



Interview Technique

A) Preparation:

- **Information about your interview partner and his/her organization**
Before you start with an interview try to get as much information about your interview partner and his/her organization s/he is working for.
- **Prepare the questions** that you really want to get answered
- **Questionnaire list**
Prepare a check list of questions which you can stick to during the interview
- **Technical preparation**
Get all your tools ready:
 - take enough paper, (Note book)
 - check your tape recorder/batteries, (prepare more tapes when you have a long duration of interview)
 - do not forget your pencil
 - take your name card with you

B) Introduction:

Every interview starts not with a question but with some information you give to your interviewee:

- **Name:** “My name is ...”
- **Background:** “I am working for ...” or “I am program officer of ...”
- **Purpose of Interview:** “I want to know more about ... “
“I make a survey on ...”
“I need to find out about ...”
- **Time:** “My interview will take 10 minutes.”
“I would like to take 15 minutes of your time.”

C) Questions:

Always keep your questions short and precise. Do not talk more than your interviewee. This works best when you start your question with one of the “w” – questions:

Who?
What?
When?
Why?
Where? (Where ... to? or Where ... from?)
How?



D) Asking Questions During an Interview:

I) Learn to think “I WANT AN ANSWER”

At first you must get a clear idea what do **you want** personally from the interview. So ask yourself:

- What do I want? I want an **answer!**
- What is my goal? I want the interviewed person to give me the **information!**
- Why do I want information?

... because I **need** to write a report.

... because I **need** to check a human rights case.

... because I **need** to prepare a lobbying strategy etc.

- Do I have the right to ask questions?

Yes, it is **my right** to ask. My freedom of expression also includes a free access to information.

If you are **not clear about your personal goals and needs** you will be **easily distracted from your questions** by the person who answers your questions. Only if you are **clear about your goals and needs** you will feel **personally strong enough to stick to your questions** and you will not be **quickly content with an insufficient answer**.

Build up your ego before you go to interview someone!

To **claim someone to give an answer** is the **first step of an interview**. It has to do something with control and supervision. The question claims someone to expose his/her information and ideas or to justify him/herself. So it clearly has to do with exercise of power. The one questioning exercises power. S/he utters a strong wish, a claim, that someone else discloses something to him/her. So the one being questioned may not always like to be questioned.

So be aware of this situation!

But do not hesitate to question only because you want to be polite or only because you do not want to push someone.

Otherwise your interview **time is over** and you **have to return without the result (information)** you wanted.



II) Learn to think: **“I STICK TO MY QUESTION”** **“I INSIST ON AN ANSWER”**

To **claim someone to come back to your question** is **frequently necessary** during an interview. Such a claim goes even more far than the first question. It shows that the interviewer is not fully content with the first answer but wants more explanation. Such a question raises a little doubt about the sufficiency of the first answer. Many people will not like being asked more questions. They think one answer is enough. The interviewer does not deserve more answers.

Be aware of this situation!

But **do not refrain from asking second questions and insisting on the answers you want.**

Come back to your question!

Example:

You are asking someone if his/her project was a success. S/he answers that the project will go on. This does not answer if the project was really successful or not but just avoids a clear answer (someone may even continue with an unsuccessful project because s/he does not want to admit the lack of success!)

So keeping in mind the fact that you will always have only limited time for an interview you have to bring the person back to your question.

So what will you do?

You could say: “You did not answer my question. I repeat again that I need information on this. Do not try to avoid an answer!”

This of course would be very rude and impolite.

So it is better to say: “You mentioned an interesting point. But I have only limited time and I am also interested in ... (repeat first question).”

or

“I am sorry, but can you give me some more details on ... (repeat first question)?”

Interrupt your interviewee:

Feel free to **interrupt** your interviewee if s/he talks too much! If you do not interrupt you will lose your valuable short interview time for things you do not want to know!

Example:

“Excuse me for interrupting you but I need to come to my next question.”



III) Learn to think: “WHY”

If you ask something you will always get an answer. But an answer will not always be sufficient!

So do not be satisfied with the pure fact that you just got an answer. But think critical: Is this answer explaining enough? What reason may my interviewee have for this answer? Do I understand the answer? Does this answer call for more questions?

