Data Gathering

Promotion, Inc., is a privately held company in the Midwest that serves the direct mail industry with printing and mailing services. A junior organization development consultant agreed to conduct an employee survey, specifically with the Mail Division, to determine why turnover rates were much higher than in other divisions within the company. An internal committee developed 16 possible causes of the turnover based on interviews with 20 employees. The 102-item questionnaire (which included a separate page of demographic data as well) was organized into 11 categories, and the survey was pilot tested with a small group of employees and revised based on their feedback. In the end, all 480 employees in the division were sent a survey in order to ensure that no employee was omitted and that employees could remain anonymous. The results of the survey held negative feedback for management about roles between departments, work policies, and employee compensation. Results of the survey were presented to management in five separate sessions, beginning with top management and continuing with the internal committee and Mail Division managers. Results took many by surprise, and some managers walked out of the feedback sessions. Managers were unwilling to take action based on the feedback and decided to shelve the reports. In the end, employees were provided only a brief and highly edited version of the feedback report almost 2 months after the survey was administered (Swanson & Zuber, 1996).

- What do you think was done well in the administration of the survey in this case? What do you think should have been done differently?
- Was a survey a good choice for a data gathering method in this case? Why or why not?
With a formal and psychological contract successfully established, a data gathering strategy is developed to further explore the causes and consequences of the problem described by the client. Using methods such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, and unobtrusive measures, the consultant can develop a nuanced and detailed understanding of the situation so that interventions developed can be both applicable and more effective. In this chapter we discuss the methods of data gathering used by organization development (OD) consultants and describe how consultants choose among them to formulate a data gathering strategy.

To both consultants and clients alike, spending time gathering additional data can seem like a trivial and costly exercise. After all, the client has at this point already seen many instances of the problem being discussed and likely has been able to describe it in detail. This can be a troublesome view to maintain, however. Clients see one angle of a problem from one perspective, and additional perspectives can add useful insights that cannot be seen without additional data. Gathering data and presenting the information back to the client can present a more complete picture of the organization and expand both the client’s and practitioner’s knowledge. It is an intervention in itself, and in many cases it is the most powerful intervention that a consultant can execute.

The Importance of Data Gathering

Comprehensive data gathering takes time, however, and “many managers and consultants show a bias for quick intervention and shortchange diagnosis” (Harrison & Shirom, 1999, p. 8). In an attempt to quickly solve the problem that may have existed for quite some time, both managers and consultants are tempted to take a shortcut through the data gathering process, assuming that the information available is sufficient. However, “managers and other decision makers run serious risks if they eschew diagnostic inquiry and systematic decision making altogether when uncertainty and pressure for quick action intensify” (p. 9). Despite these warnings, speed frequently trumps accurate data and careful diagnosis.

Nadler (1977) writes that there are three reasons that consultants should take data gathering seriously. First, good data collection generates “information about organizational functioning, effectiveness, and health” (p. 105). Argyris (1970) explains,

*Without valid information it would be difficult for the client to learn and for the interventionist to help. . . . Valid information is that which describes the factors, plus their interrelationships, that create the problem for the client system.* (p. 17)

Good data collection should expand the practitioner’s and client’s knowledge of the problem.
Second, data collection can be a force that can spark interest in change. It can bring organizational members together on a common definition of the situation that they can then agree to change. Nadler (1977) writes that in this respect, “Collection can be used for consciousness raising—getting people thinking about issues concerning them and the organization” (p. 105).

Finally, practitioners who do data collection well can “continue the process of relationship-building between the change agent, his or her internal partners, and the organization” (p. 106). The change agent has the opportunity to meet organizational members, demonstrate empathy and credibility by focusing on individuals and their perspectives, and develop cooperative and trusting relationships so that the practitioner can help the organization to change.

**Presenting Problems and Underlying Problems**

In initial meetings with practitioners, clients describe *presenting problems*. Presenting problems are those initial explanations of the situation that highlight symptoms of which the client is most painfully aware. Beneath presenting problems lie *underlying problems*. Underlying problems can be described as the root cause or core, fundamental issues that are producing the symptoms. Interventions designed to address presenting problems but that do not address underlying problems are likely to produce only a short-term, negligible impact. These interventions are commonly the “simple fix” that clients may actually prefer. After all, they usually match the client’s framing of the issues, they are frequently easier to address, and they often involve process issues or other task-oriented changes that avoid personal change or interpersonal conflict. Unfortunately, they rarely solve the underlying problem contributing to the surface-level symptoms that are easier to see.

For example, Block (2001) describes several common presenting problems framed by clients that consultants may erroneously try to fix. If a client wants more cooperation from a team, the change agent may try to get all relevant parties in a room, discuss their objectives, discuss working relationships, and agree upon communication patterns. Reframing the problem as one of territory between groups changes the problem from the lack of cooperation to a negotiation of boundaries and group identity, where each individual or group may need to give up something for the good of the larger organization. Another common example concerns training: A client sees low results and wants more training or education for organizational members. The client may not see that there are process and motivational barriers inhibiting organizational members from acting. If a consultant acts on a request for training without understanding why organizational members act in the way they do, the consultant will take up time and resources developing a training program that may have very little to do with why results are not being achieved.

The point is that without greater detail as to the nature and extent of the problem from different perspectives, the chosen interventions may target the wrong areas, and they may even deepen conflict and frustrate organizational members. Presenting
problems are an initial place to start, but the practitioner’s real concern must be with
the underlying problems. These can be best explored through data gathering.

**Data Gathering Process**

Noolan (2006) recommends a five-step process for data gathering:

1. **Determine approach to be used.** Each method of data gathering has advantages and disadvantages. Based on the client’s description of the problem, the consultant should determine what data should be collected and why.

2. **Announce project.** The client or another representative should explain to organizational members what data are being gathered, by whom, using what methods, and for what purposes.

3. **Prepare for data collection.** Surveys or interview guides should be prepared, along with a list of potential interviewees. Interviewees should be contacted and a time and place scheduled.

4. **Collect data.** Use appropriate protocols, depending on the data gathering approach selected.

5. **Do data analysis and presentation.** Practitioners may choose to use one or more diagnostic models to analyze the data and give feedback to the client. (This part of the process is discussed in the next chapter on diagnosis and feedback.)

This approach can vary somewhat, with different considerations for successful data gathering, depending on the data gathering method used. Each approach requires a different length of time for gathering information and analyzing it, a different level of expense, and a different investment on the part of organizational members, clients, and consultants. Some approaches, such as interviewing, can have a psychological effect on the organization, whereas unobtrusive measures generally occur behind the scenes without much fanfare or publicity. In this chapter we expand on the specific details for each step of the data gathering process for each method.

**Data Gathering Methods**

Organization development practitioners use five common methods of data gathering to explore presenting problems. In the following sections, we explore these methods, including why practitioners use that approach, what advantages or disadvantages each approach presents, and what pitfalls or potential problems practitioners can experience in using each approach. We also explore tips for successful data gathering using each approach:
1. Interviews
2. Focus groups
3. Surveys/questionnaires
4. Observations
5. Unobtrusive measures

**Interviews**

Interviews are generally one-on-one meetings during which practitioners speak directly with individual organizational members. The practitioner is interested in the individual stories and perspectives of organizational members and in a personal setting can explore their history, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes in depth. Seidman (2006) writes that “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). The primary advantages of interviewing as a method for data gathering include the ability to understand a person’s experience and to follow up on areas of interest. Interviews can yield surprises that a practitioner may not know enough in advance to ask about. In many cases interviews can be the only choice in getting at specific issues, such as employee experiences with a manager of a small group or a conflict between two managers. In these cases, employees may be unlikely to respond to a written questionnaire with adequate detail to truly understand the problem, and it may not be possible to witness the situation personally through observations. Even if a practitioner could see the situation personally, interviews can allow the practitioner to better understand how organizational members interpret a situation or what attitudes and beliefs they have about it.

