

# Evaluation in Organizations

A Systematic Approach to  
Enhancing Learning,  
Performance, and Change

2nd Edition

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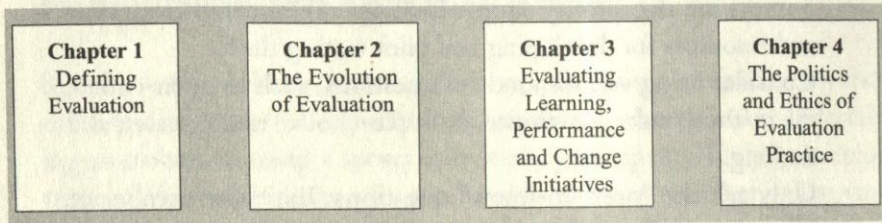
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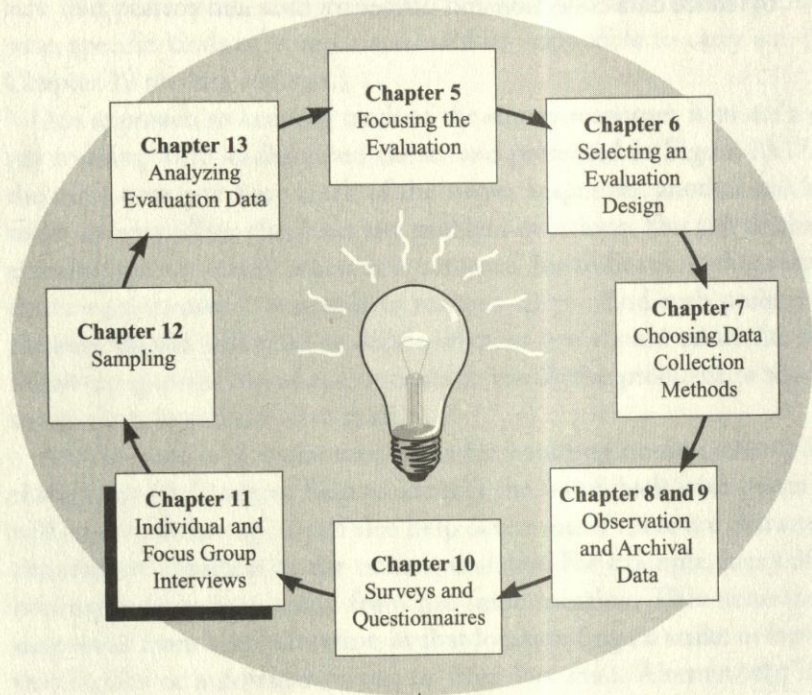
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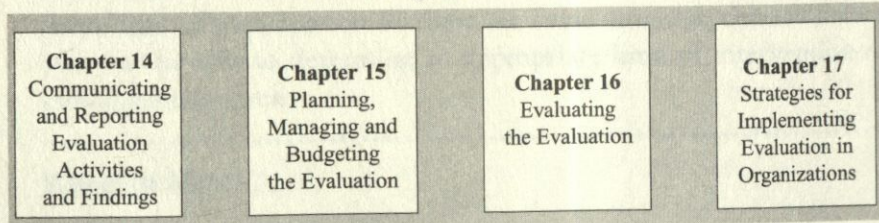
## Background and Context of Evaluation



## Designing and Implementing the Evaluation



## Maximizing Evaluation Use





# Individual and Focus Group Interviews

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- Determining Which Interview Approach to Use
- Advantages of Individual and Focus Group Interviews
- Disadvantages of Individual and Focus Group Interviews
- Guidelines for Constructing Individual and Focus Group Interview Guides
- Guidelines for Conducting Individual and Focus Group Interviews
- The Interviewer's Role
- Selecting and Training Interviewers
- Managing the Interview Process
- Computer-Aided Interviewing

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### **Vignette 8: Getting the Most from Interviewing at Bluetail Financial Services**

Sandy Gutierrez, manager of information technology at Bluetail Financial Services, wanted to better understand the organization's learning needs regarding the development, management, and use of information. After writing down several questions that she wanted answered, Sandy invited thirty-five employees from different departments to a focus group interview (she sent each one an email invitation promising refreshments for those in attendance). At the scheduled time, twenty-five of the thirty-five employees showed up. After the interview, however, Sandy expressed some disappointment that only a few people seemed to talk. She wondered if those who had



been quiet really felt the same as those who had expressed their thoughts and opinions. As a result, she wasn't quite sure what to do: should she act on the information obtained from the few?

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Because of the perceived ease of conducting individual and focus group interviews, they are frequently used methods for gathering evaluation information within organizations. In this chapter, we discuss different types of interviews, advantages and disadvantages of using the interview method to collect evaluation data, and guidelines for conducting effective interviews.

### **Types of Interviews**

In this section, we describe three types of interviews: (1) individual, in-person interviews, (2) telephone interviews, and (3) focus group interviews.

#### ***Individual In-Person Interviews***

The in-person interview is sometimes called a face-to-face interview. In organizations, such interviews typically take place in the interviewee's office or in some other location where the interviewee feels comfortable. Individual in-person interviews typically last from thirty minutes to three hours.

#### ***Telephone Interviews***

In contrast to the in-person interview, the telephone interview takes place with the interviewee and the interviewer in their own offices. Telephone interviews are often the method of choice when the interviewee is unable to meet face-to-face because of scheduling limitations or when interviewees are in different geographic locations. As a result, telephone interviews avoid the costs and delays that travel by the interviewer would incur. However, since the interviewer is not physically present, there is no opportunity to gain insight into the organizational setting through personal observation. With webcams, however, the interviewee and the interviewer can at least see each other and their



reactions to the various questions. Telephone interviews typically last between ten and thirty minutes.

