CHAPTER 2

A Framework for Interviewing

Check Your Worldview at the Door
Embrace How Other People See the World
Building Rapport
Listening
Summary
When Wayne Gretzky apocryphally explained his hockey success as "I don’t skate to where the puck is, I skate to where the puck is going to be," he identified a key characteristic of many experts: the underlying framework that drives everything. This platonic idealism Gretzky could have revealed any number of tactics such as his grip, or the way he shifts his weight when he skates. Keith Richards explains his guitar sound, which involves removing the 6th string, tuning to open G, and using a particular fretting pattern, as "five strings, three notes, two fingers, and one asshole." Even though Keith is explaining the tactics, he’s also revealing something ineffable about where he’s coming from. The higher-level operating principles that drive these experts are compelling and illustrative.

Expert researchers also have their own operating principles. In this chapter, I’ll outline mine, and I hope to inspire you to develop your own interviewing framework. As you develop, the process evolves from a toolkit for asking questions into a way of being, and you’ll find that many of the tactical problems to solve in interviewing are simply no-brainers. As George Clinton sang, "Free your mind...and your ass will follow."

Check Your Worldview at the Door

I’ve been asked, “What was the most surprising thing you ever learned while doing fieldwork?” I scratch my head over that one because I don’t go out into the field with a very strong point of view. Of course, I’m informed by my own experiences, my suspicions, and what my clients have told me, but I approach the interviews with a sense of what I can only call a bland curiosity.

As the researcher, it’s my responsibility to find out what’s going on; I’m not invested in a particular outcome. Even more (and this is where the blandness comes from), I’m not fully invested in a specific set of answers. Sure, we’ve got specific things we want to learn—questions we have to answer in order to fulfill our brief. But my hunger to learn from my participant is broad, not specific. I’m curious, but I don’t know yet what I’m curious about. My own expectations are muted, blunted, and distributed. Although I will absolutely find the information I’m tasked with uncovering, I also bring a general curiosity. Now, the people I work with don’t have the luxury of bland curiosity. Whether they are marketers, product managers, engineers, or designers (or even other researchers), they often have their own beliefs about what is going on with people. This makes sense: if there’s enough organizational momentum to convene a research project, someone has been thinking hard about the issues and the opportunities, and has come to a point of view.

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1 In fact, it was Walter Gretzky, Wayne’s dad, who said it, as "Go to where the puck is going, not where it has been," according to Fast Company’s Consultant Debunking Unit.

http://r/fid/me/hX0rpR

The Brain Dump

At the beginning of the project, convene a brain dump (see Figure 2.1). Get what’s in everyone’s heads out on the table. Whether it’s real-time, face-to-face, in front of a whiteboard, or asynchronously across offices on a wiki, talk through assumptions, expectations, closely-held beliefs, perspectives, and hypotheses. Contradictions are inevitable and should even be encouraged. The point is not establishing consensus; it’s to surface what’s implicit. By saying it aloud and writing it down, the issues leave the group specifically and enter an external, neutral space.

FIGURE 2.1
Capture everything that everyone thinks they know so that it's not stuck in their heads.

It’s also not about being right or wrong; I encourage you to anonymize all the input so that people don’t feel sheepish about expressing themselves. I wouldn’t even go back and validate the brain dump against the resulting data. The objective is to shake up what is in your mind and free you to see new things. Think about it as a transitional ritual of unburdening, like men emptying their pockets of keys, change, and wallet as soon as they return home (Figure 2.2).
Make the Interview About the Interview

Another transitional ritual is to make a small declaration to yourself and your fellow fieldworkers in the moments before you begin an interview. If you are outside someone’s apartment or entering their workspace, turn to each other and state what you are there to accomplish. If you were in a movie, you’d probably growl purposefully “Let’s do this thing.” Sadly, fieldwork is not quite that glamorous, so you might want to clarify what you mean by “this thing.” Remember, even if you consider the fieldwork part of a larger corporate initiative to “identify next-gen opportunities for Q3 roadmap,” that’s not where you should be focusing as you start your interview. Set aside the underlying goals for the duration of the session. “This thing” might instead be learning about Paul and how he uses his smartphone or GloboCorp’s IT department and how they deploy new routers. It’s important to take that moment to tangibly confirm—and affirm—your immediate objective.