Data gathering through interviews relies heavily on cooperation from organizational members who will only open up to discuss serious issues if they trust the interviewer (Seidman, 2006). Interviews can be threatening, as members may feel defensive if they are personally involved in a problem and they may be motivated to stretch the truth to present themselves in a positive light. Consequently, among the five data gathering methods, interviewing requires the greatest interpersonal skill of OD practitioners. Interviewers should be adept at placing people at ease in a one-on-one situation, excellent listeners, and skilled conversationalists. Interviews can generate a tremendous amount of data, with organizational members sharing stories, examples, and personal beliefs, including issues relevant to the issue the practitioner is investigating and those tangential to it. These data can be difficult and time-consuming for the practitioner to sort through after the interviews, and they may suffer from the practitioner’s or client’s biases or interest in seeing certain facts that may not be as apparent as the practitioner wants to believe.

To conduct data gathering successfully using interviews, an interviewer should follow these guidelines:
1. **Prepare an interview guide.** Interviews can be formal and structured, with each interviewee asked the exact same set of questions without straying from the list of questions, or they can be semistructured, with an interview guide containing a general list of open-ended questions addressing the major topics of the interview. With semistructured interviews, the interviewer adds probes, or follow-up questions, where appropriate, and can explore other areas that were not predicted in the interview guide. Follow-up probes can include questions such as “Why do you think that is true?” or “Can you give an example?” Most OD interviews are semistructured.

2. **Select participants.** When only a small team is involved, interviewing every team member is a reasonable approach. However, because interviewing can be time-intensive and resource-consuming for both the organization and the interviewer, it may not be possible to interview every relevant organizational member. For example, to gather data from employees on a manufacturing floor, the practitioner may have to sample a certain number of employees from the day shift and night shift, or to select employees from line A and line B. How many interviews to conduct likely will depend on the time available, the problem to be investigated, and the population from which participants are selected. A practitioner can be more confident that enough people have been chosen when interviews begin to get repetitive and substantiate the same common issues. The selection process can be random (using an established randomization protocol such as a random numbers table or computerized selection method) or stratified (taking every third person on an ordered list by employee number, for example). The selection of interviewees also can be intentionally based on the participants’ knowledge or involvement in the topic being discussed. (With their greater knowledge of the organization, clients should help in selecting interviewees.) Still another approach is to conduct what social science researchers term “snowball” sampling, in which a researcher begins with one or more participants and concludes each interview by asking the interviewee who else he or she would recommend interviewing. Thus, the network is tapped for its own knowledge and access to another interviewee is potentially smoother. In any case, the practitioner should be prepared to justify these choices, since organizational members in sensitive situations may attribute meaning to interviewee selection, even if it was random.

3. **Contact participants and schedule interviews.** When contacting each potential interviewee, the interviewer should explain the purpose of the interview and how long it is expected to take. It can be helpful to have the client or sponsor contact interviewees first to invite their participation, promising contact from the OD practitioner to schedule the interview. This approach can have the advantage of easing access and encouraging responsiveness, particularly for an external consultant, but it can have the disadvantage of associating the consultant with a client’s goals and objectives. The change agent can be more explicitly seen as an “agent” of management, and interviewees may be suspicious or withhold important information if they do not trust the sponsor. In any case, interview participation should be framed as a free choice with no consequences for refusing to participate, and potential interviewees should be given the option to participate free from any coercion. In
sensitive situations, practitioners may advise that the client suggest a list of possible interviewees from which a certain number will be chosen.

Contact methods for scheduling interviews commonly include telephone calls and e-mails. The more sensitive the topic of the interview, the more the OD practitioner should consider the most personal method of contact. Simply scheduling interviews to get feedback on noncontroversial matters such as employee satisfaction with general working conditions or whether a new process is working correctly may be easily done by e-mail. Interviews discussing interpersonally sensitive topics such as conflict with a manager or coworker are best done in person or by telephone.

Descriptions of the purpose of the interview should be consistent between the client’s description and the practitioner’s, as well as between interviews. Participants are likely to speak with other colleagues or their managers about the interviews, sharing the topics and questions among each other. If these descriptions are not consistent, participants may rightfully be apprehensive about the stated purpose or intent of the interviews.

Finally, a location for the interview should be selected that allows for the best interaction possible. This means a private location free from distractions such as phone calls and personal interruptions. The interview should be conducted in an environment in which conversation can take place without disturbing or being overheard by others.

4. Begin the interview and establish rapport. The interviewer should begin with a personal introduction, again explaining the purpose of both the engagement and the interview, including what topics will be discussed. The interviewer should also take the time to explain what he or she will do with the data from the interview and who will see it (if anyone). The interviewee may want to know how interviewees have been selected and who else is being interviewed, which the practitioner may be able to share in a broad categorical sense such as “all managers,” “about half of the second engineering shift,” or “five people at random from each of the company’s four sites.” The practitioner can also state what notes will be taken and what will be done with the notes, in order to explain why the interviewer may be writing during the interview. Wacławski and Rogelberg (2002) recommend that seating be arranged so that interviewees can read the interviewer’s notes to further put the interviewee at ease regarding what is written, and that interviewers alter their notes if there is anything written that makes the interviewee uncomfortable.

To put the interviewee at ease, it is a good practice to begin the interview with a relatively safe set of questions about the interviewee’s background, length of time with the company, and current and previous roles. It can also be useful for an interview to begin with a “grand tour” question (Spradley, 1979) in which the interviewer opens up the interview with a broad, general subject, such as “Tell me about a typical day for you at work” or “Tell me about your involvement with this group since you joined the company.” While such questions tend to produce somewhat longer and wandering responses, they can be instructive as an overview without asking too many questions or introducing bias.

Many practitioners make a useful distinction between confidentiality and anonymity in interviews. Information is confidential if no one other than the
consultant will know what was said in the interview—in other words, what is said stays with the consultant. Information is anonymous if it can be shared outside the interview but separated from the source (i.e., the interviewee's name). Generally interviewers can promise that information from interviews will remain anonymous but not confidential. That is, to be able to use the data and act upon them, the practitioner must be able to share the data outside of the interview, but the practitioner should not share who said what without a participant’s explicit permission (Freedman & Zackrison, 2001).

5. **Conduct the interview by following the interview guide, straying from it when appropriate.** Interviews are primarily a conversation, albeit one with a specific purpose. Interviewers need to listen carefully to the current response, think about any follow-up questions, remember the other areas that are listed in the interview guide, and be conscious that time is limited. The best interviewers can maintain the character of the interview as a conversation without being distracted by other tasks.

6. **Close the interview.** Close the interview by inviting the participant to pose any questions that he or she may have. Conclude by thanking the interviewee and reiterating the timeline for what will happen next and when the participant will hear results, if at all. Most people are naturally curious about what will happen next, and it is important that the conclusion of the interview sets the appropriate expectation. The interviewer can also choose to provide a business card or other contact information in case additional questions arise or the interviewee wishes to clarify something after the interview.