### ***Focus Group Interviews***

The major difference between the in-person and a focus group interview is that the in-person interview involves only one interviewee, whereas a focus group interview involves multiple interviewees. Thus a focus group interview typically consists of six to twelve participants who share a common experience and can collectively address a set of questions (Krueger and Casey 2000; Stewart, Shamdasani, and Rook 2006). Keeping the size of the group to a manageable number increases the likelihood that all participants will have an opportunity to speak. As illustrated in the vignette, when you have too many people in a focus group, it may be difficult to gain full participation from each person. When this happens, you potentially lose out on important information.

The interaction among focus group participants can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, as group members interact, they may stimulate new ideas and memories. On the other hand, the influence of other group members can be viewed as problematic, if one person dominates or the group reverts to a "groupthink" mentality. It is the interviewer's responsibility to keep the interview on track and to encourage everyone to offer his or her experiences, thoughts, and opinions.

To ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable talking with one another, it is usually wise to structure the focus group interviews so that people of similar position, experience, tenure, or need are within the same group. Focus group interviews are generally scheduled for one and a half to three hours.

### **Determining Which Interview Approach to Use**

In determining whether to use the interview method as an evaluation data collection method, you should consider (1) if an interview approach is an appropriate method given the organization's context and its population, and (2) which interview approach will best address the evaluation key questions. For example, if you are conducting extensive interviews with a small number of individuals in one or only a few locations, you



may want to use the in-person interview. If, on the other hand, you are trying to gather information from many people in different locations, you may want to consider conducting a telephone interview. If groups of people are located in certain sites and you want the interaction of a group, then you may choose the focus group interview method.

### **Advantages of Individual and Focus Group Interviews**

There are several advantages of using individual and focus group interviews as an evaluation data collection method. These include:

- Individual or focus group interviews typically provide more in-depth information than other methods. Interviews often result in stories, examples, and qualitative descriptions that would otherwise go unrepresented.
- Both types of interviews allow the interviewer to make a personal connection with the interviewee, which might enhance the quality and quantity of the data provided.
- The interviewer can gather and record personal impressions regarding the interviewee and possibly the setting, which may contribute further information to the evaluation.
- Since questions are read or spoken to the interviewee by the interviewer, individual and focus group interviews are particularly useful for gathering data from people for whom reading and writing may be difficult.
- Unlike the survey method, the interviewer knows who the interviewees are and thus can ensure greater participation.
- Both types of interviews can uncover unexpected information.
- Once individuals have agreed to participate in an interview, most are likely to complete the entire interview as compared with a survey where a person may start the survey and then stop in the middle.
- In comparison to focus group interviews, individual interviews allow the interviewer to have greater control over the situation, thus ensuring that all the questions are addressed.



- Focus group interviews provide opportunities for participants to interact with one another in ways that may enrich the depth and quality of the data. Participants often motivate each other in ways that result in new ideas and insights.
- Focus group interviews allow data to be gathered from a large number of people at a relatively low cost.

### **Disadvantages of Individual and Focus Group Interviews**

Individual and focus group interviews also have inherent limitations. These include:

- Although the same questions may be presented in the same manner during individual interviews, interviewees may not interpret them in the same way, and thus may respond quite differently to the questions.
- Both individual in-person and focus group interviews can be relatively expensive methods of data collection as compared with a mail survey, particularly when gathering data from people in diverse locations (which requires travel expenses).
- Qualitative data collected from interviews will take longer to transcribe and analyze than survey, checklist, or test data.
- Some groups within an organization, such as executives, may refuse to participate in a focus group interview. In such cases, you may need to conduct an individual in-person or telephone interview with these individuals.
- Both individual and focus group interviews require skilled and trained interviewers. In contrast, after the difficult work of developing the survey has been completed, a mailed survey can be handed to an administrative person or a mailing house for distribution and follow-up.
- Both types of interviews can be hard to schedule. Even when a schedule has been set, the interviewee may not be available and the interview time may need to be rescheduled.



## **Guidelines for Constructing Individual and Focus Group Interview Guides**

The following two sections describe three types of interview questions and discuss the importance of pilot testing the interview guide.

### ***Types of Interview Questions***

As you consider what interview approach to use, you need to think about how structured you want the interview to be. For example, you may wish to conduct the interview using an unstructured approach. Here you develop one or two questions to guide the interview, but the interview resembles more of a conversation that meanders through certain topics of interest to the interviewee. An unstructured interview may be particularly appropriate when all of the interview questions are not known and preliminary conversations will help identify the most critical or pertinent issues.

A second type of question format is the semistructured approach, whereby the interviewer develops a set of questions to guide the interview process in a consistent manner with all interviewees. However, the semistructured interview allows for probing, rephrasing of the questions, and asking the questions in a different sequence than laid out on the interview guide. As such, it appears informal and conversational, yet its purpose and direction are clear to the interviewees. This approach is most commonly used for in-person individual and focus group interviews.

The third type of interview is the structured approach. This method is often used for telephone interviews, whereby the interviewer asks each question in the exact order listed on the interview guide of all interviewees. The interviewer using the structured method rarely probes for details or more information and rarely rephrases a question. Structured interview guides often include rating scales or multiple-choice items. This method is most effective for reducing interviewer bias when several interviewers are used.

Once you have chosen the type of interview that is best suited for your evaluation, one of the next tasks is to develop the interview guide (for semistructured and structured interviews). Many of the suggestions that appear in Chapter 10 on the wording of questions are also relevant for constructing an individual or focus group interview guide.



### ***Pilot Testing the Interview Guide***

Pilot testing the interview guide can help identify questions that may be misinterpreted by interviewees. Conventional pilot testing typically consists of interviewers conducting a small number of interview sessions. Interviewers can then determine if specific items need further clarification or rewriting.

A second approach to pilot testing is behavior coding, in which an observer views, live or by tape or digital recording, the pilot interviews and notes the interviewee's reactions to the interviewer and his or her questions. Items that elicit a response that varies from the intended question or seem to be confusing to the interviewee are then modified for the final interview guide.

## **Guidelines for Conducting Individual and Focus Group Interviews**

This section focuses on the recruiting of interview participants and suggestions for scheduling the interviews.

