

## Choosing Evaluation Tools: A Decision Tree Matrix

A decision tree is a series of questions that helps you make a decision, usually between two alternatives. Since two of the most prevalent and well-known data collection tools are the survey and the interview, the following decision tree is designed to choose between them, based on your situation and needs. You can use this decision tree to help select a tool for evaluating an entire district- or school-wide program (e.g., Reading First, SPECTRA+), a component, a short-term project, or even a one-time event).

Directions: *On each row, check either the box in column 1 or column 2. The preponderance of boxes checked will serve as an approximate guide to the primary tool.*

### Phase of Your Program

- |   |              |  |
|---|--------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Is the program or component already in place and being actively implemented? | <b>Or...</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Is the program or component currently in the design or beginning phase? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do you know a great deal about how the program/component works?              | <b>Or...</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Do you know only a little about how the program/component works?        |

### Type of Inquiry

- |   |              |   |
|---|--------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are the questions that you want to ask predominantly closed-ended—that is, mostly “yes or no” questions? | <b>Or...</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Are your questions predominantly open-ended (requiring longer, narrative answers)? |
|---|--------------|---|

### Breadth vs. Depth

- |   |              |   |
|---|--------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are there important reasons to seek broad input (e.g., you want to involve diverse populations, ensure acceptability of policy decisions)? | <b>Or...</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Is it more important that you develop a deeper understanding of your participants’ attitudes, needs, or perceptions? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do you need to judge the impact of the program/component across a large population?  | <b>Or...</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Is it more important that you judge the impact on smaller groups or individuals?                                     |

### Logistics

- |  |              |  |
|--|--------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have an event (e.g., teacher institute, workshop, Parents’ Night) during which you might be able to administer a survey? | <b>Or...</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have personnel available to conduct interviews or focus groups and analyze resulting data? |
|--|--------------|--|

More boxes checked in this column?  
*Primary Tool: Survey*

More boxes checked in this column?  
*Primary Tool: Interview/Focus Group*

## Capturing Data Through Interviews

### What are the benefits of conducting interviews?

Interviews usually capture richer data than surveys because the interview format allows for longer, more reflective answers. Moreover, because of the nature of conversation, an interview may yield information that is not anticipated. This can be especially useful at the beginning of a project, when comparatively little is known.

### What formats can interviews follow?

**The Questionnaire.** The interviewer can administer a survey in person. Since all participants are asked the same questions, the answers of one respondent can easily be compared to those of another. The questionnaire is superior to a written survey in that the interviewer can observe body language and record emphasis and intonation. Disadvantages to other types of interviews may include too rigid a structure without opportunity to ask follow-up questions.

**The Informal Conversational Interview.** In this type of interview, the interviewer does not use a fixed list of questions. Data from such interviews can be difficult to compare because the questions that are asked may be unique each time. However, this kind of interview allows for unanticipated comments, and the interviewer can “probe” (ask follow-up questions).

**The Interview Guide Format.** Although a prepared list of questions or a checklist of topics is used to guide the interview, unanticipated comments from the interviewee are not discouraged, as long as they are relevant. This format can combine the advantages of the questionnaire approach and the informal conversation.

### Some Tips for Conducting an Interview

- ▶ Ask open-ended questions, not questions that can be answered “yes” or “no.”
- ▶ Use an audio recorder if the interviewee is comfortable being recorded. You can take notes from the recording later, enabling you to participate more in the conversation. Important: Make sure you have fresh batteries, and before the start of the interview, test to ensure that interviewees are being recorded audibly.
- ▶ Keep the interview generally on track. However, be open to any relevant and significant new directions not originally anticipated.
- ▶ Use “probes” (follow-up questions) where relevant.
- ▶ Limit each interview to about one hour to avoid tiring participants.
- ▶ Interviewing a group of two to three people can be a good time saver. (If the group is larger than two or three, also see the tips for conducting focus groups.) Such an interview can lead to increased questions and topics. However, the interviewer acts more as a moderator and is more challenged to keep the conversation on track and ensure equitable participation.

## Capturing Data Through Focus Groups

- What is a focus group?** A focus group is a group interview with six to twelve participants, generally. The interaction is often informal and is moderated by a facilitator.
- What are the benefits of conducting a focus group?** A focus group can gather richer data in a shorter time than many individual interviews. Often, a focus group interview will produce a “brainstorming” effect that benefits the program. Focus groups can be challenging to schedule and require a trained facilitator.
- Who should participate?** Any stakeholders in a program’s success—school leaders, teachers, artists/community arts educators, parents, community members—can participate.
- How many focus groups are enough?** You may want to convene several focus groups in order to cover a variety of issues and include a representative sample of stakeholders or program participants.

