Planning Interviews and Conducting Meetings

Lecture Outline:
Define four types of interview questions and clarify when to use each type
Describe how groups make decisions
Discuss the preparations and duties necessary for productive meetings

Planning interviews
Planning an interview is similar to planning any other form of communication. You begin by stating your purpose, analyzing the other person, and formulating your main idea. Then you decide on the length, style, and organization of the interview. Even as an interviewee, you gain some control over the conversation by anticipating the interviewer’s questions and then planning your answers so that the points you want to make will be covered. You can also introduce questions and topics of your own. In addition, by your comments and nonverbal cues, you can affect the relationship between you and the interviewer.

Asking yourself the following questions will help you prepare for interviews:
What are your respective roles?
What does this person expect from you?
Is it to your advantage to confirm those expectations?
Will you be more likely to accomplish your objective by being friendly and open or by conveying an impression of professional detachment?
If you’re the interviewer, responsibility for planning the session falls on you. On the simplest level, your job is to schedule the interview and see that it’s held in a comfortable and convenient location. Good interviewers are good at collecting information, listening, and probing, so should develop a set of interview questions and decide on their sequence.

Interview questions
The purpose of the interview and the nature of the participants determine the types of questions that are asked.
When you plan the interview, bear in mind that you’ll ask questions:
To get information
To motivate the interviewee to respond honestly and appropriately
To create a good working relationship with the other person

Open-ended questions
To obtain both factual information and underlying feelings, you’ll probably use various types of questions.
Open-ended questions invite the interviewee to offer an opinion, not just a yes, no, or one-word answer
You can learn some interesting and unexpected things from open-ended questions, but they may diminish your control of the interview.
The other person’s idea of what’s relevant may not coincide with yours, and you may waste some time getting the interview back on track.
Use open-ended questions to warm up the interviewee and look for information when you have plenty of time to conduct the conversation.

Direct open-ended questions
To suggest a response, use direct open-ended questions.
For example, asking “What have you done about …” assumes that something
has been done and calls for an explanation. With direct open-ended questions you have somewhat more control over the interview; but you still give the other person some freedom in framing a response.

**Closed-ended questions**
Closed-ended questions require yes or no answers or call for short responses. For example “Did you make a reservation for the flight?”
Questions like these produce specific information, save time, require less effort to answer, and eliminate bias and prejudice in answers. The disadvantage of such questions is that they limit the respondent’s initiative and may prevent important information from being revealed. They’re better for gathering information than for prompting an exchange of feelings.

**Restatement questions**
Questions that mirror a respondent’s previous answer are called restatement questions. They invite the respondent to expand on an answer: “you said you dislike completing travel vouchers. Is that correct?”
They also signal the interviewee that you’re paying attention. Restatements provide opportunities to clarify points and correct misunderstandings. Use them to pursue a subject further or to encourage the other person to explain a statement.
You can also use restatement questions to soothe upset customers or coworkers because by acknowledging the other person’s complaint, you gain credibility.

**Interview structure**
Good interviews have an opening, a body, and a close. The opening establishes rapport and orients the interviewee to the remainder of the session. You might begin by introducing yourself, asking a few polite questions, and then explaining the purpose and ground rules of the interview. At this point, you may want to clear the use of notes or a tape recorder with the interviewee, especially if the subject is complex or if you plan to quote the interviewee in a written document such as a business report. The questions in the body of the interview reflect the nature of your relationship with the interviewee.

For an informational session, such as a market research interview, you may want to structure the interview and prepare a detailed list of specific questions. This approach enables you to control the interview and use your time efficiently. It also facilitates repeating the interview with other participants. You may even want to provide the interviewee with a list of questions before the interview, giving the other person a chance to prepare coherent and well-developed answers.

On the other hand, if the interview is designed to explore problems or to persuade an interviewee, you may prefer a less-structured approach. You might simply prepare a checklist of general subjects and then let the interview evolve on the basis of the participant’s responses. In the body of the interview, use a mix of questions types. One good technique is to sue closed-ended questions to pin down specific facts that emerge during an open-ended response. You might follow up an open-ended response by asking “How many people did you contact to get this information?”

