

Guidelines for Observation of Communication in Organizations

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1. In many cases, you should ask your contact person in the organization to introduce you and your purpose for being there. You will be required to put something in writing explaining your purpose, your promise of confidentiality, and a statement indicating you are not there to judge them or their work, but to learn from them (to be provided). Be sure to arrive a few minutes early so you can discuss introductions with the person doing them. You may want to clarify your purpose for being there, assure confidentiality, and that you expect participants to go about their business as usual. It is often appropriate to ask the permission of those being observed, as opposed to just informing them that you'll be observing.
2. Find a place to sit where you are comfortable, in a good position to observe and hear most interaction, and be as inconspicuous as possible.
3. Try to be as unobtrusive as possible during your observation. You can do this by:
 - a) Appearing comfortable, confident, and non-judgmental. So, try not to squirm, laugh, or look alarmed at what you see and hear.
 - b) Writing or reading your notes during much of the interaction. In other words, people are going to feel less "in the spotlight" if you are looking at your note pad rather than at them, especially if you are doing so regularly rather than only when something happens.
4. At the beginning of each observation period, write on your note pad the time and place of the observation. Note other features of the setting that may help you later in reconstructing the events you observe. Record the time you quit observing when you finish.
5. Divide your notes page by drawing a vertical line down the paper.
 - a) On the left side of the paper, record *descriptions*, or direct observations -- i. e., what is said and done by interactants. Put verbatim comments in quotation marks, so you recognize later what was actually said versus your record of the general nature of the conversation.
 - b) On the left side, record your *inferences*, reactions, questions, hunches, and thoughts about the research process. For example, do you suspect but not have direct evidence for, discomfort on the part of one participant? Is observation becoming less obtrusive? What readings or experiences are influencing your observations and interpretations? Also, jot down notes that relate to theories you've read and want to test.

Be sure to keep these separate to facilitate interpretation of data.
6. Events will often transpire more quickly than you can record them. Manage this by:
 - a) Writing abbreviated comments that can be completed later (but be sure they're legible),
 - b) Leaving plenty of white space in recording your observations, so can record additional observations later, and
 - c) Immediately after your observation, review your notes and fill in the gaps. As much as possible, descriptions/ direct observations should be recorded during the observation.

7. Identify the questions that will guide observations. This will also help you avoid being overwhelmed with the pace of activity, since you will focus your attention on only a subset of the phenomena available. For example, if you're studying conflict, the questions should be something like: What are the issues on which there is conflict (or, different points of view)? How are differences/conflicts handled? How do individuals influence each other and attempt to make decisions and/or build consensus within the group?
8. Inferences, reactions and comments may be made during or after the observation. They should be clearly tied to direct observations; that is, any inferences, reactions, or comments should be explained by relating them to actions that are observed and recorded. Inferences should focus primarily on answering the questions guiding your study, although you should allow yourself some creativity to note other interesting issues as well. This is especially important early on, since you don't know what issues are important to the group and the subtle ways in which group members may influence each other.
9. Rather than think of your study as comprising discrete periods of data collection and data analysis, consider your analysis/interpretation as an on-going part of your observation. That is, the comments you make on the right side of your note pad should include your interpretation of the issues you're investigating. Some of these will take the form of questions, hunches, or tentative hypotheses to be investigated further. Usually, it is a good practice to review your field notes regularly, since in doing so you often notice patterns or issues of which you would not otherwise have been aware. Typing your field notes immediately after observation is one way to encourage this review and reflection.
10. You may interview participants to investigate further the interaction observed. Think in advance about how you will approach them and what questions you will ask. Generally, you want to be as unobtrusive as possible. So, look for natural opportunities to approach them, such as after others have left, when they take a break, or when they are moving from one activity to another. When you do this sort of follow-up interview, try to be careful not to impose your ideas on the interviewee. So, use open ended questions, such as, "How did you feel about the discussion on the budget? What were you thinking to yourself? What did you mean when you said . . . ? How did you interpret Kim's statement when she said . . . ?"