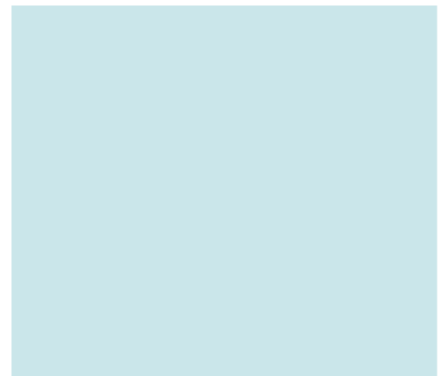


School Self-Evaluation Evaluation Tools Support Materials

Support materials for school self-evaluation teams on conducting
focus groups and interviews



Interviews / Focus Groups: A Data Collection Strategy

Introduction

Interviewing is a technique that can be used for collecting data in a school self-evaluation. It allows the school to obtain information which is frequently difficult to obtain by other means, especially information related to opinions, attitudes and motivations. The technique involves asking questions directly of individuals or small groups. When conducting interviews with a small group this is called a focus group. There are support materials for conducting focus groups. *In a school self-evaluation, staff, students, parents and caregivers could be interviewed either individually or in small groups to obtain and verify information relevant to chosen area of evaluation.*

Exploratory Tool

When very little is known about the situation to be studied the interview can be used as an exploratory tool that builds up the ground for further investigation.

Explanatory Tool

Interviewing can also be used to develop descriptions of situations or attempt to explain why certain things have happened. In this way it is an explanatory tool which allows exploration of the reasons underlying the area being studied.

Information

It is important to remember that the information provided by interviews is based on what people **say** they know, think or believe, rather than what they **do** know, think or believe, although in many situations the difference will be minimal. It must be assumed that respondents report how they view issues rather than report what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

Guidelines

Good interviews do not just happen. Specific skills are required, accompanied by an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the technique.

1. A major task of interviewing is to establish rapport with the respondents.

By assuming a relaxed manner the interviewer attempts to make the respondents feel comfortable and unthreatened. The effective interviewer does not present as a quiz master or interrogator.

2. Effective interviewing requires cooperation.

The interview should be seen as a cooperative effort between the school and the review team to collect information in a collegial way about the chosen area of evaluation.

3. There must be effective communication between the interviewer and respondent.

The interview is not one way communication. The interviewer must be an active listener, checking back regularly with the respondent that they have understood correctly. Interviewers may take part in the conversation, but they must carefully monitor their comments so as not to influence the respondent with their own beliefs or biases.

4. An interview plan should be established.

[Decisions regarding the structure of interview and the questions should be made prior to the interview. See support materials on questioning]

Interview Structures

Successful interviews continue to focus on a topic and to explore it in greater depth as information is made available. Three basic interview structures exist depending on the degree of planning and types of questions required for the interview. It is not unusual for an interview to reflect one or more structures.

1. Unstructured

Few if any questions are specified before the interview. The questions are usually general and refer to broad issues or topics.

2. Semi structured

In this format some questions will be specified before the interview. The questions will be more narrowly focused than in the unstructured interview.

3. Structured interviews

Most questions will be formed before the interview and all types of questions from specific to general maybe used.

Questions

There are two types of questions that can be used in an interview and each has a particular purpose.

1. Open questions

These are designed to obtain as much information as possible and are used most of the time in interview situations. Examples include:

- Tell me more about how you see this
- Help me understand the situation a little better
- What do you mean by
- In what ways is this important to you.

2. Closed questions

These require a yes or no or one word answer.

Group and Individual Interviews

Interviews can be of two types - the focus group and individual interview. Both are suitable.

Focus Group - The size of the group is important. There must be enough participants to allow divergent views but not so many that all members can not participate. The group members should be able to discuss the issues on the same level. This may necessitate the holding of separate group interviews with parents, staff and students. Interviews with people in different positions in the school may present similar problems. The seating pattern is important. Arrange chairs in a circle so that each member of the group is seen as equal. Be sensitive and respectful of cultural differences.

Individual - This involves interviewing one person at a time. Where possible, make an appointment for the interview and at that time, advise the respondent of the topic and the length of the interview.

Communication Skills

An interviewer requires active listening skills.