**Tips for Successful Interviews**

1. Listening is a critical skill in interviewing. It is important to avoid interrupting an interviewee with another question in earnestness to move on to another area. Listening for emotion as well as content can suggest areas for follow-up questions. Noticing hesitancy in the interviewee’s voice, the practitioner can ask, “You seem reluctant to talk about the budgeting process. Can you say more about your thoughts?”

2. Avoid indicating agreement or disagreement with the interviewee, or suggesting that the interviewee’s responses are similar to or different from other interviews. Even head nodding, nonverbal feedback such as “yes,” or “uh huh,” used to encourage the interviewee to continue, can be seen instead as a sign of agreement that may change the interview. Likewise, Seidman (2006) recommends only rarely sharing your own experiences that are similar to an interviewee’s, since the interviewer can become the focus and can potentially alter the direction of the interview. The best advice is to emphasize interest in the interviewee’s experience, not in one particular answer.

3. Take notes sparingly during the interview, and write more immediately after it ends. It is rarely possible to take verbatim notes and participate fully in the conversation. Taking very brief notes with key words, followed by a more
complete record after the interview, can allow the consultant to pay closer attention to what is being said. When verbatim quotes are desired, the consultant can ask the interviewee to repeat what was just said, noting that “what you just said is so important I want to write it down word for word.” To allow extra time to take notes after interviews, avoid scheduling them back-to-back.

Some consultants choose to audiotape or videotape interviews, thinking that it will save time taking notes. This practice can actually take more time, however, since it requires spending time equal to the length of the interview listening to or watching a tape. Given concerns about where the tapes may end up, potential technical problems with equipment, and an interviewee’s likely discomfort, this approach usually presents more disadvantages than advantages. If additional note-taking is desired to capture a great deal of data, and the consultant cannot do this alone, another consulting partner could attend the interview only for the purpose of taking notes. This can be very appropriate in some circumstances but may make some interviewees uncomfortable.

In summary, interviews are probably the most common method of data collection in OD. Good interviewing requires a consultant to have good interpersonal skills in establishing rapport, maintaining a conversation, steering the conversation to relevant areas of interest, and listening actively. While they can be time-intensive, they can be well worth the additional effort expended to gain knowledge and background detail into the organization. Because gaining the time to conduct one-on-one interviews can be difficult, many consultants turn to the group interview, or focus group.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups are groups of usually a small number of organizational members facilitated by a consultant who poses questions and then allows for group discussion. Focus groups have been used by social scientists as a research tool for many years, and in recent years they have also been used frequently for public relations and market research activities (Smithson, 2000). Like interviews, focus groups allow the consultant to explore experiences and situations in depth and to follow up on specific areas of interest. They are not observations of group behavior in the group’s ordinary work activities, but a special conversation instigated by a consultant’s questions and consultant-facilitated and directed. Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups are rarely appropriate for very sensitive issues (Waclawski & Rogelberg, 2002). Issues of a general nature, such as how employees feel about the company’s benefit plan or what they feel should be done to improve executive communications, can be good candidates for focus groups. In focus groups participants can build on one another’s ideas. They can brainstorm, discuss, and debate. Because they can allow for a wide range of participation and orient members toward group or team involvement, two key values of OD, many practitioners like to use focus groups as a method of data gathering. As a disadvantage, focus groups can generate a tremendous amount of data that can be difficult and time-consuming to analyze.
To conduct a focus group, consultants should follow a process similar to interviewing. The considerations are somewhat different, however, since the subject matter and structure of a focus group are different from individual interviews:

1. **Prepare an interview guide.** Interview guides for focus groups are likely to be shorter than those used in one-on-one interviews, since the participation level will be much greater for a similar amount of time. Consequently, it is likely that fewer subjects will be covered. In addition to the interview guide, the consultant should prepare some opening and closing remarks that explain the purpose of the interview, what will be done with the data, and how the data will be recorded.

2. **Select participants.** Participants can be selected randomly, as in interviews, or they can be selected based on some other criteria. Groups can be homogeneous, that is, selected based on some criteria they share. Examples include intact teams, managers, all employees in the New York office, salespeople, college interns, employees with 10 or more years with the company, or customer service personnel. Groups can also be heterogeneous, or a mixed group, where the group’s composition is more diverse. The advantage of homogeneous groups is that these employees may share a similar background because they have something in common, and they may be able to provide depth and detail into a problem from that perspective. Customer service personnel, for example, may be able to build on one another’s contributions to create a more complete picture of quality problems with the company’s products. By having different backgrounds or roles in the organization, mixed groups can offer the consultant the advantage of seeing patterns common to all organizational members regardless of role or demographic characteristic. The question of whether to use homogeneous or heterogeneous groups thus depends on the focus group’s purpose. Waclawski and Rogelberg (2002) find an advantage in having each group be homogeneous, but recommend conducting enough focus groups so that a heterogeneous population participates in the overall data collection.

As with interviews, a location should be selected that is free from distractions and interruptions for the length of the discussion. It is best for the location to contain a large oval table or for chairs to be arranged in such a way that all participants can see one another (Waclawski & Rogelberg, 2002). The number of participants per group depends on the subject’s complexity, but should be somewhere from 5 to 15 people. Successful focus groups can be conducted with more participants, but since time is likely limited, participants may struggle to contribute if the group numbers more than 20. Again like interviews, invitations to participants should explain the purpose and structure of the focus group, and participants should be reminded that attendance is voluntary and there should be no consequences for nonparticipation. There should be no peer pressure to participate (or not) and it is best that consultants minimize the potential for organizational members to know who did and who did not participate. For this reason, it is wise to issue invitations not to a large group at once but directly to each individual invited to participate. Thus, those who decline will remain known only to the consultant.

3. **Hold the focus group.** The consultant or focus group facilitator should begin by welcoming participants, and reiterating the purpose and explaining the structure of
the focus group. Participants should introduce themselves if they do not know one another already, in order to understand one another’s organizational roles and backgrounds. The facilitator should explain what and how notes will be taken, as well as what will happen with the results of the focus group(s). The facilitator should next propose several ground rules for participation, including the following:

- What is said during the course of the meeting should remain known only to the participants and should not be repeated to others.
- Roughly equal participation is the goal, so the facilitator is likely to intervene from time to time to ensure that all voices are heard.
- The facilitator may intervene to keep the group on track or focus conversation back to the question under discussion.
- The purpose is to explore issues; personal comments or attacks are not appropriate.
- The group may wish to agree on other ground rules as well, and the distinction between confidentiality and anonymity should be made at this point.

The facilitator can begin with an open-ended, safe question to encourage participation if the group seems hesitant to begin. So that each person’s voice can be heard and any initial hesitation to contribute can be lessened, the facilitator may wish to begin with a directive question such as “What one word comes to mind when you think of the physical environment of the building?” or “In one sentence, what’s the best thing about your job?” It is not necessary to go around the circle in order (a conversation is the objective), but that is an option for groups that are especially quiet.

