

Needs Assessment Techniques

Conducting a Key Informant Interview

Choose Your Informant Carefully

Selecting a key informant should be done with care. The informant needs to be someone who has personal knowledge or experience with a particular problem, or has professional training in that area. Be sure to have a mix of people -- people of different ages, ethnicity, religious affiliation, educational level, etc. The informant must also be able to express themselves clearly.

Be Yourself

If you have never done interviews like this before, don't let it frighten you. Be yourself! If you are genuinely interested in what this person has to say, that interest and commitment will come through. We overlook little inadequacies if the person is genuine. Besides, the whole purpose of this is not to impress people, it's to learn what this person has to say. Their knowledge should be the focus of the interview. When in doubt, be quiet and listen!

Introduce Yourself

When you call to set up the interview, introduce yourself and your position (unit leader or member of the Cooperative Extension Advisory Council). You can't assume that they know about Extension, so include a sentence or two defining Cooperative Extension: "Cooperative Extension was started as part of the land-grant universities in the 1800s. We provide research-based education to the general public." Then tell them Extension is conducting an assessment of needs in the community and explain that they are in a unique position to help assess needs. Make an appointment to interview them at a time and place convenient for them--their office, your office, or some other place quiet and private. This is not an interview to conduct at the local coffee shop. Thank them for their willingness to meet with you. Before you begin, there are several items you must address with each informant:



- ! Be sure the informant understands the purpose of the needs assessment and what you intend to do with the information you receive.
- ! Be very clear about how much confidentiality you can offer.
- ! Let the informant know if there are any organizational constraints that may limit how the study is reported.

Ask Questions

Start the interview with some basic "ice-breaking" questions, such as "Tell me about your agency and who it serves." Questions like this are not a waste of time; they give both of you a chance to get acquainted and feel comfortable with each other.

Many interviewers find it helpful to start with general questions and then become more specific as the

interview progresses. It's a good idea to have questions ready ahead of time, but sometimes what the informant tells you will change things, so that you have to ask different questions. No problem! We do that in normal conversation all the time.

You might start with these basic questions:

- What are the problems facing our community?
- What has happened that makes you believe this is a problem?
- Tell me more about that.
- Who does this problem affect?
- How does it affect them? [Encourage them to be specific.]
- What causes this problem?
- How might education help?
- What are some more problems?

Use active listening techniques, such as nodding your head, saying "uh-huh," or "Can you tell me more about that?" If the informant knows you are really listening they will talk more. Never let something you don't understand pass without asking for clarification. You can do this by saying something similar to, "I'm sorry, I don't understand how that would work," or "If I understand you correctly, you're saying...." Your role is to be a facilitator so you can get all the information you can from this person. It is not to impose your own interpretations or perspectives.

If you've been really good at establishing rapport and listening, you may find it difficult to break off the interview. Beginning your summary of what they have said will help the informant know things are winding down. This summary is important because it gives you a chance to verify that you have understood them. Put what they have said into your own words and ask them if you have said it correctly, "Now let me see if I have understood you correctly. You're saying that.. ." If you have misunderstood this gives them a chance to correct you and clarify their position.

You may also want to ask them to recommend another person you can interview. Asking them, "Who should I talk with to get a different view of this?" can enrich the quality of the assessment. Before leaving, be sure to let them know that if they think of anything else they can call. Afterwards, be sure to send a thank you note.

Keep Track of What Was Said

There are several ways to analyze the information you have received. Sometimes interviewers make brief notes on 3 x 5 cards, which can be grouped later in a variety of ways. Sometimes the interviews are taped so the interviewer can listen again and make notes. It can be helpful to have someone else listen to the interview to confirm that you have correctly understood what was said. Whatever method has been decided upon, you need to be sure that you have some record of the main points. Usually it's a good idea to sit down right after the interview and put your thoughts on paper: a summary, your impressions of the key informant's feelings, and anything else that seems relevant.

