

Interviewing Skills Summary

The following summary lays out some of the characteristics often considered important for effective interviewing as well as effective monitoring.

Listening Skills

- Start listening from the moment you walk in.
- Assume the people are ready to welcome you and are willing to suggest positive alternatives where problems exist.
- Concentrate on the interviewee's main points and the feelings that go with what is said.
- Keep eye contact with the person speaking when possible. When there is a group, be aware of other people who may have comments to add to those of the current speaker and be sure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.
- Remember, you are there to listen, not to solve problems, not defend past behaviors, nor make up for past mistakes.
- Remember to think about how they see you as well as how you are seeing them.

Procedures to Remember

- Set a friendly, professional context from the start.
- Bring all materials related to the monitoring visit (e.g., checklists, forms, random numbers table).
- Avoid any probes that would lead the person to a specific answer (e.g., "Don't you think that...").
- When a long response has been given, a good probe is to summarize the main points the individual(s) have made and to ask "if there is anything else" they would have to say about it. This also shows you have been listening.
- Your job is to identify problems, gather information for potential issues, and maintain and build relationships.

Asking Questions

Some Principles for Asking Questions

- Ask one thing at a time
- Avoid leading the person you are asking
- Avoid ambiguous words
- Don't overestimate people's ability to recall
- Stick to simple sentences
- Use core vocabulary
- Aim for clarity
- Don't use loaded questions
- Be sure that, when necessary, the time frame is expressed in the question
- Consider what has already been asked that might influence the answer to the next question

Probing During Interviews

One of the most challenging and important aspects of interviewing is getting someone to answer the questions which are asked. If your interviewee gives you an incomplete or irrelevant answer, misunderstands the question, if you do not understand his or her answer, or if he or she loses track of the question and gets off on another topic, it is your responsibility to get him back on the track through careful, neutral techniques. The quality of the interview depends a great deal on the interviewer's ability to probe and use these techniques successfully.

Probing has two major functions:

- It motivates the interviewee to communicate more fully so that he or she enlarges on, clarifies, or explains the reasons behind what he or she has said.
- It helps the interviewee focus on the specific content of the interview so that irrelevant and unnecessary information can be avoided.

Probes must perform these two functions without introducing bias.

Obtaining specific, complete responses which satisfy the objectives of the questions can be the most difficult part of the interview. Some interviewees have difficulty putting their thoughts into words; others may give unclear or incomplete answers; still others may be reluctant to reveal their attitudes because they feel that they are socially unacceptable. You must deal with such factors and use procedures which encourage and clarify responses.

Even the best questionnaire may elicit first responses which are inadequate. An answer may be inadequate because it is only a partial answer and therefore incomplete; it may also be irrelevant, about something other than the subject of the question, or it may be unclear. In the following examples, note how the inadequate replies fail to answer the question:

Q: Do you think it will make a lot of difference to the country whether the Democrats or Republicans win the November elections, or that it won't make much difference which side wins?

A: Yes, I do. (Unclear answer)

Q: *Considering the country as a whole, do you think we'll have good times, or bad times, or what, between now and a year from now?*

A: I hope we'll have good times. (Irrelevant answer)

You cannot accept either of these responses. Obviously, some method of returning the interviewee's mind to the topic of the question is needed. This does not mean that you should openly question a interviewee's answer, since the interviewee probably thought he was answering the question correctly. Rather, by probing, you can encourage the interviewee to clarify and expand the answer.

Kinds of Probes

Several different neutral techniques are listed below:

Repeat the question. Many, hearing it for a second time, realize what kind of answer is needed. Often no other probe is necessary.

An expectant pause. The simplest way to convey to an interviewee that you know he or she has begun to answer the question, but that you feel he or she has more to say, is to be silent. The pause--often accompanied by an expectant look or a nod of the head--gives the interviewee time to gather additional thoughts.

Accepting silence is often difficult for first-timers. A few seconds can seem like a lifetime. Be sensitive, however, to the fact that a person may be out of ideas.

Repeating the interviewee's reply. Repeating what has been said, especially as you are writing it, often stimulates additional ideas.

Neutral questions or comments. Anything else? Any other reason? Any others? How do you mean? Could you tell me more about that? or your thinking on that? What do you have in mind? What do you mean by that?

