

Three Conversation Styles

by Michael Smull

Seeking to have conversations not interviews

Think about how you are going to have a conversation with each person on your list. While you should think about what you want to learn you must be prepared to learn things that you did not anticipate. If you just have an interview (by asking a set of prepared questions) you will learn only what you expected to learn. If you have a conversation (and listen carefully) you will learn things that are important and that no-one suggested in advance. In each conversation you want to avoid:

Questions that are close ended. Questions whose answer is yes or no (e.g. Do you like bowling?) and questions whose answer is one or the other (e.g. Would you like to live in a house or an apartment?).

Questions that have a built in answer (e.g. Wouldn't you like to live with us? Or We like to have fun, would you like to have fun with us?). Keep in mind that some of the built in answers are a bit more subtle, they come with a head nod, a change of inflection, etc.

Questions where people who are eager to please simply look to you for the answer.

A few questions like these are nearly unavoidable in the course of a conversation but there are at least three ways to avoid having the whole conversation revolve around these kinds of questions. These 3 ways of having conversations are: linear, branching, and meandering.

Linear

A linear approach is the easiest way to have a conversation without asking leading questions. If you are talking with the individual with whom you are planning you simply start with getting up and then walk through the day with the person. You ask what a "typical" morning is like and then ask if some are better than others and what is a good one like and what is a bad one like. You move through the day in pieces asking for what usually happens and then asking for good and bad versions of that part of the day. Try to get the person you are talking with to tell you stories that illustrate what they mean. Be prepared to adapt this approach to the circumstances and capacities of the person. One man could not tell us what a good or bad day was like but he could describe his last week, day by day, in great detail. Another man had not had any good days in some time but could tell us about good days from his past.

When talking with someone who is involved during regular hours (e.g. 9 AM to 3 PM) simply start at the beginning of that time and walk through it asking questions about typical, good, and bad versions of each part of the day.

Branching

A branching approach starts in the same way, walking through time with the person, encouraging stories that illustrate the good day and the bad day. However, in a branching approach you look for opportunities for the person to tell related stories about other parts of a person's life. The result is a conversation that branches from one point in time and then meanders a bit until that line of conversation ends. At that point you go back to where you were in time when the branch started. For example, if the branch started with breakfast and wandered off from there, at the end of that branch you would ask "and what happens after breakfast?"

Meandering

A meandering conversation is the most natural and also the most difficult. In a meandering conversation, instead of walking through time with someone, you start wherever your initial questions lead you and then shape the conversation so that you hear stories about what is important to the individual's life across all of the areas that the person you are interviewing knows about. Having a meandering conversation requires that you keep the conversation moving and cover all the areas in the time that you have. The facilitator must be skilled and have a mental map of what she or he wants to learn, while always listening for the unexpected.