

COLLECTING DATA THROUGH OBSERVATION

Interviewing is one of the primary methods used to collect data from people during program or station reviews. Because there are inherent limits to what you can learn about a program or operations from what people say, observation should be used in conjunction with interviewing to strengthen the data collection.

Observation has its limits as well. The presence of a member or members of the review team may alter the operation of the program. Usually, reviews are done quickly which does not leave much time for participation or observation. Also, observation is a fairly expensive method of collecting data about a program. Despite these limitations, observation offers insight into programs and program operations that cannot be gleaned any other way. There are several reasons that observational data is crucial for station and program reviews.

First, by directly observing program operation and activities, the review team is better able to understand the context in which the program operates. Second, the firsthand experience with a program allows the review team to be more open in its approach, you just look at what is happening. Third, the review team has the opportunity to see things that may escape the awareness of the staff or program participants or that they are unwilling to talk about. Fourth, the review team can compare their own observations to the perceptions and understandings of the people they interview. There is no substitute for direct observation as a way to understand and interpret the program or station that you are reviewing.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR WHAT TO OBSERVE

If there is some part of the program that you are particularly concerned about, be sure that your observation is focused on those parts or aspects. These are some aspects of the program that you may want to focus on:

Program setting -- Describe the physical environment within which the program takes place. The description of the program setting should be sufficiently detailed to permit the reader to visualize that setting. The description should be concrete and specific using words that merely describe what you are sensing for example "participants did not look up despite the loud horn blaring" or "The owner raised his voice, and, pointing a finger at the VMO's face, said 'I don't want you or any other government bureaucrat on my property.'" Avoid interpretive words such as happy, satisfied, or angry. Write down details that are pertinent to your review, not just trivia that you may find interesting.

Human, Social Environment -- Just as physical environments vary, so too do social environments. You could look for ways that the station is organized, or how decisions are made for the program or station. You could focus on the way program staff and program participants interact, such as how frequently, and where they interact. It is again important that when recording your observations you use concrete language and not interpretive language.

Planned program implementation and formal interactions: Most reviews are focused on the planned program activities. Your team may be trying to answer some of these questions: What goes on in the program? What do people do in the program? What is it like to be a participant in the program? It may be useful to look at planned interactions or transactions and ask: Who is involved? What is being done and said by staff and participants? How do they go about their business? You may be tempted to look for patterns while you are observing. This detracts from the quality of the observational data that you are collecting. Even though you will begin to notice some patterns, it is best to keep the collection of data and the analysis of data separate.

Informal interactions and unplanned activities -- If you focus only on the formal part of the program, you will miss a lot of the data that is available. Informal conversations, how people act when they are not formally interacting about the program, body language of participants and staff are all data. It is important, however, that you not make assumptions about the meaning of what you observe without including the perspectives of the participants about their own behaviors. For example, what you may observe as typical of participants who are dissatisfied and angry, may have more to do with a participant's home life and very little to do with their views about the program.

Language -- People use language as a way of organizing the world. The things for which people have special words tell others what is important to them. This is observable in organizations and programs just as it is observable among the cultures of the world. Listening to the words that staff and participants use may give you clues to how participants understand and interact with the staff and the program itself. It is important to learn the language (especially if it is different from your own) and its patterns so that you can represent participants and staff in their own terms.

Nonverbal communication -- While recording and understanding language, it is important not to overlook nonverbal communication. The way in which participants and staff dress, how they stand when interacting, how they arrange themselves in their physical setting all offer cues about what is happening in the program. By watching for patterns of behavior, and describing what people are doing in different situations, you can isolate those nonverbal behaviors that have particular significance. Be sure that you don't ascribe meaning to nonverbal cues that is not accurate. By combining observation with interviewing, you can ask people about their nonverbal behavior and reactions to nonverbal behaviors of others.

Unobtrusive indicators -- As was mentioned earlier, direct observation and participation by the review team may alter the way the program is "normally" run. It may be useful to look for indicators about the program that don't affect the program and are carried out without the knowledge of the participants or the staff. There are often physical clues that can help the team understand the program better. Dusty equipment and files

may indicate things that are not used. Worn carpeting may indicate high traffic areas. As always, be sure to verify your conclusions with other data collected in the review.

Program documents --This is a very rich source of information about many of the programs that you will be reviewing. All programs have a paper trail that you can follow and use to help you understand a particular program. They are both a basic source of information about the program and they can give you ideas about important questions to pursue through more direct observations and interviewing. Pay special attention to forms that participants and staff complete as part of their participation in the program. Budget documents, internal memoranda and outside correspondence are all useful documents to read and examine as part of the review.

What does not happen -- All of what has been described so far has to do with what the review team can observe about the program. It is also important sometimes to describe what does not happen. There are two conditions when it is helpful to note what has not occurred. First, if the program goals or plans suggest that certain things ought to happen or are expected to happen, then the review team should note that those things did not happen. The second condition for noting what does not occur, is when the review team's experience suggests that the absence of some activity or factor is noteworthy. This calls for common sense and good judgment on the part of the review team. For example, it may be that several other stations do something that particularly enhances a program. The review team should make note that this activity is not occurring at the station they are currently reviewing.

Some guidelines for collecting and using observational data:

- Be descriptive when recording your observations.
- Separate your descriptions from your interpretations and judgments.
- Gather a variety of data. Use records of interviews, records of observations and, program documents to cross validate each source of data.
- Be as involved as possible in experiencing the programs while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the review.