ﬁnal result for you, just for accuracy.

**WHOM SHOULD YOU INTERVIEW?**

Your choice of interviewees will, obviously, be inﬂuenced by the nature of the information you need. For example, if you're trying to set up a volunteer program for your organization, you may want to interview the volunteer coordinator at one or two other successful agencies for ideas for your program.

On the other hand, if you're taking a look at the community's response to an ad campaign you've been running, you'll want to identify members of the target audience to interview. In this case, a focus group can be extremely useful.

If you're reluctant to contact a stranger for an interview, remember that most people enjoy talking about what they know and are especially eager to share their knowledge with those who are interested. Demonstrate interest and your chances of getting good interviews will improve.

**HOW SHOULD YOU CONDUCT INTERVIEWS?**

Sometimes, being a good interviewer is described as an innate ability or quality possessed by only some people and not by others. Certainly, interviewing may come more easily to some people than to others, but anybody can learn the basic strategies and procedures of interviewing. We're here to show you how.

***INTERVIEW STRUCTURE:***

First you should decide how structured you want your interview to be. Interviews can be formally structured, loosely structured, or not structured at all. The style of interviewing you will adopt will depend on the kind of result you're looking for.

In a highly structured interview, you simply ask subjects to answer a list of questions. To get a valid result, you should ask all subjects identical questions. In an interview without a rigid structure, you can create and ask questions appropriate the situations that arise and to the central purpose of the interview. There's no predetermined list of questions to ask. Finally, in a semi-structured setting, there is a list of predetermined questions, but interviewees are allowed to digress.

***TYPES OF INTERVIEWS:***

Now that you've decided how structured you want the interview to be, it's time to decide how you want to conduct it. Can you do it through the phone, or do you need to it face-to-face? Would a focus group be most appropriate? Let's look at each of these interview types in depth.

*Face-to-face interviews*

Face-to-face interviews are a great way to gather information. Whether you decide to interview face-to-face depends on the amount of time and resources you have available at your disposal. Some advantages of interviewing in person are:

* You have more ﬂexibility. You can probe for more speciﬁc answers, repeat questions, and use discretion as to the particular questions you ask.
* You are able to watch nonverbal behavior.
* You have control over the physical environment.
* You can record spontaneous answers.
* You know exactly who is answering.
* You can make sure the interview is complete and all questions have been asked.
* You can use a more complex questionnaire.

However, if face-to-face interviews prove to be too expensive, too time-consuming, or too inconvenient to be conducted, you should consider some other way of interviewing. For example, if the information you're collecting is of a sensitive and conﬁdential nature, your respondents may prefer the comfort of anonymity, and an anonymous questionnaire would probably be more appropriate.

*Telephone interviews*

Telephone interviews are also a good way of getting information. They're particularly useful when the person you want to speak to lives far away and setting up a face-to- face interview is impractical. Many of the same advantages and disadvantages of face-to-face interviewing apply here; the exception being, of course, that you won't be able to watch nonverbal behavior.

Here are some tips to make your phone interview successful:

* Keep phone interviews to no more than about ten minutes--exceptions to this rule may be made depending on the type of interview you're conducting and on the arrangements you've made with the interviewee.
* If you need your interviewee to refer to any materials, provide them in advance.
* Be extra motivating on the phone, because people tend to be less willing to become engaged in conversation over the phone.
* Identify yourself and offer your credentials. Some respondents may be distrustful, thinking they're being played a prank.
* If tape-recording the conversation, ask for authorization to do so.
* Write down the information as you hear it; don't trust your memory to write the information down later.
* Speak loud, clear and with pitch variation -- don't make it another boring phone call.
* Don't call too early in the morning or too late at night, unless arranged in advance.
* Finish the conversation cordially, and thank the interviewee.

With the increasing use of computers as a means of communication, interviews via e-mail have become popular. E-mail is an inexpensive option for interviewing. The advantages and drawbacks of e-mail interviews are similar to phone interviews. E-mails are far less intrusive than the phone. You are able to contact your interviewee, send your questions, and follow up the received answers with a thank-you message. You may never meet or talk to your respondent.

However, through e-mail your chances for probing are very limited, unless you keep sending messages back and forth to clarify answers. That's why you need to be very clear about what you need when you ﬁrst contact your interviewee. Some people may also resent the impersonal nature of e-mail interaction, while others may feel more comfortable having time to think about their answers.

*Focus groups*

A focus group, led by a trained facilitator, is a particular type of "group interview" that may be very useful to you. Focus groups consisting of groups of people whose opinions you would like to know may be somewhat less structured; however, the input you get is very valuable. Focus groups are perhaps the most ﬂexible tool for gathering information because you can focus in on getting the opinions of a group of people while asking open- ended questions that the whole group is free to answer and discuss. This often sparks debate and conversation, yielding lots of great information about the group's opinion.

During the focus group, the facilitator is also able to observe the nonverbal communication of the participants. Although the sample size is generally smaller than some other forms of information gathering, the free exchange of opinions brought on by the group interaction is an invaluable tool.

**PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW**

So you've chosen your interviewees, set up the interview, and started to think about interview questions. You're ready to roll, right?

Not quite. First, you need to make sure you have as much information as possible about your interview topic. You don't need to be an expert -- after all, that's why you're interviewing people! -- but you do want to be fairly knowledgeable. Having a solid understanding of the topic at hand will make you feel more comfortable as an interviewer, enhance the quality of the questions you ask, and make your interviewee more comfortable as well.

In addition, it's important to understand your interviewee's culture and background before you conduct your interview. This understanding will be reﬂected on the way you phrase your questions, your choice of words, your ice-breakers, the way you'll dress, which the material you'll avoid so that the questions remain inoffensive to your interviewee.

**CONDUCT THE INTERVIEW**

Now that you're prepared, it's time to conduct the interview. Whether calling or meeting someone, be sure to be on time -- your interviewee is doing you a favor, and you don't want to keep him or her waiting.

When interviewing someone, start with some small talk to build rapport. Don't just plunge into your questions -- make your interviewee as comfortable as possible.

*Points to remember:*

* Practice -- prepare a list of interview questions in advance. Rehearse, try lines, mock-interview friends. Memorize your questions. Plan ahead the location and ways to make the ambient more comfortable.
* Small-talk -- never begin an interview cold. Try to put your interviewee at ease and establish rapport.
* Be natural -- even if you rehearsed your interview time and time again and have all your questions memorized, make it sound and feel like you're coming up with them right there.
* Look sharp -- dress appropriately to the ambient you're in and to the kind of person you're interviewing. Generally you're safe with business attire, but adapt to your audience. Arrive on time if you are conducting the interview in person.
* Listen -- present yourself aware and interested. If your interviewee says something funny, smile. If it's something sad, look sad. React to what you hear.
* Keep your goals in mind -- remember that what you want is to obtain information. Keep the interview on track, don't digress too much. Keep the conversation focused on your questions. Be considerate of your interviewee's limited time.
* Don't take "yes/no" answers -- monosyllabic answers don't offer much information. Ask for an elaboration, probe, ask why. Silence may also yield information. Ask the interviewee to clarify anything you do not understand
* Respect -- make interviewees feel like their answers are very important to you (they are supposed to be!) and be respectful for the time they're donating to help you.

**QUESTIONS**

Questions are such a fundamental part of an interview that's worth taking a minute to look at the subject in depth. Questions can relate to the central focus of your interview, with to-the-point, speciﬁc answers; they can be used to check the reliability of other answers; they can be used just to create a comfortable relationship between you and the interviewee; and they can probe for more complete answers.

It's very important that you ask your questions in a way to motivate the interviewee to answer as completely and honestly as possible. Avoid inﬂammatory questions ("Do you always discriminate against women and minorities, or just some of the time?"), and try to stay polite. And remember to express clearly what you want to know. Just because interviewer and interviewee speak the same language, it doesn't mean they'll necessarily understand each other.

There are some problems that can arise from the way you ask a question. Here are several of the most common pitfalls:

* Questions that put the interviewee in the defensive -- These questions bring up emotional responses, usually negative. To ask, "Why did you do such a bad thing?" will feel like you are confronting your interviewee, and he or she will get defensive. Try to ask things in a more relaxed manner.
* The two-in-one question -- These are questions that ask for two answers in one question. For instance, "Does your company have special recruitment policy for women and racial minorities?" may cause hesitation and indecision in the interviewee. A "yes" would mean both, and a "no" would be for neither. Separate the issues into two separate questions.
* The complex question -- Questions that are too long, too involved, or too intricate will intimidate or confuse your interviewee. The subject may not even understand the questions in its entirety. The solution is to break down the question and make brief and concise.
* In addition, pay attention to the order in which you ask your questions. The arrangement or ordering of your question may signiﬁcantly affect the results of your interview. Try to start the interview with mild and easy questions to develop a rapport with the interviewee. As the interview proceeds, move to more sensitive and complex questions.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Remember to take good notes, if you're taking notes. Put quotation marks around the person's actual words, and don't embellish their quotes. You may tape-record the conversation, but make sure your tape recorder is working well, or hours of work can go down the drain. If you're going to tape-record your interview, make sure you obtain the interviewee's permission beforehand and on tape.

Finally, it's important to time your interview so that it won't last for hours. Some people may refuse to (or may be too busy to) engage on an interview they know will last for two or more hours. Others may lose interest during a long interview. So, try to be concise. A good rule of thumb is to make your interview long enough that you get useful information from it and short enough that you don't tire your interviewee. If you know you'll need to spend a lot of time interviewing somebody, consider dividing your interviews in two or more sessions.

**IN SUMMARY**

So, your interview is done and it you've got the information you needed. It's time to thank you interviewee for his or her kind cooperation. Send them a thank you note soon after the interview. Be cordial and appreciative. You never know when you may need or want to interview this person again!

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