The close of the interview is when you summarize the outcome, preview what comes next, and underscore the rapport that has been established. Restate the interviewee’s key points, allowing the person to clarify any misunderstandings or add any other ideas. To signal that the interview is coming to an end, you might lean back in your chair, smile, and use an open, palms-up gesture as you say, “Well, I guess that takes care of all my questions. Would you
like to add anything?” If the interviewee has no comments, you might go on to say, “Thank you so much for your help. You’ve given me all the information I need to finish my report. I should have it completed within two weeks; I’ll send you a copy.”

Then you might rise, shake hands, and approach the door. In parting, you could add a friendly comment to reaffirm your interest in the other person: “I hope you have a nice trip to Murree. I was there when I was a kid, and I’ve never forgotten the experience.” From a practical standpoint, you need to be certain that your interview outline is about the right length for the time you’ve scheduled. People can speak at the rate of about 125 to 150 words (roughly one paragraph) per minute.

Assuming that you’re using a mix of various types of questions, you can probably handle about 20 questions in a half hour (or about the same amount of information that you would cover in a 10-to 12-page single-spaced document. However, you may want to allow more or less time for each question and response, depending on the subject matter and the complexity of the questions. Bear in mind that open-ended questions take longer to answer than other types do.

When you’ve concluded the interview, take a few moments to write down your thoughts. If it was an information gathering session, go over your notes. Fill in any blanks while the interview is fresh in your mind. In addition, you might write a short letter or memo that thanks the interviewee for cooperating, confirms understanding between you and if appropriate, outlines the next steps.

**Participating in small groups and meetings**

Working in small groups and attending meetings involve more people and can be more complicated than one-on-one interviews. As more and more corporations embrace the concept of participative management, involving employees in a company’s decision making, the importance of teamwork has increased.

At their best, meetings can be an extremely useful forum for making key decisions and coordinating the activities of people and departments. Theoretically, the interaction of the participants should lead to good decisions based on the combined intelligence of the group. Whether the meeting is held to solve a problem or to share information, the participants gain a sense of involvement and importance from their attendance. At worst meetings are unproductive and frustrating. They waste everyone’s time and they’re expensive.

More important, poor meetings may actually be counter-productive, because they may result in bad decisions. When people are pressured to conform, they abandon their sense of personal responsibility and agree to ill-founded plans. We will now examine how to understand group dynamics, how to arrange meetings and how to contribute in a productive meeting.

**Understanding group dynamics**

A meeting is called for some purpose, and this purpose gives form to the meeting. People are assembled to achieve a work-related task, but at the same time, each person has a hidden agenda, private motives that affect the group’s interaction. Such personal motives either contribute to or detract from the group’s ability to perform its task.

**Role-playing**

The roles people play in meetings fall into three categories.

- Self-oriented roles
- Group-maintenance roles
- Task-facilitating roles

Members who assume self-oriented roles are motivated mainly to
fulfill personal needs, and they tend to be less productive than the other two types. Far more likely to contribute to group goals are: those who assume group-maintenance roles to help members work well together, and those who assume task-facilitating roles to help members solve the problem or make the decision. To a great extent, the role we assume in a group depends on our status in that group. In most groups a certain amount of “politics” occurs as people try to establish their relative status. One or two people typically emerge as the leaders, but often an undercurrent of tension remains as members of the group vie for better positions in the pecking order. These power struggles often get in the way of real work.

**Self-oriented roles**
Controlling: dominating other by exhibiting superiority or authority. Withdrawing: retiring from the group either by becoming silent or by refusing to deal with a particular aspect of the group’s work. Attention seeking: calling attention to oneself and demanding recognition from others. Diverting: focusing group discussion on topics of interest to the individual rather those relevant to the task.

**Group-maintenance roles**
Encouraging: drawing out other members by showing verbal and nonverbal support, praise, or agreement. Harmonizing: reconciling differences among group members through mediation or by using humor to relieve tension. Compromising: offering to yield on a point in the interest of reaching mutually acceptable decision.

**Task-facilitating roles**
Initiating: getting the group started on a line of inquiry. Information giving or seeking: offering (or seeking) information relevant to questions facing the group. Coordinating: showing relationships among ideas, clarifying issues, summarizing what the group has done. Procedure setting: suggesting decision-making procedures that will move the group toward the goal.