### ***Recruiting Participants***

Regardless of the type of interview, the interviewer will need to make some initial contact with potential interviewees. This initial contact can be extremely important in securing the interviewees' cooperation and participation. The following are some guidelines to facilitate this process.

- Either in a letter or by phone, briefly describe the purpose of the evaluation and what will be done with the information. Your goal is to stimulate potential participants' interest in the evaluation. (See Figures 11.1 and 11.2 for examples of recruiting scripts.)
- For both individual and focus group interviews, you may need to ask some qualifying questions during the recruitment stage. For example, you may want to include only those who have experienced a layoff in their department. If so, such qualifying questions should be asked early in the recruiting call and



certainly prior to making arrangements for the individual or focus group interview.

- If you can, assure all interviewees that the information will be kept confidential.
- If you can offer incentives for participation, do so. However, be aware that cash payment for participation may be considered income and therefore taxable. This could create problems if the payment is to a public agency or to certain kinds of organizations. In these and other cases, you may wish to provide certificates or small gift items.
- Arrange a time for the interview. For an in-person or telephone interview, this should be at the earliest mutually acceptable time. For a focus group interview, suggest one or more possible times if multiple group sessions will be conducted.
- State the beginning and ending time and the anticipated length of the interview. You should be sure to give some reasonable time that you will not exceed (unless at the urging of the interviewees).
- For both individual in-person and focus group interviews, identify the location for the meeting. Be sure that the setting provides a private and quiet environment. For the individual interview, don't assume that the person's office is the best place.
- Leave a telephone number, email address, or other contact information where you can be reached, if necessary, before the interview.

When inviting people to be interviewed, give them enough information to make them want to participate, but do not provide the complete list of interview questions ahead of time. Though giving them an overview of the questions is fine, providing them the interview guide might affect the validity of their responses during the interview if they developed "canned" responses in preparation for the interview. Of course, there may be situations where providing the list of interview questions would be appropriate. For example, you may want to interview people in English who have limited English-language proficiency. Giving them the interview questions in advance may make them more comfortable and better able to respond during the interview.



FIGURE 11.1 Example of a Recruiting Script for an In-Person Interview

Hello, my name is Cathy Mansfield. I'm calling from the Organizational Development and Performance Department of Santa Fe Concepts, Inc. Jake Richards, the site coordinator for the training program you participated in last month, gave me your name. He said that you might speak with me about your experience with the course, How to Learn on the Web. We are looking at ways to improve the course and thus are conducting an evaluation of its design and effectiveness. We want the course to be both educational and visually engaging.

I would like to schedule an interview with you during the week of October 10. Our conversation should take about thirty minutes, and I would be happy to come to your office. Would you be willing to participate? *If Yes*, What day and time works best for you? *If No*, Okay, thanks anyway.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/day and \_\_\_\_\_

time: \_\_\_\_\_

*Or* \_\_\_\_\_

Reason for \_\_\_\_\_

refusal: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time. (*Hang up*)

### **Scheduling the Interviews**

Trying to arrange an interview sometimes feels like climbing Mount Everest. With people's hectic schedules, it is often a good idea to schedule the interviews at least four weeks in advance. Even then, there are inevitable scheduling or logistical problems that prevent collecting interview data in a timely and efficient way. Some of the most common problems and their solutions are summarized below.



FIGURE 11.2 Example of a Recruiting Script for a Focus Group Interview

Name:	Follow Up: Faxed Info, call back	
Department:	Service Plus Date/Time:	
Address:	Phone:	Fax:

Hello, my name is Ben Viejo and I'm calling from the instructional technology department. I understand that you recently participated in a web-based training program on customer service skills called Service Plus.

[*IF YES*] We are conducting an evaluation to determine how effective the course was in helping participants service their customers. We would like to invite you to attend one of four focus group interviews that we will be conducting in the boardroom on the tenth floor. The purpose of the interview will be to understand your experiences as you've tried to apply what you learned back to the job.

[*IF INTERESTED*] We are scheduling focus groups at four different times.  
 Tuesday, May 20, from 11:00 to 1:00  
 Tuesday, May 20, from 3:00 to 5:00  
 Wednesday, May 21, from 11:00 to 1:00  
 Wednesday, May 21, from 3:00 to 5:00

Which of these times and dates would be best for you? [*Check the selected time and date.*]

Time:	Tuesday, May 20	Wednesday, May 21
11:00-1:00		
3:00-5:00		

[*Let them know that lunch will be provided during the 11:00-1:00 time slots and refreshments will be served during the 3:00-5:00 time slots.*]

Thank-you for agreeing to participate. We will fax you a confirmation within the week. Can you please give me a fax number? Is this your correct title and address? [*Read them the title and address that is listed.*] If you have any questions, please feel free to call Sally Jones at 555-5555.

[*If person is not interested, thank him for his time and move on. If he is not sure, schedule a follow-up call.*]



Sometimes it's difficult to reach the individual. First, call the person and leave a voice-mail message. If calling does not yield a response, try using email and fax. If the person still does not respond, try contacting colleagues to determine why this person is not responding. He or she may be on vacation or on a business trip, for example. In addition, you can ask the colleagues to have the person return your call. If none of these procedures works, you may want to replace this person with another interviewee of the same type.

If a potential interviewee is hesitant to participate, reexplain the evaluation's purpose and emphasize the importance of their participation. Be sure to let the person ask questions, and try to address any concerns. Be careful not to annoy the person or goad him or her into participating. When the person refuses, try to find out why he or she does not wish to participate, but let it go if there is significant resistance.

If the person is concerned about confidentiality, provide reassurance that only the evaluation team will see the notes or the transcripts of the individual or focus group interviews. Indicate that quotes from an interview that are included in a report will not be attributed by name, although an individual may be asked for permission to use a specific quote in a final report. In these cases, let the interviewee know that you will be contacting him or her at a later time for such permission.

Since delays typically occur in conducting the interview, make an appointment for the earliest possible date.

Since individual and focus group interviewees may or may not remember the specifics of why you want to interview them or the time of the interview, call, fax, or email each person with a reminder of the scheduled time, place, or both, just to make sure that everyone receives the information and remembers the appointment.