Active Listening Skill	Guidelines
Empathise with the speaker	Put yourself in his or her place and see what it feels like.
Concentrate on what is being said	Actively focus your attention on the words, ideas and feelings.
Ask questions	When you do not understand, when you need to know more, when you want to build trust
Look at the other person	Watch your body language and maintain eye contact.
Smile and nod	Your non-verbal responses indicate your interest and empathy.
Leave your own emotions behind	You need to be focused on the other person's emotions, not your own.
Get rid of distractions	Clear away anything likely to distract.
Get the main points	Concentrate on getting the main ideas.
Share the responsibility for communication	Ask clarifying questions when you do not understand.
Don't do mental arguing	If there is a debate going on inside your head you are not listening.
Listen for what is not said	Sometimes you can learn more from what is not said than from what is being said by the speaker. If one particular point is constantly being avoided, that may be one of the key issues to be dealt with.

Recording Information

It is important to record interview information for later analysis. Use the Interview Recording Sheets to take notes during the interview. Written notes allow immediate impressions to be recorded as they occur. However, the activity of writing can distract from the flow of the interview and interviewers must be careful to attend in an active way while they continue to record.

Issues

Respondents may:

- fail to understand the purpose of the question;
- not comprehend the language;
- not be able to articulate their opinions;
- not want to answer; and
- feel threatened.

Interviewers will need to be sensitive and adjust an interview to suit the individual or group.

References

School-based techniques of evaluation: Interviews
Queensland Department of Education
Resource Pack for Industrial Relations Forum Chairpersons
NSW Department of Education and Training

Interviewers' Checklist

Physical Environment

- Where possible, choose a well-lit, well-ventilated space that has a comfortable temperature.
- Remove any physical barriers (such as tables) between the interviewer and interviewee.
- Ensure that the interview can be conducted without interruption and without being overheard.
- Be mindful of the interviewer / interviewee's need for personal space.

Interpersonal

- Convey warmth, interest and empathy.
- Establish a rapport with the interviewee that helps them feel non-threatened and comfortable.
- Present as a colleague involved in a cooperative exercise to benefit the school and the students.
- Be punctual and keep to the interview times.

Opening the Interview

- Put the interviewee at ease and briefly explain the school review process.
- Briefly explain the interview process.
- Assure the interviewee of confidentiality unless the information requires mandatory reporting.

Conducting the Interview

- Ask questions in a clear, relaxed manner that allows an easy response. Do not be an inquisitor.
- Be an active listener.
- Reflect on the meaning of emerging information.
- Do not influence answers with your own bias or belief and seek clarification if necessary.

Communication

- Provide positive feedback through frequent eye contact, nodding to show you understand and limit verbalisation.
- Use reflective listening skills through the interview by paraphrasing what you have heard to check you have understood the message correctly.
- Avoid being sidetracked.

Recording Information

- Record relevant information. Identify only that the interviewee is a parent, student or teacher.
- Record in a way that least distracts from the flow of the information.
- Analyse notes as soon as possible after the interview.

Concluding the Interview

- Briefly summarise the key points made by the interviewee in order to clarify the accuracy of your notes and to instil confidence that what was said has been collected for the review
- Inform the interviewee of the process following the interview – that information will be corroborated with a range of other data collected throughout the review.
- Inform the interviewee that the school will receive a report which will detail findings, recommendations and strategies for future development.
- Thank the interviewee.

Interview/Focus Group Question Preparation Checklist

Types of Topics in Questions	Check
One can ask questions about:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Behaviours - about what a person has done or is doing 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opinions/values - about what a person thinks about a topic 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feelings - note that respondents sometimes respond with "I think ..." so be careful to note that you're looking for feelings 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knowledge - to get facts about a topic 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sensory - about what people have seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Background/demographics - standard background questions, such as age, education, etc. 	
<i>Note that the above questions can be asked in terms of past, present or future.</i>	
Sequence of Questions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get the respondents involved in the interview as soon as possible. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Before asking about controversial matters (such as feelings and conclusions), first ask about some facts. With this approach, respondents can more easily engage in the interview before warming up to more personal matters. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intersperse fact-based questions throughout the interview to avoid long lists of fact-based questions, which tends to leave respondents disengaged. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ask questions about the present before questions about the past or future. It's usually easier for them to talk about the present and then work into the past or future. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The last questions might be to allow respondents to provide any other information they prefer to add and their impressions of the interview. 	
Wording of Questions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Wording should be open-ended. Respondents should be able to choose their own terms when answering questions. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questions should be as neutral as possible. Avoid wording that might influence answers, such as evocative or judgmental wording. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questions should be asked one at a time. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Questions should be worded clearly. This includes knowing any terms particular to the program or the respondents' culture. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Be careful asking 'why' questions. This type of question infers a cause-effect relationship that may not truly exist. These questions may also cause respondents to feel defensive, e.g., that they have to justify their response, which may inhibit their responses to this and future questions. 	