As the facilitator follows the interview guide, it may be necessary to quiet any monopolizing participants and to encourage those that are shy or have a difficult time jumping into the flow of conversation. Making eye contact with those who look as though they are waiting to participate is a very subtle way of encouraging participation, but more directive comments may be necessary, such as “Ray has been trying to say something,” or “Just a minute, Rick, I think Shanthi has something to add.” Frequent contributions from one member can bias the facilitator’s perception and give the impression that the entire group shares a single view. It may be important to test this with the group from time to time if the group does not comment. This can be done by saying simply, “Sheila has offered her suggestion for what should be done about the procurement process. Does everyone agree with that?” or “Who can offer another idea?”

Because the focus group often results in individuals sharing a group experience, some participants may be reluctant to offer a different view, especially if members have a close relationship outside of the focus group. Such groupthink should be tested by the facilitator as well. When participants know one another outside of the focus group, the facilitator should be reminded that the members have a previous history and other organizational roles that will change the course of the conversation. Members may work together frequently, they may have had a contentious relationship in the past, or they may have unequal status. Current or past conflicts, tight coworker relationships, or strong team identification likely will be manifested in the
focus group setting. (Recall the OD value of the “whole person.” People are greater than their organizational roles in the focus group.) To the extent possible, the facilitator should try to be aware of these dynamics to better understand what is being said and why.

The facilitator must also balance the need to get through the interview guide and to explore topics of interest. Since the goal is an in-depth exploration of issues, the facilitator will need to listen carefully to the various contributions and offer additional probing questions, such as “I’ve heard a theme from many people saying that they don’t seem to trust the management team. Tell me what they could do to change that.”

Like interviews, focus groups are conversations among several participants. Careful listening and skilled conversational and facilitation practices are central to the success of the focus group.

4. **Conclude the meeting.** When time has ended or the conversational subjects have been exhausted, the participants should be invited to pose any questions they may have of the facilitator. The consultant should repeat the objective of the engagement and the focus groups and what will be done next with the data.

**Tips for Successful Management of Focus Groups**

1. Listening is just as important with focus groups as it is with interviews. Focus groups can be somewhat more complex at times because the facilitator is listening to the speaker, thinking of the next question, and watching group dynamics.

2. Also as with interviewing, it is important to maintain objectivity to the extent possible and to avoid indicating agreement or disagreement with the group’s contributions. This can be especially important in group settings, when participants may convene alone later to discuss the group. Any impression of agreement that the facilitator gives can lead the group to think that the facilitator was taking sides (“She seemed to agree with us that the management around here is terrible”).

3. In some environments where organizational members may be particularly disgruntled about a situation, a mob mentality can develop in focus groups, where negative emotions can escalate and spread rapidly. This can promote a self-defeating tone to the group where participants may leave feeling more discouraged than when they arrived. The facilitator should be attuned to this possibility and may want to develop strategies to combat a downward negative spiral, perhaps by calling attention to it.

4. As in interviews, having two facilitators is an option where one can participate in the conversation and another can take notes. This can free the facilitator to listen and participate. When exact wording is necessary and budget is available, some consultants have hired court reporters to transcribe focus group dialogue, though this requires that participants only speak one at a time, which can occasionally stifle dialogue.
In summary, focus groups can be an excellent method for gathering data. They can elicit contributions from many people in a shorter time than can be done with one-on-one interviews. Group members can also build on one another’s ideas, which can result in better solutions and explorations of a situation. If a facilitator is skilled at managing the conversation and addressing the challenges of a focus group, the data gathered from this approach can be very useful to diagnosis and planning interventions.

**Surveys/Questionnaires**

In the history of organization development, the survey or questionnaire has been one of the most commonly used methods of data gathering. Since Mann’s (1957) study of Detroit Edison, the survey has developed as a means by which consultants can solicit input from a large number of organizational members at once. Surveys or questionnaires are typically paper- or Internet-based methods to allow for a large number of participants. Generally surveys address a broad number of subjects and explore a wide range of issues, as opposed to a deep investigation of one or two issues. Used alone, surveys are best used as exploratory mechanisms, and they are typically inappropriate for sensitive subjects. Some practitioners use surveys following interviews or focus groups to understand how prevalent the issues are that have been brought up in interviews. In combination with other methods, surveys can provide breadth where others provide depth.

Falletta and Combs (2002) write that surveys used in OD engagements are primarily action-driven. In this respect, “Surveys are more than instruments for gathering information” (Kuhnert, 1993, p. 459), but they are instruments for prompting change. The change agent does not conduct a survey solely to report the results to management and to conclude the project, but instead works closely with the client on interpreting the data and planning actions to address the results. Surveys can be quick and easy to administer. Each consumes time from organizational members, so it is important to be clear about the purpose of the survey and to gain at least some initial commitment for action. Without a commitment to take the results seriously and act on them, an organizational survey that appears to promise change will only deepen any existing cynicism among members when nothing is done with the results.

Having at least a moderate background in survey design and both qualitative and statistical analysis is necessary in most circumstances. Whether practitioners conduct the analysis themselves or get assistance with the statistical procedures, most will need to at least be able to read and interpret the results for their clients. A graduate-level course in qualitative and quantitative research methods can be extremely useful to the practitioner who plans to conduct surveys. In addition, there are a number of helpful guides to conducting organizational surveys (see, for example, Fink, 2002, 2005; Smith, 2003).

The following process can help a practitioner to successfully conduct an organizational survey:

1. **Determine the reason for the survey.** Surveys can be used to assess management interaction, organizational communication, work processes, training needs, and
employee engagement. Each has a different implication for the structure of the survey. Annual satisfaction or engagement surveys are common in many large organizations, when every organizational member has the opportunity to participate. Such surveys have become “institutionalized,” often separated from the daily functions of the organization (Smith, 2003). Because these surveys are often done out of habit rather than need, the reason for the survey is often unclear and commitment to take action is unknown.

2. **Determine who will take the survey.** Organizationwide survey topics typically imply that all members will be given the opportunity to participate in the survey. In some situations, a smaller sample of members may be more appropriate, less expensive, and less time-consuming. Such samples, however, can increase the statistical error rate, depending on the population to whom the results are being generalized. If a census is chosen, then it is important that all necessary measures be taken for each member to receive a survey. Security employees who work the night shift, employees who travel from site to site, those who work from home, and manufacturing employees who may not have access to computers for Internet-based surveys can often be inadvertently left out of the survey process. If a sample is chosen, it may be a good idea to publicize the survey to the wider population to indicate that a random sampling technique is being used and that not all members will be receiving a survey invitation.

3. **Design the survey.** A practitioner may choose to use an existing survey instrument rather than design one. Many private companies have developed surveys that can be used to assess topics such as employee engagement, and academic researchers have developed highly tested surveys of organizational commitment, identification, and job satisfaction, among others. More frequently, practitioners use surveys to address specific issues, and in these situations, they often customize the questions to suit the organization. Falletta and Combs (2002) write that such surveys are frequently model-driven; that is, consultants sometimes use organizational models such as the Burke-Litwin model or the Weisbord Six-Box Model to develop questions. These models can be limiting, however, as they each frame the organization and its structure in its own way. This can lead to the model predetermining the outcome, and the consultant may feel that the model forces questions or issues into certain categories that may not match those being used by organizational members.

The length of the survey is a common concern. If the survey is too long, participants may become fatigued or busy with other work and may not complete it. If it is too short, it may not provide enough information or detail to act upon (Smith, 2003). Most surveys use a combination of fixed-response questions (for example, the Likert scale tends to use a 5-point scale with choices from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree) and open-ended or short-answer questions. Participants may not take the time to respond to a large number of open-ended questions, and analysis can be complex. However, if used judiciously, such questions can be well worth the additional analysis time.
4. **Administer the survey.** Survey instructions should be clear about how long the survey is likely to take and how participants should return it (for paper-and-pencil surveys) or submit it (for electronic surveys). The deadline should be clearly communicated, and a reminder issued shortly before the survey will close.

