

ABSTRACT

The interview is a basic information gathering and validating tool. Because it is a basic tool, considered to be easy to do and tacitly assumed that everyone knows how, inadequate attention has been paid to the methodology, responsibilities or its components. Inexperienced interviewers overlook the challenges that come from the preparatory research, the interviewees, their own inexperience, the process to capture information or the environment that they are working in. They do not consistently follow basic tenets and often mistake how things really are with how things are *in their views*. This paper presents some of the basic tasks associated with conducting an effective consultation for eliciting information or the interview.

Fact Finding *IN'THEIR'VIEW*

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In tough economic times, the number of people working as Management Consultants or contractors rises. Some of these people merely have a couple of years of work experience. During a project planning discussion regarding the need to elicit the necessary information from the Subject Matter Experts (SME), often referred to as user requirements, one such junior consultant suggested: “We meet with the staff and ask them questions and write down their answers, and then we know the facts and on that basis”. At this point I disconnected from the conversation.

Many professionals and Management Consultants specifically, need to interview to gather and validate information. Information from stakeholders and SME is the input to the analysis which produces a conclusion about how work is done; what the business requirements are; how the workflow can be improved; what process inefficiencies can be avoided; how to improve a product or provide a better service; or how to justify the *status quo*. Therefore some interviewers need to be better than just able. But as is often the case with basic tools, inadequate attention is paid to the methodology and required skills, because ‘everybody knows how’. Who does not know how to interview? Who will admit to not knowing how? Who ever measured the effectiveness of an interviewer’s skills? When did you last go to a course on *How to Interview?*

Interviewing is considered easy. It is like driving a car, in that everybody is expected to know how, after all, according to one definition on the web: “An interview is when you are being asked various questions on one thing or the other”. To continue the analogy, it is like driving, in that some people are better than others and like all men drivers, all Management Consultants think they are grrrrreat. Yet, three people can go to the same interview and come away with three different versions of ‘the facts’. Those who have been interviewing for years know that minutes taken during the hour(s) spent in interviews, do not record the facts but what the interviewer interprets the interviewee to have said that pertains to the topic at hand. Interviewing is often about recording how things are *in their view*.

Conducting an interview is easy, but conducting it effectively presents many challenges. One challenge stems from interviewees who are not able to clearly articulate what they mean or may not wish to reveal the truth, much less the facts which they may not know, yet provide an explanation anyway. Another, from the interviewer who may not have adequately researched the topic, may not listen, may apply too many preconceived beliefs to what is said, may not have the required competence or starts to discuss an issue that is more complex than expected and which may not be understood by himself, the interviewee or both. Then again, sometimes the motive to attend the interview is to foster social contact, fulfill contractual obligations, keep or appear to be busy, in which case making it effective is an undesired state.

Outside of the challenges presented by the interviewees and the interviewers, the environment can also be a hindrance to effectiveness. A senior executive with the authority to stand behind his spoken words needs to make a public announcement about why an outsider, often referred to as consultant, with no understanding of the work environment or cultural implications, will be asking questions. Appearing unannounced amidst rumours of say, staff reductions will heighten the employees' anxieties and prompt them to be less than forthright or cooperative. A perceived or real threat, an expectation of change to the way work is accomplished, can build astonishing resistance to divulging the complete picture and make the interview unproductive.

To collect good information the interviewer has to go to where the work is done and talk to the people who are doing the work. The practice of using questionnaires¹ or gathering information indirectly and secretly to avoid stirring up concern is like guessing at what the facts are. In such cases, the interview can deteriorate from *in their view* to *in the interviewer's view*. This approach can record information that is known but cannot validate it or record what is not known.

Interviews are much more than *asking various questions and writing down the answers*. Interviewers are responsible for establishing what information is needed, devising the process how best to elicit it, facilitating the interviewee to express his ideas, validating and judging the accuracy of the information received and evaluating its relevance as well as and often overlooked, identifying what information is not available. Simply taking what was said as the basis of an inference is a naïve interpretation of its importance in the argument and an abdication of inherent responsibilities that the interviewer has. Some of the related tasks associated with conducting an effective interview are:

Schedule the Interview

Interviews interrupt employees in their jobs. Scheduling the interview when it is convenient to the interviewee is the least amount of courtesy that the interviewer needs to pay to the interviewee. If the later claims to be busy, give them the benefit of the doubt, especially as doing anything else will interrupt the organizational workflow or increase resentment towards the interviewer, which will invariably impact the reliability of the gathered information. Then be on time for the scheduled start, smile, end it when you said you will and remember what used to be taught in kindergarten and say: "Thank you."

¹ Some people cross the first of the several answers to a question, no matter what the first answer happens to be.

However, even when done right, it can happen that a scheduled interview is cancelled or postponed. While the reasons may be valid, if it happens more than a few times, say three times, a Management Consultant may need to ‘read between the lines’, and find an alternate way to get the required information.

Create Trust

Interviewers need to quickly create an environment of trust where respondents feel safe to accurately and thoroughly reveal their feelings and share their information. As respondents may share very personal information, it is important to honestly assess who will own the interview notes and how this confidential information will be treated if preserved after the analysis. Then disclose how much confidentiality you can promise and what types of responses will not be kept in confidence.

Employees, who work in a Team environment and are lead by a leader, will assert if there are mistakes made in the workplace, as this will result in help to improve the situation. But those who work in an environment that is composed of a self serving boss, who manages by command and control, will not admit to making mistakes fearing personal liability. Beyond what is said, evaluate the body language and the non-verbal information that communicates the level of trust created with the interviewee.

