

Making Empathy Practical

Interviews: Conversations with Purpose

Interviews are structured or semi-structured conversations designed to deeply explore individual experiences, perspectives, and insights directly from stakeholders. This method creates space for personal narratives and motivations to emerge through thoughtful questioning and active listening.

Goal

This tool helps education and nonprofit leaders understand personal experiences in depth, explore sensitive topics that require trust, gather rich narratives that illustrate needs, and complement observational data with explanations and context.

Advice

- Listen more than you speak—aim for an 80/20 ratio (them/you)
- Use open-ended questions that can't be answered with yes/no
- Embrace silence to give participants time to think and elaborate
- Ask for specific examples when participants speak in generalities
- Follow unexpected but meaningful threads while maintaining focus
- Document emotional responses and non-verbal cues along with words
- Create a comfortable, private environment that encourages openness
- Practice active listening by reflecting back what you've heard



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What It Is

Interviews are structured or semi-structured conversations designed to explore experiences, perspectives, and insights directly from stakeholders. This method enables deep dives into individual stories, motivations, and needs through thoughtful questioning and active listening.

When to Use It

- To understand personal experiences and perspectives in depth
- When exploring sensitive topics that require trust and privacy
- To gather rich narratives and examples that illustrate needs
- When you need to follow emerging threads of insight
- To complement observational data with explanations and context

Process

Before the Interview

1. **Identify your participants:** Select diverse stakeholders who represent different perspectives.
2. **Develop an interview guide:** Create:
 - Opening questions to build rapport
 - Core questions aligned with research goals
 - Potential follow-up prompts
 - Closing questions for reflection
3. **Consider logistics:**
 - Choose comfortable, private locations
 - Determine appropriate length (typically 30-60 minutes)
 - Decide on recording method (notes, audio, etc.)
4. **Prepare informed consent:** Create clear explanations of how information will be used.

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Process, cont'd

During the Interview

1. **Establish rapport:** Begin with introductions and gratitude for participation.
2. **Set expectations:** Explain the purpose, process, and confidentiality measures.
3. **Start with easy questions:** Begin with straightforward topics before deeper issues.
4. **Use effective questioning techniques:**
 - Open-ended questions that can't be answered with yes/no
 - "Tell me about..." invitations to share stories
 - "Why" questions (used judiciously) to understand motivations
 - "How" questions to explore processes and experiences
5. **Practice active listening:**
 - Give full attention without interrupting
 - Use encouraging non-verbal cues
 - Employ silence strategically
 - Reflect back what you've heard to confirm understanding
6. **Follow threads of insight:** Explore unexpected but relevant topics that emerge.
7. **Document effectively:**
 - Take notes on key points and quotes
 - Record with permission
 - Note emotional responses and non-verbal cues
8. **Close thoughtfully:** Ask if there's anything else they want to share.

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Process, cont'd

After the Interview

1. Expand your notes immediately while fresh.
2. Transcribe recordings if applicable.
3. Identify key quotes, stories, and insights.
4. Send thank-you messages to participants.
5. Share relevant findings when appropriate.

Tips for Success

- **Use projective techniques:** Ask "how would others feel about..." to uncover perspectives people might be reluctant to express directly.
- **Try walking interviews:** Conduct interviews while moving through relevant environments to trigger contextual memories.
- **Employ the critical incident technique:** Focus on specific memorable events rather than general experiences.
- **Use photo elicitation:** Have participants bring or select images that represent their experiences to prompt deeper discussion.
- **Implement journey mapping:** Guide participants through creating a visual representation of their experience timeline during the interview.
- **Watch for contradictions:** Note disconnects between stated opinions and described behaviors.
- **Avoid leading questions:** "How do you feel about..." rather than "Don't you think..."

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Ethical Considerations

- Clearly explain how information will be used and maintained.
- Respect boundaries around sensitive topics.
- Honor time commitments.
- Provide options for anonymity when appropriate.
- Create mechanisms for participants to review and correct information.
- Recognize the emotional impact some questions might have.

Analysis Questions

- What recurring themes emerged across interviews?
- What stories or examples were particularly illuminating?
- What needs were explicitly stated versus implied?
- What emotions were associated with different experiences?
- How do different stakeholders' perspectives compare?
- What quotes capture essential insights most powerfully?