Either before or during an interview, the participant may raise concerns about answering certain questions. The interviewer should assure the person of the right to refuse to answer any particular questions.

Sometimes a participant really does not have time to be interviewed. In other cases, unexpected schedule changes occur. When this happens, participants tend to be polite and even apologetic about the cancellation. If an interviewee breaks an appointment, for whatever reason, try to reschedule the interview as soon as possible. The interviewer should volunteer to change the location or timing of the interview to make it more



convenient if necessary. In the case of focus group interviews, if another group meeting is possible, then reschedule the participant for another time.

Ordinarily individuals have the right to refuse to take part in an evaluation. The interviewer may rarely encounter a person who regards the individual or focus group interview an invasion of privacy. If an interviewer encounters a person who refuses to participate or to answer a question, the above approaches can be used. In the case of a firm and final refusal, the interviewer must record the refusal. If the person refuses to participate at all, then seek an appropriate replacement interviewee or focus group participant, if available. (See Chapter 12 on sampling.)

### **The Interviewer's Role**

The interviewer often becomes a participant in the study by inadvertently influencing responses through the manner in which questions are asked or responses are acknowledged. Such influences caused by the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee must be recognized, defined, and minimized to maintain the data's validity and trustworthiness.

With interviews or focus groups, the interviewer should identify any language or cultural barriers in advance and prepare alternative approaches to reducing those barriers. If possible, the interviewer should use the participant's language. If a translator or interpreter is needed, then someone who is trusted by the participants should be asked to take on that role.

The interviewer should dress more formally for individual or focus group interviews in order to show respect for the participants. If conducting a focus group interview, be sure to provide refreshments before and during the session. For both types of interviews, consider giving a stipend to participants for their time and involvement.

Regardless of the type of interview, interviewees may want to portray themselves in an "acceptable" manner. In some cases, they may respond in a way that seems appropriate, socially acceptable, or politically correct to the interviewer. Thus interviewer affect, question sequence, and even the ordering of information within the question can lead interviewees to respond in a particular way. Therefore interviewers should be careful not to communicate information to interviewees that would bias their responses, and should in most cases not express their personal views.



The interviewer should, however, try to develop rapport by using a friendly, relaxed, and nonjudgmental approach. Developing rapport does not, however, imply that the interviewer should agree with what the interviewee says. Rather, the interviewer should understand and be sensitive to what is being expressed. The following are some suggestions for developing rapport.

- Remain neutral in delivering questions but avoid being monotonous. Refrain from giving positive or negative verbal or nonverbal reactions.
- Do not agree or disagree with the interviewee, either verbally or nonverbally. Raised eyebrows, indicating disagreement with the interviewee, can substantially alter later responses. The interviewer's response should be to affirm understanding of what the interviewee is saying, not agreeing or disagreeing with it.
- Note that with in-person and focus group interviews, the act of writing what the interviewee has said provides one of the most important indications that you consider the information meaningful and important. Recording responses in writing or on audiotape increases the likelihood that the interviewee will continue to talk.
- Understanding interviewee communication style is critical. In some cultures, maintaining eye contact with the interviewee indicates interest in the comments of the interviewee. In other cultures, maintaining eye contact is considered disrespectful. Thus consideration should be given to the cultural context of conducting both individual and focus group interviews.
- If you feel that you must say something to maintain rapport, paraphrase what the interviewee said.

Creating a relaxed atmosphere for the in-person or focus group interview is critical. A receptive, attentive, and interested interviewer can achieve such an atmosphere. In addition, the interviewer should be familiar with the questions and ask them without hesitancy. In some cases, the interviewer may want to work toward memorizing the guide so that he or she can direct all attention to the interviewee rather than to the guide.



### ***Facilitating the Interview***

The following guidelines may be useful to consider when preparing for and conducting the interviews.

- The beginning of the individual or focus group interview should include a brief introduction to the purpose of the evaluation, an explanation of how the respondents were chosen to participate, and an indication of how the information from the interviews will be used. Figure 11.3 shows the introduction to a telephone interview, and Figure 11.4 presents an example of a focus group introduction.
- Since the interviewee may have some anxiety regarding the interview, it is usually a good idea to begin with easy or nonthreatening questions. Such questions will enable the interviewee and the interviewer or facilitator to become comfortable with the setting and the process.
- Because focus group participants do not tend to arrive at the same time, it is helpful to prepare a one-page survey for those who come early. The questions should be relevant to the focus group topic, and the facilitator can then ask participants to report on their responses to one or more of the questions at the beginning of the session. This survey could focus on collecting necessary demographic information on the participants. In either case, these surveys should be collected at the end of the focus group interview, because they provide additional useful data. Make sure to collect surveys from all participants regardless of the time they arrived.
- Ask the questions as they are written on the interview guide if using a more structured interview approach. In general, changes should be limited. It is important to keep the same wording for all interviewees. Realistically, however, there will be circumstances when the interviewer will decide that a given question or part of a question is inappropriate. If so, the question may be altered to make it more relevant. If such a change or omission is needed, note what was said or write "omitted" by the question.



FIGURE 11.3 Example of an Introduction for a Telephone Interview

Participant ID# \_\_\_\_\_

Hello, my name is Mary Javier, and I called you a few weeks ago about participating in an evaluation we're conducting on the Leadership Counts training program at Wieviel Enterprises. When we last spoke, you suggested that this would be a good time for the interview. As we discussed during our earlier conversation, the interview should take no longer than thirty minutes. In addition, everything you say will be treated confidentially and no one but the evaluation team will have access to your responses. All of the data collected for this evaluation will be aggregated, and your name will not be used in the final reporting. Is this still a convenient time for you?

