Interviewing Guide: Using the Interview as a Source of Data, Information, and Learning (IHI Tool)

The Interviewing Guide was developed by Jane Taylor in conjunction with her work as an Improvement Advisor for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. This tool is useful for anyone who plans to conduct interviews as a means of learning about a topic, assessing current knowledge around an improvement area, or simply evaluating an improvement project. It is simple and generic enough that it can be used in most disciplines. It covers how to select subjects to interview, and how to construct questions that will generate rich responses. The guide includes a discussion of how to structure an interview, how to take notes or to tape the interview, and how to analyze completed interviews. This tool will guide you through the process of planning, conducting, and analyzing interviews.

This tool contains:

- Purpose
- Directions for planning the interview, developing questions, and collecting and analyzing the data
- Directions for reporting of results
- Appendix with sample interview questions, helpful reminders and tips, and references

Institute for Healthcare Improvement
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

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I. Purpose of Interviewing

An interview is simply a purposeful conversation. I interview when I want to learn something about someone that numerical data will not reveal or when the experience of others interests me — like how they view an issue, or how they understand a process or their work. The point of an interview is to enter the world of the person you interview to see things from their perspective. Conduct an interview when you want special information, especially information that you cannot see such as historical events, behavior in the past, concepts, feelings, intentions, thoughts, or prior organizational accomplishments. I like interviews when I am trying to understand another perspective, understanding, interpretation, or experience.

II. Planning the Interview

A. Interview Types

Interviews may be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Select the type of interview based on your own expertise of the subject, the participant's expertise, the number of interviews needed, as well as the nature of information you plan to collect. A good rule of thumb is that the more unique or specialty knowledge a participant has, the less structured the interview. When interviewing participants who are known as experts in their field, the more open-ended the interview, the better — especially if you have knowledge of the topic. This allows information to emerge naturally as it would in a conversation.

I prefer a semi-structured interview because sometimes I get caught up in a conversation and forget to inquire about the very thing I most need to understand. In semi-structured interviews, I begin with a list of things I want to cover but the order is open and the prompts are based on the direction of the interview.

If you know little about the topic, it may be difficult to design appropriate interview questions. You may want to use an unstructured interview. This is especially true if you are conducting an informational interview. As you learn more about the subject from the interviews, or if you will be conducting several interviews, then you may decide to design a set of standard questions.

A structured interview is best for multiple interviews. It allows you to ask each participant the same questions so that you may compare and contrast their responses. This is not always possible in an unstructured interview where the responses may vary.

B. Who to Interview

Before I conduct interviews, I want to know who might have a particular point of view related to the area of interest. Here are some example questions I might ask: Who knows what changes are most effective in improving specialty access? Who has the most experience implementing protocols in an intensive care unit?

Who has the best safety survey results? Who are the experts in this area? What different perspectives do I want to hear? Do I want to understand how a rural critical care unit approaches reducing adverse events compared to an academic medical center? Often, I will ask colleagues or an expert to nominate participants.

Elite interviews are conducted with known experts in a field. An elite participant is someone who is influential, prominent, and well informed. A literature review is one of the best ways to identify elite participants. Sometimes access to experts is a problem and sometimes interviewing elites will provide you with the "cannon" (that is, the official, standard version) rather than perspectives that might be fresh, innovative, or on the cutting-edge.

I find it useful to create criteria to select participants and then follow those criteria. This lends rigor to my investigation, and I develop a rationale for who I interview. When I don't know who to talk to, I build a "snow ball." I begin with a personal contact and ask that person with whom I should talk. In each subsequent interview, I ask for the names of other people with expertise or experience that I might interview. I also like to ask who might have a totally different perspective that I might want to include in the interviewing.

If I need to limit the number of interviews to ensure that I only spend time interviewing participants with experience in the topic under investigation, I find it helpful to use a critical incident questionnaire. A critical incident questionnaire is a set of two questions to elicit a high point, or peak experience, and a low point. I usually email the questions to prospective participants and then, based on their responses, select those individuals with whom I want to conduct interviews.

C. Constructing Interview Questions

Always start with an opening that thanks the participant for the interview time and reminds him/her of the purpose of your interview. If you don't know each other, introduce yourself and engage in enough small talk to put the participant at ease. I like to test the interview questions beforehand whenever possible. I usually find a colleague to test the questions and often ask permission to tape the test interview because sometimes the information is good enough that I want to include it in my analysis.