### Tips for Conducting a Focus Group

- ▶ Usually limit to one hour to avoid tiring participants.
- ▶ Audio tape for accuracy. Taking notes is difficult in a large group situation. Do a test to ensure that all participants are being recorded audibly.
- ▶ Prepare a list of questions ahead of time. Usually six to eight questions should be enough to fill an hour. However, be open to unanticipated issues that may be pertinent.
- ▶ Encourage a variety of people in the group to speak, not just the most vocal. To accommodate various cognitive styles, you may want to incorporate a writing component in which participants can jot thoughts on Post-it notes for posting on a board and later discussion.
- ▶ Avoid group dynamics that may inhibit candor (for example, mixing teachers and their principals in the same group).
- ▶ Choose an inviting space for the focus group, away from noise and interruption. Be sure that temperature, lighting, and seating are comfortable for all participants.
- ▶ Provide refreshments as an acknowledgment for people’s time.

## Capturing Data Through Surveys

### What types of questions can be asked in a survey?

A survey can include short-answer questions with a range of choices or questions that call for more in-depth, textual answers.

Short-answer items often take the form of declarative statements rather than questions with the instruction to indicate agreement or disagreement. Usually, participants are given choices ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*, or they are asked to indicate the extent of their agreement using a scale from 1 to 5.

#### For example:

*Circle the number that best represents your response to the statement, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).*

*I found the topics of the workshop to be useful in my work.*

*Strongly Disagree*

*Strongly Agree*

1

2

3

4

5

If the goal is to elicit in-depth, textual answers, the questions should be worded to encourage more than a simple *yes* or *no*. Also, allow adequate space for answers.

#### For example:

*How would you describe the involvement of parents in your school district's arts education program?*

## Some Tips for Designing Survey Questions

- ▶ Avoid asking for more than one piece of information in a single question. (Example: *Was the program at about the right length and level of complexity?*) Break such a two-part question into two separate queries.
- ▶ Customize the questions to the survey audience (e.g., teachers, parents, students, community members).
- ▶ Generally limit surveys to two pages or one page double-sided.
- ▶ Ask for demographic information at the end of the survey; it's generally less threatening.
- ▶ Ask for demographic information only if it is relevant.
- ▶ Ask only for information that the respondent would be likely to have.
- ▶ Ask questions in respondents' own terms.
- ▶ Avoid including preconceived conclusions in your questions. (Example: *Why was the program a success?*)
- ▶ Always respect respondents' confidentiality and anonymity. Do not use persons' names in reports without prior permission. Avoid disclosing any information that would accidentally identify someone.

## Capturing Data Through Observation

### What are the benefits of observation?

Observations differ from surveys and interviews in that they provide first-hand, direct viewing and description of project activities as they happen. In the survey or interview, the data is second-hand, seen through the participants' memories and ways of filtering. An observer can record in detail the activities of the program and the interactions of the participants.

### What formats can observation follow?

**The Open-Ended or Unstructured Observation.** The observer simply records everything that he or she sees and hears during the period of the observation. There are practical limits to how much you can record, so it is always a process of selection. Ideally, it is preferable to have a trained observer to conduct open-ended observations, if possible. Such persons may have a clearer idea of what kinds of things to look for.

**The Checklist Observation.** An observer uses a list of important features or actions, making a tally mark each time one of those is observed. For example, a checklist used during a lesson may include specific teaching strategies or behaviors.

## Tips for Conducting an Observation

- ▶ Try to be inconspicuous, so as not to overly influence the setting; at the same time, for ethical reasons, make certain that participants are fully informed of the reason for your presence. In most situations, participants soon accept an observer's presence and continue their normal activities.
- ▶ After an observation, go somewhere quiet and fill in anything that you didn't have time to write.
- ▶ If possible, use multiple observations and, if appropriate, multiple observers. Doing so will lessen the possibility of bias and provide a broader perspective.
- ▶ If possible, videotape important sessions. Evaluation team members who were unable to attend a session can observe the tape and derive almost the same data as a live observer. A videotape also provides a record for the professional evaluator to review. When possible, hire a videographer who knows how to use the video camera for maximum visual impact and clarity. If a professional videographer is not an option, obtain the services of an experienced volunteer, such as a parent, teacher, or older student.