*If YES, continue with questions.*

*If NO, when would be a good time to talk?*

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Time \_\_\_\_\_

- When using a semistructured or structured approach, avoid immediate rephrasing of a question if an answer is not immediately forthcoming. Although an initial silence may lead you to feel that the question has not been understood, allow the interviewee a few moments to come up with an answer or to request clarification. If no answer comes, repeat the question verbatim. If there is still no answer or if the interviewee does not appear to understand the question, try to clarify the question by rewording it. However, if you do reword a question, try to record your exact words in brackets on the interview guide.
- Ask all questions on the interview guide, unless you know that an item is inappropriate or irrelevant for specific interviewees. When you are not certain whether a question applies, either ask the question anyway or begin by asking a preliminary clarifying question (and record it in brackets).
- Be sure to keep track of the time as you are conducting the interview. If you find you are running out of time, you may need to



FIGURE 11.4 Example of an Introduction for a Focus-Group Interview

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Thank-you so much for coming today. My name is Sandra Schmidt. I am part of the evaluation team that has been asked to evaluate the Creating Passion in the Workplace initiative that your organization has implemented over the last several months. We greatly appreciate your taking the time to participate in this focus group interview.

For the next ninety minutes, I will be asking you several questions about your opinions and experiences with the program. It's very important that you provide honest and candid feedback since the organization wants to use what they learn from this evaluation (1) to improve the program where needed and (2) to understand the ways in which the program is or is not successful. Rest assured, there are no wrong answers. We are conducting group interviews such as this with employees in each of the company's seven regional offices.

As you answer each question, I will try to note the essence of what you're saying on these flip chart pages. Since it's very important that I capture what you say, please let me know if I've represented your thoughts accurately. If not, I will certainly correct it. I will also be tape-recording our conversation so that I can be sure to capture everything you say. If any of you would not like to be tape-recorded, please let me know at this time.

All of the information you provide today will be treated confidentially. We will not be using any names in our evaluation report. However, so that we can follow each person's comment, we've given you each a number (on your name tent) and will use that number next to your comment on the flip chart pages. This will just tell us how many different people provided the various responses.

At your table, we've provided paper and a pencil for you to use to note anything you'd like to say while others are talking (just so you don't forget!). Please feel free to get up and help yourself to the refreshments.

Do you have any questions or concerns about what we're going to do here today?

Okay, let's get started! Let's first have each person introduce him- or herself.

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decide which questions are the most important to ask and which can be eliminated.

- Recognize that all interviews require some flexibility. Sometimes it is not possible to go in a particular order if the interviewee answers later questions in the process of answering an earlier one.

When posing multiple-choice questions in a structured interview, keep in mind the following:

- Do not change the wording of the questions, unless to paraphrase in semistructured interviews.
- If an interviewee does not know the meaning of a word used in a question, define the word.
- If an interviewee gives a reply other than the choices available or one that supplements or explains it in any significant way, record the reply next to the question, for later use in the analysis.
- At the conclusion of the interview, you should ask all interviewees if they have any questions or anything else they'd like to offer. Thank the interviewees for their cooperation and indicate that the interview was useful and worthwhile.

### ***Confidentiality of Interviewees' Responses***

Anonymity is nearly impossible when conducting individual and focus group interviews. Confidentiality can, however, be provided to interviewees for in-person and telephone individual interviews. Confidentiality means that the interviewer may know who the interviewees and their responses are, but they do not divulge their responses to anyone else. When reporting the findings, no identifying information is provided without permission.

However, in a focus group interview setting, interviewers cannot guarantee complete confidentiality since participants may choose to relay what they've heard to others outside of the focus group. Nevertheless, the interviewer should clearly explain that the evaluators regard the information as confidential and should request that participants treat what they hear as confidential. Confidentiality can also be promised by explaining that the interview transcripts, notes, and tapes will not be made available to others outside of the evaluation team.



### ***Asking Probing Questions***

Sometimes interviewees' responses do not seem to fit the question or, alternatively, seem to lead to additional important information. In such situations, asking the interviewee additional questions can improve the quality and quantity of the data. These questions are called probes and are designed to clarify, explain, and focus the comments of the interviewee to specific questions. The interviewer should consider using probing questions when:

- The response only partially answers the question.
- No response is given.
- The response seems irrelevant to the question.
- The response is inconsistent with previous responses.
- More information would provide examples or critical incidents to further enhance the original response.

The interviewer can use one or more of the following probing methods:

- Asking for further clarification. Probes can be useful after vague or impersonal responses. When probing a response to a certain question, you may want to use the technique of implying that you failed to understand the response. You might ask the question, "Can you tell me a little more about this? I'm not sure that I understand what you mean." This kind of probe is useful when an answer appears to be inconsistent with previous statements or the response is not clear. The interviewer might also say, "Think of a particular example—an example from your own experience. Can you tell me more about that?" After a response that seems significant but somewhat vague, the interviewer could ask, "How did you feel about that?"
- Repeating the question. Sometimes repeating the question for the interviewee is a useful technique, particularly if the interviewee's answers have strayed from the topic of the question or if the answers indicate a misinterpretation of the question.
- Summarizing the interviewee's reply. Repeating what was said is one way of making sure that you have understood the interviewee's



reply. Repeating the response allows the person to indicate the degree of accuracy of what you think you heard. For example, you might say, "What you are telling me is" . . . This provides an opportunity to elaborate on the response and obtain confirmation that what was said is what you heard. Always keep in mind that the interviewer's interpretation may tend to "lead" the interviewee's later responses.

A seemingly nonresponsive answer can mean different things under various circumstances. It might mean that the interviewee is thinking about an answer, wants to evade answering the question, does not know how or in what context to respond, or really does not understand the question. When receiving such a response, the interviewer should use whichever of the above mentioned probes is appropriate to determine the reason behind the seeming nonresponse and to try to obtain the needed information.

Probes are not always effective. Some people just do not remember specific examples or great detail. Another area in which probes may be ineffective is with questions that require highly personal or introspective answers. Some people may not have reflected on the interview topic and may not be able give a detailed reply to the particular question.

The most effective use of probes can be made only when you know the specific objectives of each question you will be asking. Only by knowing what you are after can you recognize an inadequate response. For this reason, it is important that you review the interview guide and the evaluation's key questions thoroughly.