FOCUS GROUPS CHECKLIST

Preparing for the Session	Check
1. Identify the major objective of the meeting.	
2. Carefully develop five to six questions (see below).	
3. Plan your session (see below).	
4. Call potential members to invite them to the meeting. Send them a follow-up invitation with a proposed agenda, session time and list of questions the group will discuss. Plan to provide a copy of the report from the session to each member and let them know you will do this.	
5. Call each member (about three days before the session) to remind them to attend	

Developing Questions	Check
1. Develop five to six questions. The session should last one to 1.5 hours. In this time, one can ask at most five or six questions.	
2. Always first ask yourself what problem or need will be addressed by the information gathered during the session. For example, examine if a new service or idea will work, further understand how a program is failing, etc.	

Planning the Session	Check
1. Scheduling: Plan meetings to be one to 1.5 hours long. Over lunch seems to be a very good time for other to find time to attend.	
2. Setting and Refreshments: Hold sessions in a conference room, or other setting with adequate airflow and lighting. Configure chairs so that all members can see each other. Provide name tags for members as well. Provide refreshments, especially box lunches if the session is held over lunch.	
3. Ground Rules: It's critical that all members participate as much as possible, but that the session move along while generating useful information. Because the session is often a one-time occurrence, it's useful to have a few, short ground rules that sustain participation, yet do so with focus. Consider the following three ground rules: a) keep focused, b) maintain momentum and c) get closure on questions.	
4. Agenda: Consider the following agenda: welcome, review of agenda, review of the goal of the meeting, review of the ground rules, introductions, questions and answers, wrap up.	
5. Membership: Focus groups are usually conducted with 6-10 members who have something in common e.g., similar age group, status in a program, etc. Select members who are likely to be participative and reflective. Attempt to select members who don't know each other.	
6. Plan to record the session with either an audio or audio-video recorder: Don't count on your memory. If this isn't practical, involve a co-facilitator who is there to take notes.	

Facilitating the Session	Check
1. The major goal of facilitation is collecting useful information to meet the goal of meeting.	
2. Introduce yourself and the co-facilitator, if used.	
3. Explain the means of recording the session.	
4. Carry out the agenda - (See "agenda" above).	
5. Carefully word each question before that question is addressed by the group. Allow the group a few minutes for each member to carefully record their answers. Then, facilitate discussion around the answers to each question, one at a time.	
6. After each question is answered, carefully reflect back a summary of what you heard (the note taker may do this).	
7. Ensure even participation: If one or two people are dominating the meeting, then call on others. Consider using a round-table approach, including going in one direction around the table, giving each person a minute to answer the question. If the domination persists, note it to the group and ask for ideas about how the participation can be increased.	
8. Closing the session: Tell members that they will receive a copy of the report generated from their answers, thank them for coming, and adjourn the meeting.	