Embrace How Other People See the World

If you’ve effectively purged yourself of your own worldview, you are now a hollow vessel waiting to be filled with insights. Lovely image, isn’t it? It’s not quite accurate. You need to not only be ready to hear your participant’s take on things, but you should also be hungry for it. This willingness to embrace is an active, deliberate state.

Go Where the People Are

Rather than asking people to come to you to be interviewed, go where they are. In order to embrace their world, you have to be in their world. Inviting them into your realm (and let’s face it, even if a neutral market research facility isn’t technically your realm, that’s how your participants will perceive it) won’t cut it. You’ll benefit by interviewing them in their own environment—this is the environment you are interested in, where the artifacts and behaviors you want to learn about are rooted. By the same token, you’ll also benefit from your own first-hand experience in that environment. The information you learn when going into other people’s worlds is different from what you learn when bringing them into yours.

To that end, try not to bring your world into theirs. Leave the company-logo clothing (and accessories) at home. Wearing your colors is fine when you’re rooting for the home team or taking your hog to Sturgis, but it has no place in the interviewing room (see Figure 2.3).

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2 Touchpoint, the Service Design Network publication, Volume 4, Issue 2.
The response you fear: Why are you asking me this stuff? Everyone knows that it's April 15. Get out of my house, jerk face!

The type of answer you are just as likely to get if you swallow your discomfort and ask the question anyway: I always complete everything by March 1. I think it's April 15 this year, but I never really pay attention to that.

The goal here is to make it clear to the participant (and to yourself) that they are the expert and you are the novice. This definitely pays off. When I conduct research overseas, people tangibly extend themselves to answer my necessarily naive questions. Although it's most apparent in those extreme situations, it applies to all interviews. Respect for their expertise coupled with your own humility serves as a powerful invitation to the participant.

Nip Distractions in the Bud

Tactically, make sure that you are not distracted when you arrive. Take care of your food, drink, and restroom needs in advance. When I meet up with colleagues who are coming to the interview from a different location, we pick an easy location (such as a Starbucks) for a pre-interview briefing. It gives us time to acclimate into interview mode, review the participant's profile, catch up on what's been happening in the field to date, and address our personal needs. If your brain is chattering, "Lord, am I famished? When's lunch?" you are at a disadvantage when it comes to tuning into what's going on in the interview.

Needless to say, silence your mobile phone and don’t plan on taking calls or checking texts or emails during the interview. I say "needless," but I met a team that took a different approach. Sensitive to the commitment their internal clients were making in leaving the office for fieldwork, they allowed mobile device usage during the interview, within limits. Although they were inspired by one colleague who had the stealth-check-below-the-table move down cold, most people weren't able to handle it quite so deftly. It was a good lesson to learn; they won't be allowing cell phones in the future. Mind you, even if one were successfully stealthy, that's beside the point. Figure 2.4 is an evocative depiction of the multitasking potential of technology, but during an interview (and probably during a date), you should be fully engaged with the other person.

Be Ready to Ask Questions for Which You Think You Know the Answer

You already know how you plan a balanced meal, prepare your taxes, or select an aspect ratio on your HDTV. You may already have an idea about how your participant does those things (because of what you've learned about them during the screening process, or implied by something they said earlier in the interview, or assumed by what you've seen other people do in the past). However, you need to be open to asking for details anyway. I'll have more to say in subsequent chapters about asking questions, but for now keep in mind that to embrace their world you need to explore the details of their world. Some people fear that they are being false by asking a question if they think they know the answer. But don't be so confident with your own presumptions. Interesting tidbits can emerge when you ask these questions, as this hypothetical example suggests:

**Question:** When are your taxes due?

**The answer (which you already know):** April 15
Building Rapport

I often leave an interview with my head slightly swimming, in a state between energized and exhausted. In addition to all the useful information that will impact the project, I’ve just made an intense connection with a new person. I’ve established a rapport with someone. That’s a powerful feeling, and likely as not, my participant is feeling the same way. Our quotidian transaction to learn about breakfast making has turned into something else.