**Tips for Successful Administration of Surveys**

The most common errors in the use of surveys involve the questions or survey items themselves. The following list does not delve into all of the possible errors with question design, but these are a few important issues for OD practitioners to consider:

1. Avoid questions that indicate bias toward or against a particular group of people. Questions should use language that is neutral toward any racial group, gender, religion, or any level, role, or category of organizational members.

2. Avoid questions that could be answered accurately in multiple ways. For example, a survey question that reads “I am satisfied with my pay and benefits” could be answered both “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree” if the respondent is very satisfied with the benefit plan but is dissatisfied with monetary compensation.

3. Keep in mind the need to translate or localize questions. In a global environment, many organizational surveys need to be accessible in various languages. Survey items will need to be translated as well as localized. That is, translation is a matter of linguistic change, whereas localization is a matter of cultural accuracy for the context. Items should avoid idioms or slang unique to American English, as well as U.S. work practices that may not be applicable to employees in other countries.

4. Clarify important terms. Even phrases that might appear to be self-evident such as “senior management” or “your work team” may need to be defined at the beginning of the survey. Employees in a regional office, for example, may wonder whether “senior management” refers to the highest ranking local management or whether it refers to the executive team at headquarters.

5. Survey items should be tested with a small sample of organizational members who can later be interviewed to determine whether questions were clear and whether the respondent understood the survey items in the manner in which they were intended.

Technological advancements have made issuing and responding to surveys easier than ever before. It is now possible for a consultant to develop and issue a survey to a targeted population and receive responses within a matter of days. Consequently, surveys remain one of the most popular ways that consultants gather data in OD engagements. The disadvantage of this ease of use is that some organizational members can become oversurveyed, but when used occasionally and conscientiously, surveys can be an excellent addition to the consultant’s data gathering approach.
Observation

A fourth method of data gathering is direct observation. Compared to the first three methods we have discussed, observations allow the consultant to collect data on actual behavior rather than reports of people’s behavior (Nadler, 1977). Self-report data can be erroneous because the information relies on the memory of the person being asked. For several reasons people may report their behavior in error, may not be accurate in their perceptions of the behavior of others, or may represent behavior to give the interviewer a positive impression. Interviewees may not be conscious, for example, of whether telephone interruptions during a task cause them to make more errors, whether they handle customer complaints on a certain product differently from their coworkers, or whether they compliment certain employees more often than others. They may report only what they remember (perhaps only the last few days, or an event that was extraordinary and thus stands out) or they may report what they want to make known (avoiding a complaint about a coworker, but sharing frustrations about this year’s salary increases). Questionnaires may also be unlikely to elicit accurate data on these points. Observations allow the practitioner to get closer to seeing how these issues play out during the course of an ordinary day and to avoid errors in self-reporting. Moreover, self-report data is always a reflection of past events, whereas observation collects data on what is happening in the present (Nadler, 1977).

The OD practitioner can use observations to gain a better understanding of the actual work that people are doing. Instead of only interviewing members to understand how patient registration or building inspections are handled, or reading the formally documented process, the practitioner can learn much more about the process by sitting with an intake nurse for a day or following a building inspector as she completes her rounds. By doing so, the practitioner will have a greater understanding of the process, will build credibility and relationships with organizational members, and will have a richer understanding of how any changes to the job will impact those who perform it.

Data gathered through observations, however, are prone to being filtered through the eyes of the observer. The observer who has heard complaints that employees in the billing department are unproductive because they socialize frequently may be more likely to observe that. Observing a staff meeting to watch for conflict may mean that the consultant interprets certain behavior as conflict that organizational members may not see in that light. Thus, bias is not omitted in this method of data gathering, but it is a different kind of bias than that which occurs during interviews, focus groups, or surveys.

In addition, observations are likely to alter the circumstances and potentially change the behavior of those being observed. This fact about observations has come to be known as the Hawthorne Effect, named after a now-famous experimental study of working conditions in a manufacturing plant described by Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939). Listening to a customer service agent handle customer complaints likely will expose the consultant to the kinds of calls that agents receive, but it may not be the best choice to learn how agents truly deal with complaints. Anyone
being observed in that circumstance is likely to want to make a good impression and to complete the work in the most diligent way. Staff meetings conducted with an observer watching from a corner may be more cordial and agreeable than one without an observer. Unless the observer is trusted and builds rapport, observation may not work well to see conflict, to learn how informal systems subvert the formal ones, or to understand how employees work around official processes.

While observations can give a general sense of how things happen, a consultant is not likely to see the entire range of situations. One or two team meetings’ worth of observation, or a few hours watching patients in a hospital waiting room, can be very instructive but does not substitute for the knowledge and expertise of those who work there and have seen many more examples. The observer should not overgeneralize from only a small sample of observations and assume knowledge equal to that of organizational members.

Finally, observation would not be a good choice in situations where the phenomenon being observed is rare or infrequent. A practitioner may observe for many hours without witnessing what happens when a machine breaks down if it only happens every 3 months. Observations are less useful for studying unusual problems or infrequent interactions.

**Tips for Successfully Conducting Observations for Data Gathering**

1. Observers should show an interest in learning what usually happens, demonstrating interest in the activity observed. Observers can be intimidating. Making it clear that the point of the observation is not to act as a police officer for an official process usually puts people at ease. In addition, no matter how quiet the observer is, observation is still usually an intrusive activity that interferes in some way with the ordinary course of organizational life.

2. Consider observing with explicit permission rather than hiding the purpose of the observation. It can be useful to observe interactions in the lunchroom or the lobby, and such observations rarely need widespread publicity or long explanations. When observing people doing their daily jobs, most consultants find it more ethical and comfortable to make their purpose known. However, the consideration to share one’s purpose is situation-dependent. The more those observed know about the purpose of the observation, the more the behavior may change. Telling a team that the purpose of the observation is to see “whether staff meetings remain on topic or whether they wander off onto tangents” (or even a more general “to watch the flow of the meeting”) probably will mean that team members pay much more attention to the content and process of the discussion, and the observation will be of an atypical meeting. This can be unavoidable, however, so the more general explanation probably would suffice.

3. Observations can be unstructured or formally structured. Unstructured observations can be as simple as moving from location to location, watching and listening to what people are doing. The observer can simply make notes about what is being seen. Formally structured observations can be used as well,
sampling different times and locations to get representative observations. Other structured observations can be useful for group interaction, using forms that have been designed for that purpose (with check boxes that represent the number of questions asked, for example).

4. Note-taking can heighten participants’ anxiety about being observed and can give away the purpose of the observation if it has not been disclosed in detail. It may be best for the observer to take short notes and frequent personal breaks where additional detailed notes can be taken.

5. Because observation can be prone to observer bias, it may be appropriate to use multiple observers, whether internal or external to the organization, to observe multiple times and locations. The observers can share their notes and interpretations with one another to test bias and determine whether they may share multiple interpretations of the same event.