### ***Valuing Silence***

Often interviewers feel that they must keep the interviewees occupied with a steady stream of questions. However, it is important to build in opportunities for the interviewee to contemplate a question and formulate a response. Once a question has been asked, the interviewer should allow the interviewee a few seconds or even a few minutes to think about the question before beginning some comment or going on to the next question. Because the interviewee, unlike the interviewer, has not previously reviewed the questions, he or she may need some time before answering.



Being silent while ostensibly "doing nothing" can improve the quality of the interaction. An expectant pause not only allows the interviewee time to reflect on a question but also tends to encourage him or her to be more spontaneous, candid, and thoughtful. A typical pattern in which silence is useful is when the interviewee answers quickly, pauses, and finally makes a modified and sometimes more revealing statement. Occasionally silence during questioning helps create an introspective mood. Such a mood tells the interviewee that the interviewer appreciates a thoughtful response and is willing to wait to hear what the interviewee has to say.

However, silence may be misused. Verbal silence contradicted by signs of interviewer anxiety or impatience (squirming, checking one's watch, fiddling, or finger tapping) is likely to be interpreted by the interviewee as an interruption. Such silence will not encourage contemplative answers. Also, too much silence might cause interviewees to feel pressured or embarrassed, thereby dampening their willingness to be forthcoming. The interviewer must learn the signs that indicate how much silence is most productive and monitor those signs continuously.

### ***Managing the Unexpected***

Overall, most individual and focus group interviews go smoothly and are completed in a professional manner. However, there are occasions when an interview or a focus group gets interrupted by a participant or another person. If possible, the interviewer should ask the person to postpone dealing with the interruption until after the session. If that is not possible and it is an individual interview, then the interviewer should suggest rescheduling the session. If the person is participating in a focus group interview and cannot postpone or delay dealing with the interruption, the interviewer should ask the person to leave this session. If there is another later session, consider rescheduling the person for that session.

In rare cases, the interviewer is in the uncomfortable position of hearing about and feeling a need to respond to problems that are not necessarily related to the evaluation. The interviewer may encounter an interviewee with problems that need to be handled by an employee assistance program (EAP) counselor, social worker, or friend. The interviewer should not be expected to deliver any service or follow-up on personal problems discovered in the interview setting. If the interviewee is upset



about some problem and the interviewer knows of a service or agency that could help in solving that problem, it would be appropriate to mention it as a possible source of assistance. If no appropriate referral is known, offering the interviewee some general sympathy and encouragement is often enough. The interviewer should not inform any staff or agency of a personal problem that is revealed during an individual or focus group interview. Such information is privileged, and to divulge it to any outside person or agency is a violation of confidentiality as well as the AEA guiding principles and program evaluation standards (Chapter 4). Although unlikely, the interviewer may also learn of illegal activity in the course of the interview. If it is secondhand information, the interviewer should advise the person to talk with an appropriate authority. If the interviewee mentions his or her involvement in some illegal activity, the interviewer may need to consult with a lawyer or at least another evaluator to determine the appropriate course of action.

In rare circumstances, an interviewee may decide to terminate an interview or want to leave a focus group before it is completed. First, the interviewer should determine whether the person is objecting to a certain question (which he or she has a right to do). If that is the case, the interviewer should indicate that the interviewee does not need to answer the question. If the interviewee still wants to terminate participation, the interviewer should determine whether the interviewee is simply tired or ill or has some other work or appointment. In a focus group interview situation, the interviewer should invite the person to leave, thank the person for his or her participation, and continue with the rest of the interview. In the case of an individual interview, the interviewer should ascertain whether the interviewee would consent to continue the interview at another time or on another day. If the interviewee wishes to end the interviewing process and not resume later, the interviewer should thank the person for his or her time before leaving. If appropriate, the interviewer should then arrange to interview another person who meets the same criteria.

### ***Recording Individual and Focus Group Interview Responses***

The interview data can be documented for later analysis and interpretation in a variety of ways. In all cases, consider the extent to which you can promise confidentiality of the transcripts, tapes, or notes.



*Digital Audio or Video Recording.* Using a digital audio-or video recorder can be an effective means for documenting individual and focus group interview data. Each interviewee, however, must agree to the recording. Indeed, in some states, it is illegal to record a telephone conversation without the person's permission. In any case, ethical practice demands that the interviewer obtain permission to record the interview. Furthermore, it is advisable to obtain a recording of the interviewee affirming permission for the recording when it is an in-person or telephone interview. If the person seems anxious or reluctant to be recorded, you can offer to place the equipment in an unobtrusive location or to turn it off and take notes instead. Even if you are recording the individual or focus group interview, you should not rely on it as the only record of the interview. Notes should also be taken if possible. Otherwise, if the equipment were to fail, no data would be available.

*Handwritten or Computer Written Notes.* Responses to all questions should be recorded in such a manner that they can be recalled and rewritten just as they were given by the interviewee—that is, as nearly verbatim as possible. This is not difficult in most cases, especially since the interviewer exercises some control over the pace of the session. Writing quickly and using abbreviations of responses is generally necessary during the session. With experience, interviewers typically develop an effective system of shorthand to faithfully capture the meaning and tenor of each response. In any case, it is important to write up the interview soon after it is over so that limited data loss occurs and so that others involved in the data analysis can read the transcripts.

For many questions, the interviewee may provide detailed examples or stories that can be digitally recorded easily but cannot be completely written down during the interview. For example, stories may be too lengthy to record verbatim or you may be unable to fully describe the tone or inflections of the interviewee's answer. In these situations, it's a good idea to jot a quick note or even a single word. Even without a recorder or in case the equipment fails, the remainder of the answer can be filled in immediately after the interview has ended.

When taking notes during the individual interview, try to ensure that your notes summarize everything that the interviewee has said. In particular, do not omit what seems to be peripheral or overly descriptive. These stories often tell a great deal about the interviewee and may be useful in



ways that do not appear obvious at the time. By leaving out some of the details, we may inadvertently lose the richness that interviews provide. Furthermore, omitting such details gives a distorted impression of the interview's content and of the interviewees' character and concerns.