Customs are Crucial

99% of the interviewers do not have to think about this but the remaining one percent should keep in mind that personal hygiene and rules of etiquette also play a role in success. Garlic bread with lunch is seldom a good idea before an afternoon interview, polished shoes are better than unclean ones, baseball caps are best kept on one’s head at baseball games, hand shakes should be after removing one’s gloves and if a cell phone needs to be kept active, it should be in a pocket and on vibration mode. If the cell phone rings during an interview, it will be a ‘strike’ against effectiveness and the interviewer. If the interviewer answers the ringing cell phone, as brought to the movie screen in the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, it will make the interview no longer relevant. During the interview treat the interviewee as the important person that he/she is, the star. An interviewer, who does otherwise, is destined to get less information than available.

Ask the Expert

In an interview the interviewee is the SME and the CEO equivalent of the work that they are doing, otherwise the person is probably the wrong one to interview. Therefore, interviewers must make the most of the time they will spend with this SME. Clearly define why the interview is needed, what information is needed, and why this interviewee is the best resource to help you. Resist the tendency to ‘jumping over’ the interview before launching the analysis stage. Resist recording a premature conclusion or a first impression as the solution that will seemingly correct an apparently ineffective or inefficient work method that someone has been doing for years. First impressions are normal but they can ignore the meagre tools or the constraints that this SME has at his/her disposal when transforming their input into an output.

Listen and Document

In addition to preparing for and asking the right questions interviewers need to do two things well. First, they have to learn how to listen. They need to remember the adage:

"God gave men (and women) two ears and one mouth and they should use them in that proportion." Rapid comments or interjections made, sometimes before the interviewee terminated expressing a thought, only indicates that you did not listen or do not acknowledge the importance of the interviewee. It is not evidence of quick thinking. Interviewers armed with a belief that they have 'been there, done that' and know the solution, will hear every part of the interviewees' answer that supports their pre-conceived solution. If they forget to listen, they will not hear those parts of the answer that prove their solution unviable. This is to be expected according to the concept referred to as 'cognitive dissonance', which holds that our minds cannot hold opposing thoughts, so we hear what supports our convictions.

The interview is not a discussion. Getting involved in the answers with the interviewee, or questioning his position, can guide the information provided in a direction that it would not have gone in otherwise. Getting involved, with the explicit exclusion of what is discussed below in *Explore Vital Areas*, favours gathering information to justify a predetermined position.

The second thing an interviewer needs to be able to do well is make copious notes of what the interviewee said during the interview and then, as soon as possible after the interview, rewrite them. Capture nuances but keep up with what is being said and avoid interrupting the interviewer's natural speaking style. Then rewrite the notes with as much detail as possible because people forget the majority of what they heard in the first 24 hours. Detailed accounting will reveal what was said, where some information came from and why some information was not used, weeks after they were written. Finally, if possible, validate findings that will be used to support the conclusions.

Facilitate

Documenting what the interviewee has said is but one part of the interviewer's responsibility. Interviewees do not necessarily have the skills or need to be skilled to answer questions or articulate succinctly, completely and transparently the process or issue under investigation. Therefore to ensure the ensuing analysis will be based on comprehensive information and not merely what was said, the skilled interviewer has to be able to extract from the interviewee the information that may have been, intentionally or otherwise, not divulged. Interviewers, not interviewees, are solely responsible for the success of the interviewing process and the quality of the gathered data.

Notwithstanding the admonishment in *Listen and Document*, facilitating the interviewee to clearly articulate a comprehensive response is explicitly encouraged. Interviewers must know what information they need for the analysis, ask probing questions, get the facts, note what information is missing, explore interpretations, validate their understanding, and if a question resulted in a dubious answer, present the implications to the interviewee or ask the question a second time in a different format, perhaps at a later time. Finally, if possible, ask the interviewee to demonstrate what actually happens in the workflow. An eventual flaw in the conclusions because the analysis is based on inadequate or inaccurate information is the failing of the interviewer not the interviewee.

Opinion or Fact

In the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, the fiancée of the defending attorney is asked to testify. After making a crucial statement, the prosecuting attorney asks her: “Is that your opinion, or a fact?” Interviewers need to be able to evaluate how comprehensive, valid, accurate and reliable is the information they were provided. They must be able to and distinguish between objective recounting of events or facts and personal opinions or wishful thinking. Simply documenting what the interviewee said was the role of the secretary and is not of adequate value when done by a business analyst or the objective of the interview. This may be the most significant reason why a one-on-one interview, that allows the interviewer to look into the interviewee’s eyes, can not be replaced with a questionnaire.

Share your Findings

Employees work in silos and seldom look across them. This prevents most of them from seeing the business improvement opportunities that Management Consultants or Business Analysts studying cross-functional process are able to see. Were the interviewees to have had the opportunity to look, they would have seen many possibilities for improvements as well. Therefore some of the obvious and immediate improvement opportunities uncovered are not due to the Management Consultants’ or Business Analysts’ expertise in reengineering but rather due to looking across silos and the interview.

Therefore, share with the interviewees the ownership of the obvious improvements identified. By involving them as owners in the quick win, they will feel enthused and will embrace and help implement the suggested changes. In addition, such sharing is often rewarded with valuable new information that may be relevant but that has not been identified and that would not have otherwise surfaced.

The Management Consultant or Business Analyst should be more proud of the resulting improvement(s) made and benefit(s) gained by the organization, than who received the credit for the discovery. Sharing the spotlight is the mark of a leader, boosts one’s credibility and guarantees success in getting buy-in for the more challenging changes and restructuring that business transformation recommendations call for.

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