Checklist for Effective Communication in Interviews and Focus Groups
Ouen Hunter and Jeffrey Hillman
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Introduction
Conveying a clear message to intended recipients is central to effective communication, especially during interviews and focus groups for evaluation. An interviewer’s communication skills can motivate study participants to disclose sensitive information or impede them from doing so. Equally important, the evaluator’s comfort level can affect the phrasing of questions and the quality of communication. Using strategies to enhance verbal and nonverbal communication can both improve the quality of collected data and help create a positive experience for participants.

This checklist presents key concepts to keep in mind during the planning of interviews and focus groups, and during the implementation of protocols that will guide such data collection events. We encourage you to practice these communication strategies before collecting data.

Verbal Communication
There are several factors to consider regarding the verbal communication skills used while conducting interviews and focus groups. This section will help you to decide how to ask a question and how to communicate with your intended audience. In addition, this section will outline common communication pitfalls to avoid so that you can create a welcoming, undistracted environment.

Below are strategies you can use in your practice.

1. Use Inclusive Language

Use inclusive language to avoid disrespect or confusion. When meeting with the program staff, pay attention to the vocabulary they use, as it is often the same vocabulary that you should use. Additionally, familiarize yourself with the background of the participants and ask program staff or potential participants themselves if there are any specific words or phrases to avoid or use.

Be cautious when using common greeting phrases. “You guys,” “hey, ladies,” and “you people” are generalities that can alienate or offend participants. Instead, try using, “Hey” and “Hello, everyone!” Keep your greetings gender neutral.

Be aware of your own biases; avoid language that suggests or perpetuates generalizations and stereotypes about gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, age, etc. Educate yourself about the target population before facilitating interviews and focus groups.

Here is what you can do to be mindful of using inclusive language:

• Ask a trusted colleague to bring it to your attention when you use insensitive language in conversation or in interviews and focus groups.
• Practice using gender-free or gender-neutral language, so you are more at ease when conducting interviews or focus groups.

• Always reflect on your use of inclusive language after data collection events. Either debrief with your note-taker (ask questions regarding the flow of the session and if any improper terms were used) or listen to recordings of your interviews or focus groups then reflect on your use of words. This will help you become more aware of your speech patterns, so you can make the necessary adjustments.

2. Ask One Question at a Time

Ask one clear question at a time. Asking one question may seem like a simple task, but it can be challenging once you are in an interview or a focus group. To avoid rambling, practice your protocol with colleagues and be familiar with all the questions that you plan to ask. Ask multipart questions one part at a time.

In conversational speech, one is likely to ramble or ask run-on questions; these can confuse participants. Here are tips for limiting rambling and run-on questions:

• Pause and breathe to stop yourself from asking multiple questions at once. Keep in mind that if the participants do not understand your question, they will ask for clarification.

• Practice singing ABCs, or any short nursery rhymes that you are familiar with, silently to yourself. This will help you fill the silence while waiting for the participants to process the question that you ask.

3. Limit Use of Filler Words

Filler words are words that you use when you think, such as “um,” “you know,” “so,” and “like.”

Filler words interrupt the flow of conversation and the transcription process. Additionally, filler words can be distracting and hinder desired responses. Avoiding filler words will improve your communication by forcing you to ask a succinct and coherent question.

Here are some exercises you can do to limit your use of filler words:

• Listen to recorded interviews or focus groups and count the number of times you use filler words and which filler words you use most often. This practice helps you realize how often you use them.

• Watch or listen to your favorite interviewers (e.g., on a radio program or podcast) to pick up on their techniques to avoid filler words.

4. OARS

OARS—an acronym that stands for “open-ended question, affirmation, reflective listening, and summaries”—is often used by counselors and social workers. This method is also efficient in interviews and focus groups.
• **Ask open-ended questions:** This is a common practice in interviews and focus groups, as it encourages in-depth responses. Here is a tip for practice:
  ▪ When chatting with someone you trust, practice asking follow-up questions that are open-ended.

• **Provide affirmation:** Affirmation can be a head nod or a general-neutral statement of agreement, such as “That must have been difficult for you” or “I see.” Providing affirmation will improve your listening skills. You can practice affirmation by doing the following:
  ▪ Nod when someone is sharing something personal. Do not respond with your own stories as an attempt to relate with someone else. Nod and listen. If you are uncomfortable, use the suggested phrases above.