These probes indicate interviewer interest. New interviewers often find it useful to write these probes on a card and tape the card to the inside of their folder. You know the question's objective, while the interviewee may not. Your manner in asking these questions is very important. Using an aggressive or demanding tone may put people off and kill rapport. Longer sentences tend to encourage more information than longer sentences. "Are there any other reasons why you feel that way?" give the interviewee time to think. "Any other?" is much more likely to elicit a "no" response.

Sometimes, the question is most effective when asked in a slightly bewildered tone. "I'm not quite sure I know what you mean by that--could you tell me a little more?" However, please do not overplay this or the interviewee may begin to think you are incapable of understanding.

Non-directive Probing. Of course, these probes must be accomplished without introducing bias, and the potential is great. Consider the following situation:

"How do you think things are going in the world today--I mean our relations with other countries?"

The interviewee's first answer might be:

"Well, I don't know. In some ways they are going well and in some ways they are going poorly."

The interviewee has not answered the question but has indicated some thoughts on the subject. How might the interviewer handle this situation? A neutral probe might be:

"I see; well, could you tell me what you have in mind?"

or

"There are no right or wrong answers on things like this, of course. I'd just like to get your thinking about it."

It is important not to change the content of the question. The following example illustrates a directive probe that violates this rule:

"Well, what about our relations with China?"

The interviewee will then consider any answer in terms of our relations with China--a subject that neither the questionnaire nor the interviewee had mentioned and that was introduced solely by the questioner.

The principle of non-directive probing does not apply in the same way when the question is asking for straight factual information. For example, if you are asking about total number of employees and the interviewee seems to only be considering the employees on the site, it is perfectly acceptable to focus on the question by saying, "Does that include those at the sites in central and western Connecticut?" It is not acceptable to say, "You have more than 500 employees, don't you?"

Occasionally, an interviewee will give an "I don't know" answer. This can actually mean:

- The interviewee does not understand the question
- The interviewee is using "don't know" to fill the silence while thinking about the question
- The interviewee may be trying to evade the issue but does not want to hurt the interviewer's feeling by saying so in a direct manner.
- The interviewee really may not know.

If the interviewee actually does not have the information that you request, this in itself is significant data. It is your responsibility to be sure that this is in fact the case, and not mistake "I have no opinion on that" for "Wait a minute, I'm thinking." A repetition of the question, an expectant pause, a reassuring remark ("Well, we're just interested in your general ideas about this.") or a neutral probe ("What are your ideas about this?") will all encourage the interviewee to reply.

Since you know very little about your interviewee's reaction to questions at the beginning of the interview, it is a good idea to probe all of the "don't know" responses that occur during the first few pages of a questionnaire.

Examples of Probes

The primary question is:

"Considering the country as a whole, do you think we will have good times during the next year, or bad times, or what?"

Answer 1:

Yes, I do.

(What does the interviewee mean? "Yes, we will have good times," and "Yes, we will have bad time," are both possible interpretations.)

Possible probes:

Let me make sure I understand you. Do you think we will have good times during the next year, bad times, or what?

Repeat answer, "You said yes..." (pause)...(repeat question).

What did you mean?

Answer 2:

I hope we have good times.

(This answer is irrelevant. The question asked what his expectations were, not what his wishes and hopes were.)

Possible probes:

We all hope we will have good times, but what do you think will happen?

Let me just read this question again...(repeat the question).

Answer 3:

Well, we're all getting along better these days.

(This answer is irrelevant. The question asked for an expectation in absolute terms, and not a statement of how things are now, or a relative answer comparing next year to this year.)

Possible probes:

I see, but would you say...(repeat question).

Yes, and thinking only about next year...(repeat alternative emphasizing the words "good times" and "bad times").

Answer 4:

It will be good; my husband just got a promotion.

(This answer is irrelevant. The question asked about the country as a whole, not the interviewee and her family.)

Possible probes:

That's nice, now...(repeat question, stressing the words "country as a whole.").

Answer 5:

Maybe good, maybe bad. It all depends.

(The interviewee may be saying that he just cannot tell, but he has not made that clear. Be careful no to misdirect the interviewee by focusing on the word "depends.")

Possible probes:

What do you expect will happen?

Which would be closer to the way you feel? (repeat alternatives)

Can you tell me more about what you expect will happen? (Depending on the subsequent response, you may need to summarize to clarify which alternative they have actually chosen.)