Though they can be time-consuming, observations can be a good choice when the practitioner would like to witness a situation personally. They usually bring the practitioner closer to the situation or problem being experienced than do interviews or focus groups. It can be enlightening and humbling to witness the complexities and challenges of organizational life in action, and it can make a consultant more aware of the organizational culture so that interventions can be appropriately directed at the right sources of the problem.

Unobtrusive Measures

A fifth type of data that can be gathered consist of unobtrusive measures (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966; Webb & Weick, 1979). As the name suggests, these data are generally readily available because they are produced during the ordinary course of organizational activity. They can usually be gathered in an inconspicuous manner without changing the data themselves. As discussed earlier, observations can be intrusive, and the very nature of observation can change what is being observed. With unobtrusive measures, the data usually already exist, and gathering the data does not usually change what is being studied. Like the Sherlock Holmes mystery in which the absence of a barking dog led Holmes to conclude that the dog knew the intruder, unobtrusive measures can be a source of data that can give the consultant insight into the organization without making a direct inquiry or conducting observations. Because these data exist separate from the consulting engagement itself, the data are likely to be less influenced by the presence of the observer or practitioner. As a result, unobtrusive measures can be highly valid sources of data. They can contradict or substantiate data gathered elsewhere (through interviews or observations, for example).

There are a variety of types of unobtrusive measures that can be useful to consultants:

1. **Historical data.** Historical data and archives consist of both public and non-public records. A consultant who wants to learn the history of a union strike or a company’s bankruptcy can certainly rely on interviews with organizational
members, but may also look up articles in a local newspaper to learn this history as well. These articles are less likely to be influenced by changing perceptions and interpretations of the event over time. The organization may maintain its own library of historical artifacts that can be examined as well, such as employee newsletters or correspondence with customers.

2. Official documents. These consist of a wide variety of documents that are often used for financial, legal, or human resources purposes, such as job descriptions, goals and objectives, personnel files, or meeting minutes. Obviously these data only represent the formal and official record, which may differ substantially from what organizational members experience. Meeting minutes, for example, may not document everything that was said during the meeting, but do tend to define what organizational members considered to be worthy of documentation (Anderson, 2004). Presentations, e-mails, and other documents can also be helpful background information, as can internal Web sites.

3. Databases. Most organizations maintain databases of customer, financial, and employee records. These can be useful sources of data to determine, for example, how many people were hired last year compared to the year before or where most customers live.

4. Physical environment. An organization’s physical environment can say a great deal about its culture. In organizations where status and hierarchy are important elements of the culture, executives maintain large offices with expansive windows on the surrounding landscape. Middle managers may have smaller offices and windows, and employees may sit in cubicles. In other organizations, all employees regardless of role may have an office or may have a cubicle. Other objects of the formal physical environment to observe include the following:

- Architecture and signage (e.g., layout, building construction materials, lobby furnishings)
- Design of work areas, formal gathering locations, and meeting rooms
- Lunchroom, break room, and cafeteria
- Posters, photographs, or art
- “Costumes, company uniforms, standard attire” (Jones, 1996, p. 6)

The personal physical environment, or how organizational members design their own work environments, can also be a source of data to illuminate the organizational culture. Examples include the following:

- Employee bulletin boards (newspaper articles, comic strips, papers posted by employees to be read by other employees)
- Desk or office decorations, such as personal photographs, diplomas, and certificates

Environments designed or customized by employees can give a consultant insight into employee satisfaction and morale. The number and content of currently
popular Dilbert cartoon strips can provide a source of data about employee frustrations, for example.

5. *Language use, including stories and metaphors.* As Burke (1992) puts it, “Metaphors used by executives and other members of an organization are windows into the soul, if not collective unconscious, of the social system” (p. 255). Members describing the organization as “one big family” or “a sinking ship” (Brink, 1993, p. 369) give great insight into how they think about the culture. Common organizational metaphors concern sports (often used when people describe working in teams for a common goal) or the military (used to highlight urgent or competitive activities, such as beating the competition). They are more than shortcuts for longer explanations or mere poetic devices, but are ways of calling on and even creating a set of values that organizational members ought to share (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006; Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003).

Similarly, stories serve a teaching function. Values and lessons historically have been passed down from generation to generation through storytelling, and the same can be said for organizational stories. Members may recall “the lesson of the product failures of the 1980s” or tell a story about the vice president who was fired after making a major decision. These stories can be illuminating for a consultant who wants to understand the organizational culture and context.

Language such as stories and metaphors occurs naturally in organizational discourses but can be elicited during interviews or focus groups as well. An interviewee may be asked to tell a story that would give a newcomer an insight into the organization or to pick a physical object that describes how the office functions.

**Tips for Gathering Unobtrusive Measures**

1. Despite the impression that may be given by the name, some unobtrusive measure data gathering is still resource-intensive. Unless the consultant has access to the database, for example, an organizational member who knows how to use it must do the work, so exploratory or “just to see” data gathering may not be appropriate.

2. Unobtrusive data gathering is not always hidden from organizational members. Nadler (1977) adds that searching through filing cabinets or employee records can cause a great deal of unease among organizational members, reminding us that such methods are not emotionally neutral. It may still be necessary to explain to organizational members what the goal is of the data collection.

3. Not all data may be unambiguously interpreted. For example, simply because all organizational members have the same office size does not mean that the organization is free from hierarchy or status. Nadler (1977) writes, “It’s not always clear, for example, what constitutes an incident of absenteeism or lateness. The data can be interpreted in several different ways” (p. 139). It may be helpful to check an interpretation with someone with experience in the organization’s culture to validate whether it is accurate.
Used in combination with another method, unobtrusive measures can be a useful source of additional data to help the consultant interpret the problem the client describes and the organizational culture. They can validate or contradict information gained from other sources. It can also be a rapid way of collecting data with less intrusion than other methods.

Creating a Data Gathering Strategy and Proposing an Approach

Choosing a method of data gathering involves several considerations. Each of the methods described in this chapter presents various advantages and disadvantages, so the consultant and client must choose between them with the knowledge that none is perfect. As Schein (1969, p. 99) puts it, “No data gathering method is right or wrong in the abstract.” Table 7.1 compares the pros and cons of the five approaches.

Consultants must balance several criteria when choosing a data gathering strategy:

1. **Investment required.** Each method has a cost to the organization and the consultant in terms of time and monetary expense for both data gathering and data analysis. Methods such as interviews take time to gather the data, whereas methods such as surveys can produce volumes of quantitative and qualitative data that can be time-consuming to analyze. While one-on-one interviews may be ideal to explore a certain problem, the client may not be willing to devote the time needed to execute such a strategy. In addition, the organization may not have the resources available to devote to substantial data mining from databases or files.

2. **Access.** The client may not allow the consultant to have access to data or it may not be practical. It may not be possible to interview each organizational member due to work schedules, travel, or vacation. The organization’s policies may prohibit use of personnel files or may not allow external consultants to have access to financial or technical files.

3. **Relevance to the problem.** Some methods of data gathering are better suited to particular types of problems. Unobtrusive measures are less likely to yield useful data about how a team feels about a management change, and observations are unlikely to give significant insights into whether employees are satisfied with the training programs provided. Thus, each method of data gathering selected must be relevant to the problem described by the client. Each method selected should be chosen because it is likely to yield useful valid information about the presenting problem and its underlying problems. If clients do not believe that a proposed data gathering strategy is relevant to the problem described, they will question the consultant’s choices, since it may appear that the consultant is wasting time or following an unfruitful path.