The rapport is what makes for great interviews. You won’t leave every interview walking on a cloud, but getting to that state with your interviewee is something to strive for.

It’s your job to develop that rapport over the course of the interview. By all means, recruit participants who are articulate, outgoing, and eager to be part of the interview, but remember that creating that connection falls to you, the interviewer. As in life, you’ll meet some people who you’ll connect with easily, and others who you’ll have to work hard for. Some of my best interviews have been with people who are visibly uncomfortable or disinterested at the outset.

Be Selective About Social Graces

Your participants have no framework for “ethnographic interview,” so they will likely be mapping this experience onto something more familiar like “having company” (when being interviewed at home) or “giving a demo” (when being interviewed about their work). Sometimes when you visit people in their homes, they will offer you a drink. For years, I resisted taking the drink, trying to minimize the inconvenience I was causing. I was well intentioned but naïve; one time I declined a proffered drink and met an ongoing undertone of hostility. The drink offer was made again, so I accepted, and suddenly everything thawed. The issue wasn’t my pursuit or denial of refreshment, it was acknowledging my participant’s social expectations—guests should act like guests. This experience took place in the U.S.; in other parts of the world (say, Japan), these rituals are even more inflexible and failure to adhere to them will likely doom the interview. Be sure that you’re aware of the social expectations in the country in which you conduct your interviews.

In addition to accepting a drink, allow for some small talk as you get settled. But don’t dwell on the chitchat, because your participant may find this confusing.

Be Selective When Talking About Yourself

You are bound to hear stories in the field that you strongly identify with, whether it’s someone’s frustration with a broken part of Windows or their passion for Pre-Code Hollywood. Although it’s important to connect with your participant, it’s not the best idea to get there by sharing your common interest. Remember that the interview isn’t about you. If you also love Pre-Code Hollywood, you may think “OMG! Another fellow Pre-Code Hollywood enthusiast!” But you don’t have to say that! Think about when to reveal something about yourself (and when not to). Putting a “me too!” out there changes the dynamic of the interview. It may work to develop some rapport in a difficult situation, or it may imply you are more interested in talking about yourself than listening to the other person. Although this approach might work in social settings, where “see how interesting I am!” is a way we establish our worth in new situations, it can be detrimental in an interview.

You should definitely talk about yourself if doing so gives the other person permission to share something. As an example, early on in my career I was part of an interview team where my role was to hold the video camera and ask only a few supporting questions. As our participant was telling us about her family and their history, she stopped and looked at both of us and said, “Well, you know, my family is Jewish.” She was hesitant to continue. I piped up, explaining “My family is Jewish as well.” She said to me, “Well, then you understand.” She then turned to my colleague and proceeded to explain the specific details she wanted to convey. I don’t always tell my Jewish interviewees, “Hey, I’m Jewish, too! I have a menorah, too!” but in this case a small revelation gave the interviewee permission to move forward with the interview.
Work Toward the Tipping Point

There’s often a visceral point in the interview where the exchange shifts from a back-and-forth of question-and-answer, question-and-answer to a question-story setup. It’s such a tangible shift in the interview that I feel as if I can point to it when it happens. Stories are where the richest insights lie, and your objective is to get to this point in every interview.

The thing about this tipping point is that you don’t know when it’s coming. So you have to be patient in the question-and-answer part of the interview because you don’t necessarily know what you’re doing to build rapport is getting you anywhere. You have to trust in the process, which is easier with experience.

Acknowledge That the Interview Is...Something Unusual

Although your participants are using “social call” or “vendor meeting” as their initial framework for their experience with you, it’s not a perfect model. Strangers don’t typically visit us and take video of us grinding coffee beans. Falling back on naturalistic observation is disingenuous; it’s not easy for participants to pretend you aren’t there and just go on as they would normally. If we make the generous assumption that people on reality TV shows are in fact behaving naturally, that is typically due to an extensive amount of time surrounded by cameras, where what is natural shifts to something different. You won’t have enough time in your interview to accomplish that. Instead, leverage the constructed nature of your shared experience. You are empowered to ask silly-seeming detailed questions about the mundane because you are joined together in this uncommon interaction. Frame some of your questions with phrases such as “What I want to learn today is...” as an explicit reminder that you have different roles in this shared, unnatural experience.