Interviews usually follow a pattern of starting with general questions, followed by more specific questions and then a summary. The first question is usually a broad, general question. Try to evoke a memory by painting a picture with your question. For example, "When you think of all the work you have done in the safety domain of IMPACT, and remember a particularly wonderful experience working with a team to implement a change concept, what happened?"

I always ask positive questions before the "day from hell" question. This prevents the interview from getting stuck on a negative theme. I usually create about seven or eight questions for a one-hour interview.

When constructing good interview questions, make sure they are open-ended. There is nothing worse than getting a "yes" or "no" answer when you are trying to understand what really happened or how someone views something. And, avoid leading or loaded questions.

Michael Quinn Patton, one of my mentors, developed a typology of questions that you might want to use.

- Experiential: Used when I want to know what I would have seen if I could have observed

- Opinions and values: Used when I want to know what you think, your goals, desires, intentions
- Feeling: Used when I want to understand your emotional responses to the situation or actions
- Knowledge: Used when I want to know what you consider information
- Sensory: Used when I want to vicariously experience sight, sounds, touch, taste, feel
- Background and demographics: Used when I want to understand how you compare to others.

A tip about background and demographics: I try to make a list of key demographics, for example, number of ICU admissions, mortality rate, revenue, days to next available appointment, and so forth. Sometimes I get these questions answered in advance via email or right at the beginning of an interview.

In addition to Patton's types of questions, there are a few others: hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretative questions.

D. How Long Will the Interview Take?

Generally, an interview will take about one hour. Every once in a while I have an interview that goes longer. For this reason, I always use a 90-minute audiocassette tape.

E. Ethical Considerations

It is important that the interview participant understands the purpose of the interview, how the information will be used, and who the intended readers of the interview are. The interview should be avoided if it is in any way harmful to the participant — for example, issues that are potentially political like hiring intensivists and closing a critical care unit with a history of being an open unit where the participant's opinion could jeopardize a job. It is possible to offer anonymity but not to guarantee an anonymous interview. With this in mind, make sure participants are well informed before you interview them. In addition, depending on how you are going to use the information, you may need to go through your organization's internal review board.

I believe written consents are a type of ethical insurance. The consent should state the purpose of the interview, how the results will be used, and whether you are offering anonymity or not. Also, get consent if you are audiotaping the interview. Volunteer to share results with participants and offer them the opportunity to opt out of the final presentation or report at any time during the process. Make sure participants know how to contact you and include this information on the consent form.

F. Data Collection During Interviews

The basic question of data collection is whether to audiotape your interviews or to take notes. I prefer and strongly recommend taping because it allows me to focus on the questions and follow the conversation rather than become distracted by taking notes. Also, I can go back to the taped interview again later for additional information — maybe something didn't seem important during the conversation but when I aggregate the data, or as I learn more about the topic from interviews, it emerges as important information.

I also like to create a transcript of the interview, with double-spaced text and wide margins for note taking. Ginna Crowe, my colleague and co-researcher, often prefers what Krueger calls the "quick tape method." This involves listening to the tape recording, then pausing and taking notes when something seems particularly noteworthy. Ginna plays the cassettes in her car on her long commutes and familiarizes herself with the interviews and then uses the quick tape method to capture notes.

G. Analysis of the Data

In general, plan to spend as much time analyzing your data as you did collecting it. Begin by reading all the interview transcripts or your notes. Look for patterns or themes to emerge and underline key phrases as you read, making notes in the margins. If a new idea emerges in an interview, go back and reread your other interviews to see if you previously overlooked this idea. Once you have identified the key themes, organize the interview data around the themes. I like to use a word from a participant to sum up a theme. For example, from recently conducted observations and interviews at an auto repair shop, one participant described "dumpster diving" as a source of ingenious devises used to repair cars. Dumpster diving became the thematic name for this phenomena that emerged in other interviews as well. Under the theme of dumpster diving, I put all the comments related to using "found objects" and adapting objects for use in the shop.

Often themes already exist from the literature. A good example of existing themes is the Picker categories for hospital service. You may analyze the interviews with this in mind or use what Glasser and Strauss call "grounded theory" and let the categories emerge from the interviews. I like to use grounded theory and then look for support of the categories or themes in the literature.