The following checklist can be applied to any answer and will give you some tools to think critically about this answer and if it is convincing you or not:

1) On what grounds is the answer based?

Is the answer based on ...

- ... Experience?

It is not enough that the person who answers just is high ranking or has authority.

So ask for example:

“Did you ever try what you now suggest?”

“Has this ever been checked, tested in reality?”

“What is your experience with this? Please give me some examples of the experience you made?”

“How long have you been dealing with this problem?”

- ... Facts?

An answer can be based just on simple allegations without some factual base.

So ask for example:

“Please give me some facts, numbers?”

“Is this based on a survey or on a study? Which study?”

“How do you get this percentage?”

“On what reports or evidence do you base your answer?”

- ... on the law or commonly accepted rules?

It is not enough if a government official just says: “This is against the law” or if an NGO just says: “This is violating human rights”.

So ask for example:

“What law exactly do you mean. Could you please quote the article?”

“What exactly is the human right you see violated? Please give me some details where I can find it?”



2) What attitude of your interview partner is expressed by his/her answer?

Does the answer show that the interviewed person ...

- **... has a perspective for the future?**

To check the perspective of the answer you can additionally ask some hypothetical questions regarding the future: “How do you think will it be like in two years?”

“What do you think will be the situation in two years in the worst case / in the best case?”

“What is your vision?”

- **... wants to contribute actively to the society?**

To find out about this directly ask about the motivation and goals of the interview partner:

“What drives you to do this difficult task?”

“What is your vision?”

“Why do you think this will improve the situation of the society?”

“Who do you think will benefit from that?”

- **... tolerate other views ?**

To find out if the interview partner is open minded ask him/her about alternative views:

“Let us imagine you would be on the other side.

What would you do?”

“Do you have an idea what your opponents, critics say to this?”

“Why do you think this should be also convincing for the opposition/ minority group?”

3) Does the interview partner try to avoid a clear answer?

- **Does s/he change the topic of your question?**

Always check if the answer still has something to do with your question. In case the interview partner just switches to another field of interest you could ask like this:

“Maybe my question was not clear enough. So I would like to formulate the question more clearly: Actually I want to know about ...”

- **Is his/her answer vague and unprecise (without details that can be checked)?**

Always check if the answer does provide facts and details that can be proved. If the answer does not you could ask: “Please could you give me some more details on that?”

“Could you name some persons that I could ask about this for further research?”

“What is your source of information?”



4) What is the quality of the argument of the interview partner?

The quality of any argument in a discussion depends on three elements:

- The **starting point** i.e. the premises or the assumptions
- The **logical steps** and conclusions leading from that starting point to the final result (solution, answer)
- The **result** itself.

Every thought is based on some premises or assumptions. Starting from this it takes some steps of thinking to come to a conclusion. These steps should be logical. That means they should be convincing and easy to follow. If someone takes the same steps s/he should come to the same conclusion. And finally the result or the solution itself can be practical or not, it can be with the law or not or it can be totally unrealistic.

So you should examine the answer and arguments of your interview partner always by checking these three elements:

- **Are the assumptions/ premises convincing?**

For example your interview partner would start with saying: “As we all know everyone needs permission for a public demonstration” or “You will agree that the constitution does rule out coalitions of parties after the election” or “The drug problem is caused by smuggling from Thailand.”

This may be right. But this already can be wrong. If your interview partner is clever s/he will be able to formulate his/her assumptions already like a matter of fact that you simply feel urged to follow it.

So always check this and ask him/her: “As I understood your assumption is ...”

“Why do you think this is right? Could you give me some more explanation on your assumptions?”

- **Is the way to come to the conclusion logical?**

Your interview partner may say: “We do not need participation of the people on the provincial level by electing provincial governors, because we already have people's participation on the national level and on the commune level”. When you look closely to that this is not a logical thought, because it actually does not really explain the lack of participation on the provincial level and why there should be an exception of the principle of self rule which is applicable to all levels of government.

So you could ask:

“Do you think there is a difference between provincial and commune level that would justify such an exception of self rule?”

- **Is the result acceptable, realistic, practicable in real life?**

A politician answers you: “To fight crime we should not punish police men who passively watch a mob killing” you could ask: “Do you think this is compatible with the constitution?”



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