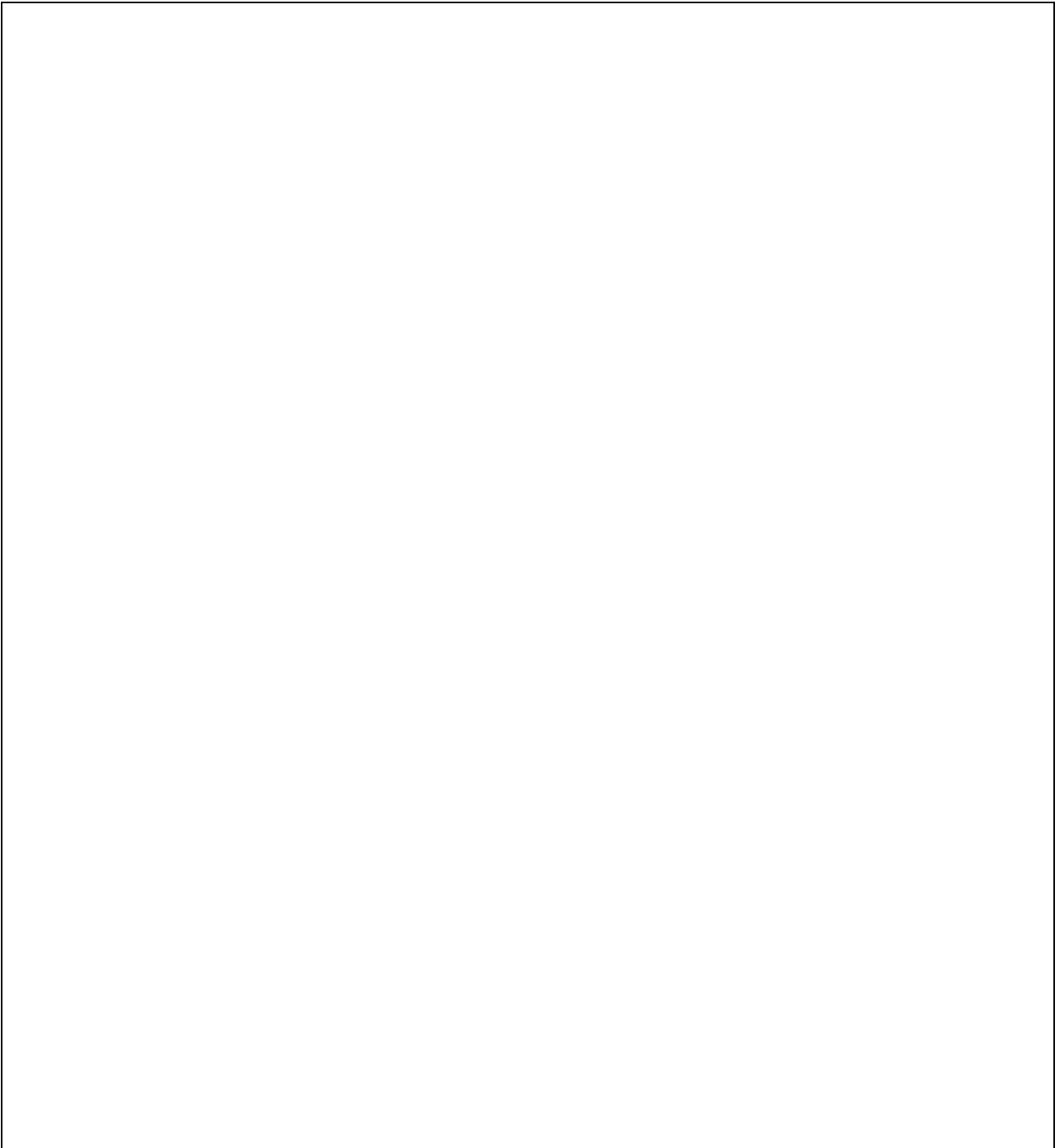
Immediately After the Session	Check
1. Verify if the tape recorder, if used, worked throughout the session.	
2. Make any notes on your written notes , e.g., to clarify any scratching, ensure pages are numbered, fill out any notes that don't make sense.	
3. Write down any observations made during the session. For example, where did the session occur and when, what was the nature of participation in the group? Were there any surprises during the session? Did the tape recorder break?	

FOCUS GROUP RUN SHEET

Date / Time	Location	Facilitator
Objective of focus group		

<p>Agenda:</p> <p>Welcome:</p> <p>Introduction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitator or co-facilitator if present• The objective of the focus group is discussed and the goal of meeting to generate information is explained• Explain how information is collected and processed (recorded by facilitator or co-facilitator if present). <p>Rules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Each person will be asked to provide feedback• The facilitator may redirect conversation where necessary• The facilitator will indicate who can speak• The facilitator will terminate answers where necessary

<p>Questions (Should have been developed using interview/focus group checklist)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Record responses• Ensure even participation. If one or two people are dominating the meeting, then call on others. Consider using a round-table approach, including going in one direction around the table, giving each person a minute to answer the question. If the domination persists, note it to the group and ask for ideas about how the participation can be increased.• At the end of the questions, repeat back to the group the summary of the comments.
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Closing the session

Tell members that they will receive a copy of the report generated from their answers, thank them for coming, and adjourn the meeting.

Immediately After Session

- Verify if the tape recorder, if used, worked throughout the session.
- Make any notes on your written notes, e.g., to clarify any scratching, ensure pages are numbered, fill out any notes that don't make sense.
- Write down any observations made during the session. For example, where did the session occur and when, what was the nature of participation in the group? Were there any surprises during the session? Did the tape recorder break?

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