4. **Accuracy.** Some methods are more prone to respondent and consultant bias than others. The consultant may be less likely to gain highly valid data from respondents in some situations, or the consultant’s own biases may color what is seen in
Table 7.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Five Data Gathering Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>May prompt interviewees to be more forthright in a personal environment.</td>
<td>Time- and data-intensive if many interviews are to be conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviewer can follow up on important issues and explore situations in</td>
<td>Potentially expensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>depth.</td>
<td>Rapport must be established; interviewees must trust interviewer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More personal than surveys or focus groups.</td>
<td>Gives only the interviewee's perspective.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consultants can capture examples and quotes effectively.</td>
<td>Interviewers may unwittingly encourage certain response bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews may reveal new issues.</td>
<td>Analysis can be time-consuming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>May save time compared to individual interviews.</td>
<td>Potential for groupthink or for people to “go along” with one point of view to avoid conflict.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Access to many people at once, thus can be more efficient at getting</td>
<td>Confidential issues may not be discussed with peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>information than interviews.</td>
<td>A few members may dominate the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group can build on one another’s thoughts, stimulating thinking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys/</td>
<td>Data from many people can be gathered at once.</td>
<td>Data analysis can be intensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>Can take a short time.</td>
<td>May require statistical knowledge beyond the capabilities of the consultant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allows a broad range of topics to be addressed.</td>
<td>Difficult to follow up in depth on a single issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data can be quantified and compared across groups.</td>
<td>Response rates may be low or may bias the results.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can repeat survey to show differences over time.</td>
<td>Respondents may give socially desirable answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Allows data collection “in the moment” when an</td>
<td>Can be time-intensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>event occurs.</td>
<td>Can be expensive.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
observations. Thus, the ability to obtain valid information from a certain approach will differ based on the situation and the consultant’s relationship with the client and organizational members.

5. **Flexibility.** Some methods allow the consultant to have greater flexibility in terms of following up on particular questions of interest or items that come up during the course of data gathering. A survey can be inflexible, for example, because once it has been designed and administered, it is not possible to add subsequent follow-up questions. Interviews tend to be more flexible since consultants can alter the questions during the course of the conversation.

How should a consultant balance these criteria and choose among the five approaches? Each client situation presents a unique negotiation between the problem described and the factors listed above. In other words, consultants may have to settle for what is possible as opposed to what is ideal. To compensate for the disadvantages of one approach, it may be a good idea to balance it with another, combining different methods to yield the most detailed data. Surveys, for example, can be followed by interviews or focus groups where organizational members can help to interpret the results. Alternately, interviews done before

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>event occurs rather than after the event.</td>
<td>Observer may be biased to see an event based on how others have explained it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(continued)</td>
<td>Allows behavior to be seen rather than self-reported.</td>
<td>May be difficult to observe multiple instances of a behavior that occurs sporadically.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can be initiated with little preparation.</td>
<td>Observer may intimidate or affect the group or individual being observed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can build relationships with organizational members.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unobtrusive measures</td>
<td>Data exist separate from individual interpretation or motivation.</td>
<td>Can be time-intensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High validity.</td>
<td>Can be more subtle to interpret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can substantiate or contradict data gathered elsewhere (triangulation).</td>
<td>Can be more difficult to access.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can be less intrusive.</td>
<td>Potentially poor quality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
surveys can give the consultant insight into what survey questions should be asked. The point is that by using several methods to gather and analyze their data, practitioners can compensate for many of the drawbacks associated with relying on a single method. They will also need to choose methods that fit the diagnostic problems and contribute to cooperative, productive consulting relationships. (Harrison, 1987, p. 21)

Mixing methods and triangulating the same issue from different perspectives can solidify an interpretation as well and make it more persuasive in the client’s eyes. As Swanson (2007) concludes, “In almost all instances, using more than one data collection method is necessary to ensure valid conclusions about the trends, factors, and causes of organizational, process, team, and individual performances” (p. 122).

To select an approach, it may be useful to create a chart such as the one shown in Table 7.2. Based on the client’s description of the presenting problem, the consultant can list other possible interpretations or underlying problems that might be contributing to the situation that the client is describing. Then a data gathering approach can be selected that would generate the greatest amount of useful information on that issue. Because this approach is likely to spawn an exhaustive list of possible data gathering methods, the consultant should choose only those that seem most relevant to the client’s problem and that fit the five criteria described above. In Table 7.2, for example, a client may have shared a problem with the cycle time of insurance claims processing, perhaps even noting that new employees seem to take longer than tenured employees. There could be a number of reasons for this. One might be that they did not learn the process accurately when they joined the organization. Interviews would be well suited to determining how they learned the claims process. A chart such as this one can focus the data gathering effort by forcing the consultant to retain a disciplined concentration on the client’s problem, as well as to be explicit about the rationale for the data gathering approach.

### Table 7.2  Selecting a Data Gathering Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facts From Client’s Description of Problem</th>
<th>Possible Interpretation or Reason</th>
<th>Data Needed</th>
<th>Best-Suited Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New employees do not process insurance claims as quickly as experienced employees.</td>
<td>Employees do not learn the process accurately.</td>
<td>Ask new employees about their orientation experience and training.</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales figures in Midwest are significantly lower than East or West regions.</td>
<td>Salespeople in Midwest make fewer sales than in other regions.</td>
<td>Gather revenue per employee data in each region for past 3 quarters.</td>
<td>Unobtrusive measure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical Issues With Data Gathering

Data gathering is itself a response to ethical concerns. It is an ethical consulting practice in that its purpose is to avoid colluding with the client’s initial statements of the problem, and in doing so, the consultant seeks to expand on the client’s view in order to solve the right problem for the long term. By gathering data, the consultant can avoid some of the ethical issues described in the previous chapter.

However, data gathering also presents consultants with a number of opportunities to face further ethical challenges, some of which have already been hinted at earlier in this chapter. The primary opportunity for an ethical dilemma concerns “misuse of data” that “occurs when the voluntary consent or confidentiality of the client system is violated or abridged” (White & Wooten, 1985, p. 150). This ethical principle is violated most flagrantly when a practitioner discloses who made a particular comment during an interview or focus group session even after pledging to the respondent that comments would remain anonymous. For a change agent, quotes from interviews, paper-and-pencil surveys, and facts gathered through unobtrusive measures are a typical and sometimes mundane part of the job. What the practitioner considers sensitive or risky matters less than what organizational members consider sensitive. It is no stretch to say that inappropriately leaked data could have serious life consequences for organizational members, including career limitations or termination from a job.

In addition, before gathering data, practitioners owe organizational members an explanation about what will be done with data gathered from them, giving them an opportunity to participate with free and informed consent or to decline to participate without consequences. In academic research, researchers are usually required to present research subjects with an informed consent form that lists the researcher’s purpose, contact information, and any benefits or risks to the subject for participating. OD practitioners should consider their own research practices no less seriously.

These ethical principles require that practitioners be vigilant in protecting data. Notes from interviews and handwritten surveys should be kept with the consultant or in a secure location under lock and key. Practitioners should consider taking notes by using pseudonyms instead of actual names, or by using a personal shorthand method. Any audiotapes or videotapes must be only heard or watched by the consultant (or those with permission) and should be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. It is also easy to inadvertently “leak” information between interviews by stating “I heard the same thing from the last person I interviewed” (Farquhar, 2005, p. 227).