As mentioned above, the degree of emotion or emphasis that the interviewee expresses is part of the response. However, it is a difficult thing to record during the session. If the interviewee becomes overly emotional—cries, becomes very animated and enthusiastic, raises his or her voice in discussing some topic, and so on—this can be noted in a word or two. Make it very clear when something is your impression or conclusion and not part of the interviewee's comments by placing brackets around your impressions or comments.

It is also good practice to avoid summarizing or paraphrasing the interviewee's answers. Summarizing or paraphrasing a response results in a loss of information and can distort the interpretation of the interview data, since the summarized response obscures the interviewee's own answer. For example, consider the following:

*Verbatim recording*

"I have a hard time getting to the training programs. My car is pretty old. I don't like to drive after dark. And I'm afraid to take a bus at night."

*Summarized recording*

The employee rarely goes to the company training programs.

In addition to distorting the meaning of the response, the summarization fails to provide details of the response that may be crucial to its interpretation. In the example given above, the summary fails to include the actual words used by the interviewee, omits some elements of the response, and gives no indication of the length of the response.

Whenever possible, include all your probes, comments, and explanations in your notes. Such statements made by the interviewer should be recorded on the interview guide at the point in the session where they were made. These statements should appear in brackets or parentheses to differentiate them from the interviewee's statements. This ensures that later interpretations are more accurate, because you will know which statement prompted which response.



Provide a response or an explanation for each question in the interview guide. Each question should either be answered by the interviewee or have some explanation as to why it was not answered. Questions might not be asked because the interviewer skipped them, either intentionally or by mistake.

*Completing the Interview Transcript.* If using a recording of the interview, make a thorough check to ascertain that the recording is complete and understandable. If the entire recording or portions are missing or difficult to understand, your handwritten notes should be used to complete the transcript.

The final versions of the interview transcript must be written accurately and legibly. Although having typed copies of the final copies of the notes will ensure legibility, it is not always possible or desirable to wait until a computer is available to do the transcription, particularly when a recording is not available or is difficult to understand. In these cases, the transcription should be done as soon after the interview as possible, preferably within twenty-four hours. If possible, the transcription of one interview should be completed before the next interview is conducted. Alternatively, the day's interviews may be written up after all have been completed, but this tends to cause confusion about precisely what was said in which interview. To whatever extent possible, the interviewer should avoid delays, because data loss increases with time.

In addition to the transcript available through the recording or the interview notes, you may also have materials that were created during the interview. Particularly in the case of focus group interviews, you may use flip charts to gather responses or ideas. These too must be transcribed.

### **Selecting and Training Interviewers**

Sometimes you will conduct evaluations in which you will employ others to conduct in-person, telephone, or focus group interviews. This may occur when data collection must take place with many people in a short amount of time. Alternatively, you may conduct an evaluation using a team approach. Whatever the circumstances, you should be sure that all interviewers are carefully selected and trained.



The role of the interviewer is crucial to the data collection process. He or she exerts control over the quality and quantity of data collected, particularly with more complex and extensive interview guides. Interviewees are likely to make judgments about the study and the staff conducting the study based on their personal contacts with the interviewers. For these reasons, the selection, training, and supervision of such staff can represent a major responsibility.

Interviewers may include outside contracted professionals, departmental staff, evaluation staff, or some combination of these. The following describes certain advantages and disadvantages associated with using each group.

The main advantage of contracting outside interviewers is their previous experience. They usually possess strong technical skills, can gain the confidence of interviewees because of their perceived objectivity, and can dedicate their full time to the completion of data collection. An experienced interview supervisor can easily coordinate day-to-day activities and can serve as a liaison to the lead evaluator. In addition, such a team can usually obtain additional trained personnel when needed. Disadvantages associated with contracted professionals include increased expense, some loss of knowledge when the data collection team disperses at the end of the project, and lack of in-depth knowledge of and experience with the program or the organization.

The principal advantage of using departmental staff is that they may gain new, systematic insights into the nature of the program, areas that need improvement, and impact the program may have on various groups (thus providing for individual, team, and organizational learning opportunities). In addition, interviewing affords them an opportunity to expand their firsthand knowledge about evaluation and the program being evaluated. Because of their knowledge of the program and the people involved, they may also have easy access to interviewees. Furthermore, using departmental staff can reduce data collection costs. Disadvantages of asking departmental staff to conduct the interviews include real or perceived lack of objectivity, lack of credibility regarding collecting evaluation data, lack of interviewing skills, little commitment to the evaluation, and little time to devote to the data collection effort.



### ***Critical Interviewer Skills***

Deciding on criteria and procedures for interviewer selection is an important task. The following criteria can be applied to the selection of appropriate contract personnel or departmental staff.

- Acute observation skills are indispensable to a good interviewer. The interviewer needs to listen carefully and openly to what the interviewees state and must avoid hearing only those things he or she expects to hear.
- Ability to deal with the unexpected is a core competency. The interviewer must be able to effectively handle the variety of unexpected challenges that arise in the in-person, telephone, or focus group interview setting.
- Neutrality in conducting an evaluation study is essential. If the interviewee senses that the interviewer has an agenda or expects a certain kind of response, the interviewee may not respond honestly, which will then affect the validity of the data. However, the interviewer should be able to express empathy as appropriate.
- Interviewing experience is desirable, though not critical. This includes familiarity with asking a series of questions and handling in-depth probes. Experience may come from related types of interview situations (e.g., counseling, clinical, or journalistic interviews).
- Willingness and ability to follow the prescribed procedures is a must. The interviewer must be willing and able to complete interviews and the written summaries on schedule and in sufficient detail.
- Educational background, including bachelor's level training in the behavioral or social sciences or experience in social science or educational research, should be sought whenever possible. Equivalent paid or volunteer experience may be substituted for academic training.
- Availability for the entire period of the data collection effort is clearly necessary.



