

The Essentials of Interviewing – How to Build Trust and Get the Data You Want

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Interviewing is an art form. Everybody can do it, but good interviewers get more insightful results faster and *leave the interviewees feel good about themselves*. In fact, an interview offers a chance for the participant to explain at length the issues they feel strongly about but oftentimes do not have the right audience to tell. A good interview allows you to understand the issues at hand thoroughly and makes the interviewee feel understood, validated and appreciated. It should be a win-win situation!

Here are some tips for conducting interviews that apply to researchers, physicians and counsellors:

To build rapport at the beginning ...

- Let participants talk freely: People usually bring up issues dearest to their hearts first. Listen carefully for anything you'd like to probe for later in the interview.
- You don't always need to analyze the first part of the interview. Use this time to get to know your interviewee.
- Some interviewees are long-winded. Use your judgement to determine if they will loop back to the question or if you should interject to bring the topic back on track.

When people go off topic ...

- Address their concerns or feelings, and bring them back to the topics you'd like to hear about using phrases like "I remember you mentioned earlier that..." or "That's interesting. What about ...". Avoid using words like "but" or "however" here.

When smart participants are guessing what you are trying to get out of them...

- Devise a smart interview guide that does not literally include the key words in the questions. For example, when asking about social relations, don't use the phrase "social relations"; ask about how they live their lives, who they spend time with, what they do, etc. When probing for their leadership style, don't ask directly "how do you lead people"? Instead, ask "how do you relate to your staff?" or even "what do you considered the most important things in the workplace?"
- "Beating around the bush" may have its benefits with "thoughtful" interviewees.

When participants refuse to open up...

- Offer your personal experience first, then ask about their experiences.
- Listen intently for what they are interested in, probe for those even if they are unrelated to your topics. The purpose is to get them relaxed and build rapport.

- Worry about data quality later, some data is better than no data at all.

When the interview goes overtime...

- Again, another judgement call on whether you're collecting data that is useful, or the interview is simply exceedingly long. Typically, a semi-structured interview that is longer than 1.5 hours is too long. You may have more data than you can analyze within your timeframe.
- Find the sweet spot of open-ended enough and not tediously long, for the sake of both yourself the analyst and the transcriber! This takes experience.

When the interview hits a sour note...

- Never, ever leave the interviewee feeling bad after an interview. This is detrimental both to yourself and your institution and to the participant who puts his/her trust in you.
- Find something nice to say to liven up the mood if the interviewee is upset. Anything helps!
- Remember to ask the participant if there is anything he/she would like to add and if they have any questions or concerns. 100 per cent of the time!

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