

Empathy Interview Protocol

Empathy interviews are an approach used to better understand the perspectives, feelings, and lived experiences of others. They can provide structured opportunities to listen deeply to an individual’s personal stories and identify their choices and behaviors, which can represent the individual’s unacknowledged needs. Once needs are identified, solutions and systems can be designed to better serve those needs. The Empathy Interview Protocol can assist teams at your school or district with designing and conducting productive interviews that can yield important data to make your assessment system more culturally responsive.

Before engaging in empathy interviews, be sure the interview team is familiar with these [guidelines and best practices for gathering and using human subject data](#), especially when empathy interviews are conducted with students. In addition, it is important to enter these interviews ready to listen with empathy and without distractions; ensure these interviews are conducted in a safe and appropriate space; and for interviewers to stay neutral and not react in a way that could be perceived by the interviewees as challenging, correcting, interrupting, or interrogating. Any data that is used should help inform decisions that enact change based on evidence the data provide.

Step 1: Make a Plan

The first step is to draft a plan for empathy interviews. Use the Purpose Planning Template below and discuss the consideration questions with your team. Your team’s responses will become the foundation of your plan.

Purpose Planning Template

Consideration Question	Response
Why is your team conducting empathy interviews?	{enter response here}

Consideration Question	Response
What does your team hope to learn?	{enter response here}
Who will your team interview?	{enter response here}
Who on your team will conduct the interviews?	{enter response here}
Where will your team hold the interviews?	{enter response here}
When will your team hold the interviews?	{enter response here}

Step 2: Review Interview Guidelines

Much like other interviews, empathy interviews adhere to certain norms that support their successful execution. Review these guidelines with your team. Remind your team of the importance of adhering to these guidelines, particularly when employing multiple team members in the interview process.

Interview Guidelines

1. Seek to understand and remain an interested listener. This will put your interview subject at ease and encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings.

2. Ask why often, even if you think you know the answer. This practice will help your subject share more deeply and reveal additional information and insights.
3. Be aware of your subject's body language and nonverbal cues. Allow moments of silence and natural pauses in conversation. These moments offer space for reflection and deeper insight.
4. Ask permission to record the interview in audio or video formats, instead of taking written notes. This will free you up to offer your undivided attention to your subject and support engagement.

Step 3: Formulate Questions

Interviews are a chance to hear directly from individuals within your system and can help provide nuance to existing data, unearth hidden factors that impact students and their families, and reveal previously unexplored opportunities for improvement. It is important for your team to take the time to formulate questions that align with why you are conducting these interviews and what you hope to learn from them. Review the following suggestions for how to create quality questions for your interviews, then refer to the sample questions that follow. Use the Question Planning Template and write questions that will give you the best chance at understanding the problem you hope to solve.

Suggestions for How to Create Quality Questions for Interviews

1. Craft questions that encourage your subject to tell stories about their experiences. Telling stories can help you uncover how your subject really thinks and feels.
2. Frame questions neutrally so as not to influence your subject. Instead of asking, "What do you think is wrong with...?" reframe the question to ask, "What do you think about...?".
3. Make questions specific to avoid generic answers. Instead of asking, "How do you usually...?" try asking, "Tell me about the last time you...?".
4. Probe for more information as needed. Say things like, "What was it like when...?" and "Tell me more about..." The quality of your subject's responses matters more than the quantity you receive.

Sample Question Frames

- Tell me about your best experience with...

- What contributed to your success?
- How did you feel?
- What happened afterwards?
- Describe a time when you had difficulty doing...
 - What made it so hard?
 - How did you react?
 - What do you wish had been different?
- What do you wish other people knew about...?
 - What kinds of changes would result from people knowing this information?
 - What makes this worth knowing?
- What advice would you offer about...?
 - What led you to this conclusion?
 - What caused you to feel this way?

Question Planning Template

Question	Possible Follow-Up Questions
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}

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{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}

Step 4: Prepare for the Interviews

It is time to revisit your team’s responses in the Purpose Planning Template in Step 1. Why is your team conducting empathy interviews? What does your team hope to learn? Your team’s responses to these questions can help you focus on selecting the questions from the Question Planning Template in Step 3 that are most aligned to your purpose and have the best chance of providing you with the specific data you need. Read through the Question Planning Template and select your top five or six questions. Use the Final Interview Questions template below to arrange the questions in order so that the most important questions appear first. This way, if you run short on time during the interviews you can make certain that the most important questions are asked of each subject.

Final Interview Questions

Order	Question	Possible Follow-Up Questions
1	{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
2	{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
3	{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
4	{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}

Order	Question	Possible Follow-Up Questions
5	{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}
6	{add question here}	{add follow-up questions here}

Step 5: Conduct the Interviews

Now your team is ready to gather data through empathy interviews. Review your team’s answers in the Purpose Planning Template to identify the logistical information you need to address to conduct the interviews (e.g., contact interviewees, schedule time and place for interviews, select team members who will conduct interviews, prepare materials and technology). Consider whether to use video or audio recordings and get participants’ or their parents/guardians’ permission before using. Be sure to thank your interviewees for their time and candid participation.

Step 6: Analyze and Reflect

Gather the data your team collected from the interviews. You may wish to have audio or video recordings transcribed to make the data easier to consume. Look and listen for patterns in the data, key insights from interviewees, and areas where more information is needed. Ask yourselves the following questions:

- What did we hear from the interviewees?
- What are we learning about the problem and its root causes?
- What do we find surprising or noteworthy?
- Where do we need to follow up?

References

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<https://practices.learningaccelerator.org/artifacts/stanford-d-school-empathy-interview-guide>