### *Interviewer Training*

Once selected, the evaluator should prepare interviewers for the data collection task. Ideally, all interviewers should meet as a group in a central place so that they receive the same training. If the group cannot meet at one time and place, two alternatives are available. Training may be done in smaller groups where interviewers are clustered (such as in an organization's regions). The problem with decentralized training is that the reliability of the results may suffer if the content or processes of the various sessions are not consistent.

If in-person, decentralized training is judged infeasible, other media (such as video, web, telephone conferencing, training manuals, video or audio recordings with illustrative individual or focus group interviews) may be developed and combined with telephone consultation and close supervision. Regardless of the training mode chosen, two agenda items should be included in interviewer preparation: orientation and materials.

A thorough orientation to the study—its scope, intent, and possible uses of the evaluation's findings—should be an early part of the agenda. Knowledge of the evaluation's key questions allows the interviewer to ensure that they are addressed and may help the interviewer develop appropriate probes to clarify a point. To minimize the unintended biases of interviewers, several training methods can be used. Critical observations and group discussions can be used to develop an awareness of how interviewer effects manifest themselves and how these effects can be minimized. In addition, demonstration and practice interviews will prove helpful.

The interviewer should be given an opportunity to observe a demonstration session conducted by the evaluator or an experienced interviewer who was involved in the development of the interview guide. The interview may involve interviewees who meet the criteria for inclusion in the study, or staff members who role-play them. It is advisable to have all observers take notes as if they were conducting the interview. The notes serve as a basis for later discussions regarding the nature of responses, probing, coding decisions, and issues of interpretation.

After observing the demonstration interview, trainee interviewers should practice interviewing and recording responses under supervision. Individual interviewers can be paired with each other for practice. Focus



group interviewers can lead a small group of staff or other interviewers. After they become comfortable with the interview guide, practice with “real” interviewees is advisable. It is important to include some practice with unexpected responses and situations.

All written materials for use in the data collection process should be distributed and reviewed. Typically, these materials include the following:

- A general interviewer’s handbook containing sections about the evaluation’s purpose and key questions (or the entire evaluation plan), types of interviewees, time schedules, suggested responses to anticipated queries or problems, interviewee privacy and confidentiality, data handling, staff to be contacted and circumstances under which to seek staff help, and other related issues.
- Individual and focus group instruments (sometimes called guides or protocols) for each type of interviewee involved in the evaluation.
- Related materials, including documents such as introductory letters, follow-up telephone call guidelines, interview handouts, and financial and travel policies and forms.

### **Managing the Interview Process**

Keeping track of who is being interviewed and when is an important part of the management process. It might be advisable to develop an interview management plan to carefully monitor this phase of data collection. (See Chapter 15 on planning, managing, and budgeting the evaluation.)

### ***Keeping Records of Contacts***

Each contact with an interviewee, whether a letter, initial telephone call, follow-up call, or confirmation call, should be recorded in a project log. For each contact you should record:

- The date of the contact
- The type of the contact (e.g., letter, initial telephone call)
- The person contacted (name and position)



- The purpose of the contact
- A brief statement of the content of the contact

This information should be filed under the interviewee's name for easy access.

### ***Interview Logistics***

The logistics of each interview effort will differ. As a result, you may want to create a week-by-week or day-by-day plan. Nevertheless, the following will need to be a part of any plan:

- **Confirming participation.** You will want to send confirmation via email, fax, letter, or postcard of the scheduled time for the in-person, telephone, or focus group interview.
- **Assembling materials.** For each interview, you will need to gather all of the appropriate materials, including interview guides, surveys, flip charts, markers, adhesive tape, video or audio recorders, batteries, microphones, and tapes.
- **Labeling materials.** At the conclusion of each interview, you should label the tape, surveys, and flip charts with the date, location, and the name of the interviewee or group.

### **Computer-Aided Interviewing**

Computers are becoming an important part of conducting individual and focus group interviews. The following will discuss some aspects of computer use in individual and focus group interviews.

With the use of video-conferencing technologies, interviews can be undertaken with individuals or groups located in other parts of the country or the world. Indeed, using services such as Skype, along with relatively inexpensive cameras, makes long-distance interviewing possible and inexpensive.

More traditional computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) systems were developed in the 1970s. Here the interviewer is led through the interview guide, and he or she can enter the responses directly into



the computer. Some advantages of CATI systems are that the computer can provide:

- Complex skip and branching patterns in the questioning
- Rotation of choices to present to the interviewee
- Insertion of the response from a previous question.
- Access to previous historical data on the interviewee

The major disadvantage is that the interviewer may seem somewhat constrained and stiff. Skilled interviewers can easily overcome such problems.

In recent years, some advances have occurred in computer-aided interviewing. In-person interviews can now use laptop computers to enable computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). This has now advanced so that the computer can provide the questions orally. For example, Turner, Ku, Rogers, Lindberg, Pleck, and Sonenstein (1998) conducted a study comparing the use of audio computer-assisted self-interviewing (audio-CASI) or audio computer-assisted self-administered interviewing (audio-CASAI) with the traditional self-administered questionnaire. This audio-CASI or audio-CASAI approach presents interviewees with questions that have been digitally recorded and stored on a laptop computer. In addition, the questions are presented on the screen in visual form. The interviewee can then simply type the response into the computer.

Computers can be used in focus group interviews as well. The interviewer can use a form of groupware to poll the individuals in the focus group for their responses to certain questions. In these cases, individuals can respond without seeing other participants' responses until and unless the interviewer wants to show those responses.

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### **Keep in Mind . . .**

- Interviews provide an excellent way of gathering in-depth, descriptive information.
- The three types of interviews are (1) individual in-person interviews, (2) telephone interviews, and (3) focus group interviews.



- The interviewer plays a critical role in facilitating the interview, maintaining confidentiality, asking probing questions, managing unexpected situations, and recording responses.
- Interviewers should be selected based on their acute observation skills, their ability to deal with the unexpected, their ability to remain neutral, and their willingness to follow the prescribed procedures.