**Group norms**
A group that meets regularly develops unwritten rules governing the behavior of the members. To one degree or another, people are expected to conform to these norms. For example, there may be an unspoken agreement that it’s okay to be 10 minutes late for meetings but not 15 minutes late. In the context of work, the most productive groups tend to develop norms that are conducive to business. When a group has a strong identity, the members all observe the norms religiously. They’re upset by any deviation, and individuals feel a great deal of pressure to conform. This sense of group loyalty can be highly motivated to see that the group succeeds. However, such group loyalty can also lead members into groupthink, the willingness of individual members to set aside their personal opinions to go along with everyone else, even if everyone else is wrong, simply because belonging to the group is important to them.

**Group decision making**
Groups usually reach their decision in a predictable pattern. The process can be viewed as passing through four phases:
Orientation phase
Conflict phase
Emergence phase
Reinforcement phase
In the orientation phase, group members socialize, establish their roles, and agree on their reason for meeting. In the conflict phase members begin to discuss their positions on the problem.
If group members have been carefully selected to represent a variety of viewpoints and expertise, disagreements are a natural part of this phase. At the end of this phase, group members begin to settle on a single solution to the problem. In the emergence phase, members reach a decision. Those who advocated different solutions put aside their objection, either because they're convinced that the majority solution is better or because they recognize that arguing is futile. Finally, in the reinforcement phase, group feeling is rebuilt and the solution is summarized. Members receive their assignments for carrying out the group's decision and make arrangements for the following up on these assignments.

**Arranging the meeting**

By being aware of how small groups of people interact, meeting leaders can take steps to ensure that their meetings are productive. The key to productive meetings is careful planning of purpose, participants, agenda and location. The trick is to bring the right people together in the right place for just enough time to accomplish your goals.

In order to do that, special attention should be given to the following:

- Determining the purpose
- Selecting the participants
- Setting the agenda
- Preparing the location

**Contributing to a productive meeting**

Whether the meeting is conducted electronically or conventionally, its success depends on how effective the leader is. If the leader is prepared and has selected the participants carefully, the meeting will generally be productive. Listening skills are especially important to meeting leaders; the leader’s ability to listen will facilitate good meetings.

As meeting leader, you’re responsible for keeping the ball rolling. Avoid being so domineering that you close off suggestions. At the same time, don’t be so passive that you lose control of the group. If the discussion lags, call on those who haven’t been heard from. Pace the presentation and discussion so that you’ll have time to complete the agenda. As time begins to run out, interrupt the discussions and summarize what has been accomplished.

Another leadership task is either to arrange for someone to record the proceedings or to ask a participant to take notes during the meeting. As leader, you're also expected to follow the agenda; participants have prepared for the meeting on the basis of the announced agenda. However, don't be rigid. Allow enough time for discussion and give people a chance to raise related issues. If you cut off discussions too quickly or limit the subject too narrowly, no real consensus can emerge.

As the meeting gets underway, you’ll discover that some participants are too quiet and other are too talkative. To draw out the shy types, ask for their input on issues that particularly pertain to them. You might say something like “Irfan, you’ve done a lot of work in this area. What do you think?” For the overly talkative, simply say that time is limited and others need to be heard from.

The best meetings are those in which everyone participates, so don’t let one or two people dominate your meeting while others doodle on their notepads. As you move through your agenda, stop at the end of each item, summarize what you understand to be the feeling of the group, and state the important points made during the discussion.

At the end of the meeting, tie up the loose ends. Either summarize the general conclusion of the group or list the suggestions. Wrapping things up ensures that all participants agree on the outcome and gives people a chance to clear up any misunderstandings. As soon as possible after the meeting, the leader gives all participants a copy of the minutes or notes, showing recommended actions, schedules and responsibilities.
The minutes will remind everyone of what took place and will provide a reference for future actions. Like leaders, participants have responsibilities during meetings. If you’ve been included in the group, try to contribute to both the subject of the meeting and the smooth interaction of the participants. Use your listening skills and powers of observation to size up the interpersonal dynamics of the people; then adapt your behavior to help the group achieve its goals. Speak up if you have something useful to say, but don’t monopolize the discussion.