• **Incorporate reflections:** Reflections indicate to interviewees or focus group participants that you are listening. These are follow-ups to affirmations. If a participant does not have anything else to share after you provide affirmation, offer reflective phrases that indicate you heard them. For example, if they are expressing a feeling, make sure to take the opportunity to confirm the feelings that they are sharing. When appropriate, use the following:
  ▪ “It sounds like you are frustrated with the situation.”
  ▪ “This is an exciting time for you!”
  ▪ “Thank you for sharing your struggles.”

• **Conclude a topic with a summary.** A summary conveys the overall ideas that were shared. Summarizing a topic allows the participants to amend any ideas they shared and is a way to move on to the next topic without participants feeling as if the interview or focus group is disjointed. Summarizing can be challenging because it forces you to be succinct and inclusive of all the ideas. A summary can go something like this:
  ▪ We discussed X, Y, and Z; the ideas shared include A, B, C, and D. Are there any other ideas that you would like to add or clarify?

**Nonverbal Communication**

Interview and focus group protocol development focuses on what words will be said and rarely considers nonverbal communication—how those words will be communicated. Albert Mehrabian brought the focus on nonverbal communication to the forefront in his book *Silent Messages* (1971). He proposed that communication is 55% body language, 38% intonation, and 7% words. Each of these is important for effective communication. Though there is some controversy regarding the exact breakdown of verbal versus nonverbal communication, it remains widely accepted that how a message is presented will affect how it is received. If you plan only the words to be said, you have missed a substantial portion of what will be communicated. Below are strategies you can use in your practice.
1. Be Aware of Cultural Context

Cultural contexts vary greatly. Understanding the nature of the culture you will be entering before starting the data collection is critical for effective communication. Learn about participants and their cultural backgrounds before conducting focus groups or interviews.

Below is one area to investigate so you can apply relevant cues when conducting your interviews or focus groups. Please note this is not meant to be comprehensive but to provide a starting point.

- As lines of the global community become increasingly blurred, awareness of unique cultural differences is imperative and cultural awareness practices are essential. Consider what your body language is communicating in your culture and determine what is appropriate in the culture you are entering. The following are resources to help you consider culturally characteristics of body language:

Some other types of cultural differences to be aware of during qualitative data collection, such as attitudes toward disclosure and conflict, are addressed in the following resource:


There are many factors to consider when entering another culture. Key actions include remaining open to new cultural experiences, being humble enough to recognize that your way is not the only way, and exercising respect for others in all situations.

2. Use Dominant and Submissive Behaviors Intentionally

Depending on the context and type of interview, particular attention should be given to whether you are conveying a dominant or submissive posture. It is important to periodically reflect on how you are carrying yourself and what message you are communicating through your posture.

Dominant behaviors can show control of situations, or they can convey aggression. Submissive behaviors can show deference to others, or they can convey disinterest or fear. Be self-aware of what message you want to give and consider your audience.

- Submissive cues are considered less threatening and can make you appear more relaxed and interested in what others are saying.
  - Sit forward or lean forward while talking.
• Keep your arms relaxed.
• Keep your hands open and relaxed; refrain from having close fists.
• Use a soft gaze and avoid staring directly or intently at the speaker.

• Here are some dominant actions to avoid if you do not wish to convey dominance.
  • Sit with your legs spread at shoulder distance apart.
  • Tent (or steeple) your hands.
  • Stretch your torso to appear larger when standing or sitting.
  • Stand with your hands behind your back.

3. Mimicry and Modeling

Pro-social interactions are strengthened when an individual mimics the actions of another and vice versa (O’Donnell, 2016; Shaw, et al., 2015). Interviewers can be faced with a continuum of responses to the interview process, ranging from hostility or indifference to acceptance or excitement. Being conscious of your body language and how it is conveying a message is essential. You can use body language to show acceptance, model desirable behavior, and demonstrate openness to communication.

• Mimicry — If a person is accepting of the interview:
  • Show interest in their responses through eye contact, nodding, and open body posture.
  • Use similar intonations and vocal levels of the interviewee.
  • Move (not too overtly) into a position that is similar to the interviewee’s. This mimicking can include your positioning in the seat, hand and leg positioning, and crossing of the legs.

These actions help create a pro-social, relaxed setting, where a person is more likely to share their thoughts honestly.

• Modeling — Conversely, if you are met with nervousness, indifference, or aggression, exhibiting the behavior you desire will help alter the actions of the interviewee.
  • Speak calmly.
  • Keep an open posture, such as relaxed arms and open palms.
  • Avoid aggressive gesturing.
  • Avoid dominant postures.

These actions help to calm a participant and provide a comfortable environment. Ultimately, if you face an overtly aggressive situation with no foreseeable chance for change and it escalates to an unsafe level, take steps to remove yourself from the situation.
Additional Resources