Listening

When you engage in conversation, you’re often thinking about what you want to say next and listening for the breathing cues that indicate it’s your turn to speak. As you jockey for your 51% of the conversation space, listening becomes a limited resource. Although we all like to consider ourselves “good listeners,” for interviewing you must rely on a very special form of listening that goes beyond the fundamentals, such as “don’t interrupt.”

Listening is the most effective way you can build rapport. It’s how you demonstrate tangibly to your participants that what they have to say is important to you.

Listen by Asking Questions

In addition to demonstrating listening by what you don’t say, you can also demonstrate that you are listening by what you do say. The questions you ask are signifiers that you are listening. Try to construct each question as a follow-up to a previous answer. If you are following up on something other than what the participant just said, indicate where your question comes from. For example, “Earlier, you told us that...” or “I want to go back to something else you said...” Not only does this help the person know that you’re looping back, it also indicates that you are really paying attention to what they are telling you, that you remember it, and that you are interested. If you are going to change topics, just signal your transitions; “Great. Now I’d like to move on to a totally different topic.”

Be Aware of Your Body Language

Make and maintain eye contact with your participant. If you find eye contact personally challenging, take breaks and aim your gaze at their face, their hands, and items they are showing you. Use your eyes to signal your commitment to the interview. Acknowledge their comments with head nods or simple “mm-hmm” sounds. Be conscious of your body position. When you are listening, you should be leaning forward and visibly engaged (see Figure 2.5). When you aren’t listening, your body tells that story, too (see Figure 2.6).

FIGURE 2.5
Good listening body language.

FIGURE 2.6
Not so much.
The listening body language is important because it not only gets you in the state, or reflects the state that you’re in, but it also very clearly tells the person you’re talking to that you are listening.

If your brain is listening, your body will naturally follow. But it works the other way, too! Just as therapists and life coaches encourage people to “act as if,” you can also put your body into a listening posture and your brain will follow. Consider the example described by Malcolm Gladwell in his article *The Naked Face*. He describes the work of psychologists who developed a coding system for facial expressions. As they identified the muscle groups and what different combinations signified, they realized that in moving those muscles, they were inducing the actual feelings. He writes:

> Emotion doesn't just go from the inside out. It goes from the outside in...In the facial-feedback system, an expression you do not even know that you have can create an emotion you did not choose to feel.

**TIP** FEEDBACK IS BACK

If you are recording your interviews on video for later editing, you may find the “mm-hmm” noises incredibly aggravating. Unless you are mirroring your participants, your affirmations may be much louder than their responses (see Figure 2.7). For novice interviewers in particular, it’s still good to let the “mm-hmm” fly and really work on developing rapport, even if the resulting video is going to suffer a bit. It’s better to have abrupt audio changes in the deliverable than fail to achieve the maximum possible rapport in the interview. As you gain experience interviewing, learn to silently affirm with facial expressions and head-nods, and throw in the vocalization only occasionally.

**FIGURE 2.7**
The interviewer’s affirmations can be louder than the participant’s comments.

**Summary**

Experts have a set of best practices—tactics, really—that they follow. But what really makes them expert is that they have a set of operating principles. This looks more like a framework for how to be, rather than a list of what to do. You will have your own framework, but mine consists of the following:

- Check your worldview at the door. When you begin fieldwork, don’t fixate on what you expect to learn, but rather cultivate your own general, non-specific curiosity.

- Embrace how other people see the world. Do your fieldwork in their environments—not in yours. Before you head out to the field, get the team together and do a cleansing brain dump of all the things you might possibly expect to see and hear, leaving you open to what is really waiting for you out there.

- One of the factors that makes for great interviews is the rapport that you establish between you and your participant. Don’t forget that it’s up to you to build that rapport. Focus on them and be very selective about talking about yourself.

- Your job is to listen beyond “Keep your mouth shut and your ears open.” Your choice of questions and how you ask them demonstrate that you are listening. Pay attention to how your body language cues your participant—and you—as to how well you are paying attention.