



Observation: An Underused Method to Collect Data

Besides a survey, how else can I collect needs assessment and evaluation data?

One of the most under used data collection methods is observation. We can assess or evaluate many physical aspects of an environment such as a child care facility or farm by using a combination of observation and interview. For instance, in a walk-around interview, we can ask about and then observe written instructions next to the phone for emergency response to an accident on a farm. Something else we can observe are the “products” of our extension programs, such as grant proposals drafted as a result of an agent’s workshop on writing grants, or, health or financial records. A third thing we can observe is a public policy process or leadership development. In this arena you can observe meetings and the action at those meetings such as whether goals are set, or the chair includes all stakeholders in discussion.

To develop an observation tool, you want first to establish the indicators for the observation. Indicators are based on what you expect to find in the environment, product or process as a result of your program. The second thing you want to do is consider each of the indicators and measure them for their presence or absence, and then, their quality. A scale can rate the quality. Below are two examples for assessing two indicators for Reporting an Emergency on a Farm.

EXAMPLE 1

Directions for the interviewer-observer. Observe each safety feature below and rate for the extent of emergency reporting preparation: (circle number)

Safety Features for Reporting Emergencies:

Directions to Farm

- 1 POOR
- 2 FAIR
- 3 GOOD
- 4 EXCELLENT

Reporting Instructions (what officials will want to know)

- 1 POOR
- 2 FAIR
- 3 GOOD
- 4 EXCELLENT

In this typical example both indicators are included, the directions and reporting instructions, and the quality of each can be rated. What is missing, however, is what the words *Poor*, *Fair*, *Good*, and *Excellent* mean for each indicator. Reliability is compromised if a definition of the answer category is not provided to the observer, even if the observer is the same person for all farms. What is also missing is a way to specify whether the indicator is *not* present.



EXAMPLE 2

Directions for the interviewer-observer. Observe each safety feature and rate for the extent of emergency reporting preparation using the ratings below:

<i>Safety Feature for Reporting Emergencies:</i>	<i>Rating</i>
<i>Directions to Farm</i>	
<i>Emergency Reporting Instructions</i>	

RATINGS: DIRECTIONS TO FARM

- 0 NO WRITTEN DIRECTIONS*
- 1 WRITTEN DOWN; NOT POSTED*
- 2 WRITTEN DOWN; POSTED BY PHONE*

RATINGS: EMERGENCY REPORTING INSTRUCTIONS

- 0 NO WRITTEN DIRECTIONS*
- 1 WRITTEN DOWN; NOT POSTED*
- 2 WRITTEN DOWN; POSTED BY PHONE*

In this example, both indicators are included (the directions and reporting instructions), as well as a way to specify whether the indicators are present or absent, and, the quality of each. Here the quality can be specified more reliably because the stages of quality have been defined very precisely. Note also that the stages of quality are mutually exclusive.

The second example requires more work to establish in concrete terms what the different stages of quality are. If you have done a program on the topic, however, you should have those stages in your teaching notes. The second example comprises a more reliable tool than the first example.

You can easily train program development committee members, teens, and volunteers to use an observation tool to assist in needs assessments or evaluations when the stages of quality are so well defined. You can also involve your committee to pre test it.

Other programs to use an interview observation to assess behavior change include:

- Deep tillage tools used by producers
- Preventive measures for Lyme Disease used by hikers and fishermen
- Age-appropriate techniques used by 4-H leaders
- Food safety practices in kitchens used by volunteer firemen to prepare Friday fish dinners
- Discipline techniques used by parents

For more about observation, see:

Tipsheet #61: [Using Observation to Evaluate Skills](#)

PA EXAMPLE #4 Observation 1: [Better Barnyard Management](#)

PA EXAMPLE #9 Observation 2: [Impact of a Food Safety Program](#)

PA EXAMPLE #11 Observation 3: [The Farm Safety Audit: An Educational Breakthrough](#)

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