You may use sophisticated software such as *In Vivo* or *Nud.ist* (both available from Sage Publishers) for data analysis. Or you may use the low-tech method: use a pair of scissors to cut up the interview transcript into pieces — preserving the person's name with each comment — and organize each piece under a theme. This is like aggregating data.

H. Synthesis

Synthesis involves integrating a variety of data sources. In the case of interviewing, other data sources may be your own experience, the literature, other information from observation or "what do we know activities."

A simple way to conduct synthesis is by use of matrices. Create a matrix with all the data sources on one axis and the themes on the other. Look for areas of integration, convergence, and divergence. Summarize what you find in the cells.

III. Reporting

The report I produce usually introduces the topic, explains how I selected the participants, how the interviews were conducted, how the interview questions were constructed, and whether or not participants validated the findings in a focus group or by reviewing an early report of findings. I usually explain a little about the interviewing methodology I am using too. If I conducted a literature review, I may also summarize it in the report.

Then I present the findings organized around the themes that emerged, along with a few illustrative quotes from participants to support each theme. I include a brief analysis of what the theme means, a synthesis based on the interview data and "what we know" information. The final section includes conclusions and recommendations.

IV. Appendix

Before the interview

I first ask: Why am I conducting these interviews? If I knew what this person(s) will tell me, then, "so what?" What question do I want to answer with these interviews? Who else cares about this? When I am done with the interviews, who will gain from the work, whose interests are served by this? Will this be useful, if so, to whom? Will these interviews yield a deeper understanding of the issues, challenges, conflicts, joys, involved in this project?

Before I select participants

Who should I talk to? What is the logic or rationale of this group of individuals?
Do I care deeply about this topic and what participants will share with me?

Before I create the questions

How can I link my curiosity to the questions: What am I curious about, what questions will address my curiosity? What questions do I have? What bothers me, intrigues me, or makes me nervous? What can I learn from others' experiences?
What do I know about this from my experience?
What is required by users (IMPACT, prototype teams) to be useful?
What other topics might relate to this one? Analogous areas?
What assumptions lead to these questions?
What are the explicit assumptions about this area and what we/others know?
What are my own assumptions about this topic?
Now what are my questions?
Whose points of view do we need to understand (patient, caregiver, funder)?

I always remind myself

The key skills I need are the ability to listen, skillful interpersonal interactions, question framing, and gentle probing.

After the interview

I read the transcripts and my notes, or listen to the tape. I watch for patterns, themes, or categories to emerge. As I discover a new theme, I reread and review previous interviews to see if it is also there and previously unrecognized.

About the questions

Open with informal time with some give and take. Say why you are doing the interview, how the information will be used, that the information is important and the interviewee's perspective is important to the project. I remind myself to be careful asking "why" because I don't want to put a participant on the defensive.

I review my questions for variety and see if I included any *role-playing questions* like, "Suppose I was a patient in your redesigned CCU, what would you tell me I might experience differently now that you have participated in the IMPACT domain for two years?" Or I might want to use a *simulation question*: "If I were a patient in your redesigned unit, what would I see happening? What would be going on? Take me there." Another question I may use is a *prefatory question* — it is a way to preface transition questions, e.g., "I've asked you about the staff's reaction to the redesign and you said, xxx. Now I'd like to ask you about family reaction. What has been the reaction of families to the redesigned unit?" This type of question helps prepare the participant and gives a little breathing space. The *direct announcement* tells the participant what question you are going to ask next. For example, "Now I'd like to ask you some questions about how you used an architect in this project. How did you find the architect you used?"

About probes

Useful probes: When did this happen? Who else was involved (Patton, 1990, p. 324)? Where were you during this time? What was your involvement in xxx? How did that come about? Where did this happen?

Or use elaboration probes such as: Would you elaborate on that? Say more (shows you are nodding your head although that cannot be seen if you are on the phone). Can you say some more about that?

Clarification probes: "You mentioned that redesign work is creative and fun. Could you say some more about what fun meant on this project?"

Recording phone interviews

Always get permission to tape the interview. A simple, inexpensive cassette recorder and a telephone recorder connector is all it takes (usually available at electronic stores such as Radio Shack). The connector connects the phone line and the telephone receiver into the tape recorder. You will need a non-mobile phone (the old fashion kind with the curly cord between the dialer and the receiver). If you use a teleconferencing service, such as Chorus Call, for a fee they will record the call and transcribe it verbatim on the same day. I believe this service is well worth the fee, because of the speed and accuracy of their work.

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