Finally, data gathering is conducted to benefit the client, not the practitioner. The practitioner should aim to gather data relevant to the problem described or that would illuminate related areas of the problem, all with the client’s consent. The practitioner should avoid collecting data simply because it is interesting or useful for another engagement.

Summary

The most effective way that a consultant can learn about the client’s problem and propose an effective intervention is through data gathering. Consultants use data
gathering methods to delve into a client’s description of a presenting problem to determine what underlying problems may be contributing to what the client is seeing. By gathering valid information about the organization, the client and consultant have a better understanding of the problem. Five data gathering methods that consultants use most frequently include interviews, focus groups, surveys/questionnaires, observation, and unobtrusive measures. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, so a mixed method approach may be the ideal solution. Consultants must balance the pros and cons of each method with what clients may accept, based on the investment needed in the approach, access, relevance, accuracy, and flexibility. Thus, proposing a data gathering strategy to a client is to propose another kind of contract, one in which the consultant is pledging to help the client understand the underlying problem in exchange for the organization dedicating energy to analyzing it in order to work toward an appropriate solution.

In the case study that follows this chapter, you will have the ability to practice analyzing a client’s initial presenting problem and to propose a data gathering strategy that will explore other elements of the situation and any underlying problems.

For Further Reading


Case Study 2: Proposing a Data Gathering Strategy at AeroTech, Inc.

Read the AeroTech case and consider the following questions:

1. What is the client requesting?
2. What are the presenting problems? What do you think may be any underlying problems? Which of these underlying problems is most likely, in your view?
3. What data would illustrate whether these underlying problems are occurring? Which method of data gathering would you use and why? (Consider using the method of analysis shown in Table 7.2.)
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that method? Include a proposed timeline for your approach and any details about the data gathering method itself, including possible interview or survey questions, documents to gather, or observations you would conduct.

"I want to thank you for meeting with me," said Patrick Delacroix. "We have an important issue that I’m hoping you can address. It’s costing the company a lot of time and money, and I think that the project that we’re going to plan out will really help solve a major problem in our group."

Patrick Delacroix, executive vice president of engineering for AeroTech, an aerospace technology research and products firm, was sitting behind a large walnut desk at AeroTech headquarters. Cassandra Wilson, an organization development consultant in the AeroTech human resources department, had been assigned to consult with the engineering organization and was anxious to hear more about the problem that Patrick had called her to discuss.

AeroTech headquarters is located in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area. It is housed in an older concrete building that was built in the 1970s without many windows or the showy glass and steel architecture characteristic of many of the other companies in the area. In fact, these days it would be easy to drive by the headquarters and not know that this major, multimillion-dollar company was even located there. AeroTech has a long and distinguished history, having been a major supplier to the top government contractors contributing to U.S. space and defense programs in the 1980s. In the past 20 years, however, it has fallen out of favor among government contractors as quality problems plagued the company’s products. The company briefly considered bankruptcy but averted a Chapter 11 filing when its new CEO was named 4 years ago. The CEO helped the company to partially recover by revising its strategy, and as a result, AeroTech has now begun to diversify into other areas in which there is higher demand. Some of these new business segments have become very successful enterprises, but it is clear that the pressure is high to succeed in the new lines of business. An article in the local newspaper predicted the demise of AeroTech if annual losses continue at the present rate, and it suggested that based on financial analysts’ projections, layoffs this year are almost certain to repeat last
year’s 16% reduction of AeroTech staff. “With financial performance mirroring last year’s,”
the article concluded, “we may be witnessing the slow death of one of the metro area’s
original companies. Unless it merges or is acquired, we would be surprised if we are still
reporting on AeroTech news a few years from now.”

Patrick began at AeroTech nearly 25 years ago as an associate engineer, a few years
after he finished his doctorate in engineering from a local university. He has witnessed
the extensive changes in research and development of engineering products in his vari-
ous roles as engineering manager for metals fabrication, director of the new component
division, and now as vice president of the entire engineering operation. He lived through
the decline in personnel and morale after quality problems forced the closure of the fab-
ication operation, but he also oversaw the rise in revenues following the successful com-
ponent products released in the past 6 years. Most recently he presided over the largest
loss of engineering talent that the company had seen through voluntary and involuntary
termination programs. Much of the new strategic direction is riding on his shoulders.

“I’ll get right to the point. As you can imagine, I’m under a great deal of pressure to
get the new laser systems released to the market,” he began.

“I can understand,” Cassandra said. “I’ve heard that everything is on track with
product development at least, is that right?”

“I wish it were that simple,” Patrick said. “Developing advanced laser systems is a
complex operation. We’re relying on our best and brightest engineers to create some of
the most innovative applications of advanced laser technology on the market today. If
we pull it off as planned, it will be an incredible success for the company. Unfortunately,
we can’t always predict how long it will take to develop a product. How long it takes to
be creative is a volatile challenge that’s always present in our division. We also have to
balance cycle time with our financial investments in research and development. We put
a lot of pressure on our engineers, and we count on them to deliver.”

Cassandra nodded. “I do hear that many of them are working nights and weekends.
So what brings you to requesting our meeting today?”

“First let me give you a bit of background. As you know, we have five engineering
teams in this division: laser systems, component systems (which are separated into two
teams, new components and enhancements to existing components), satellite technol-
ogy, and custom design. The laser and satellite teams are relatively new, having only
been organized in that way since last year, and you’ll recognize that they’re the two
critical areas in the new direction of the company. The other teams have the same charter
that they’ve had for the past few years.”
Patrick continued. “Productivity is my main issue. We have very limited budgets and very short delivery windows in which we’re expected to produce results for the business. If we don’t produce, a competitor will get to the market faster and we’ll essentially have lost the battle. Right now we’re not doing a very good job of that.”

“Tell me more about what you mean by productivity,” Cassandra said.

“I mean that in general we’re not meeting our commitments to getting our products out. As a result, we’re losing market share each time we’re late to reaching the point at which our products are generally available. That impacts our sales force, marketing efforts, and the credibility of the engineering team.”

“What do you think is causing low productivity?” she asked.

“Well, I think that there are many factors, but the most basic seems to be time management. Obviously how our engineers spend their time is critical. We need them to be skilled at prioritizing their time to spend it on the most value-adding activities so that the development activities can be completed on time.” Patrick paused. “We need them to be self-managing and productive. That’s why I called. I’d like to ask for your help in designing a time management and prioritization seminar to address some of the issues that I see among the engineers. You might throw in a little project management as well.”

“We can certainly consider that,” Cassandra said. “Let me ask you a couple of questions to better understand what’s happening with your group. What’s led you to the conclusion that they can’t manage their time well?”

“Well, I’m obviously nervous about the laser systems team,” Patrick said, “so I walk downstairs pretty frequently to get an update and to see how things are going. Almost every time I’m down there I see people working, but the results just don’t seem to be there.”

“What have you done so far?” she asked.

“I prefer to let my managers do the managing. I don’t like to bypass them. And they know that the entire company is waiting for the product to be ready. But I have to be fair here. It’s not everyone, it’s mostly Todd’s group.”

“Who is Todd?” Cassandra asked.

“Todd Lyman is the manager of the laser systems engineering group. He joined the company last year at this time, right after we reorganized the engineering group after the layoffs,” Patrick said. “We brought him in from the outside to lead the development of the new laser systems. We were lucky to recruit him, since he has extensive background in laser engineering management at one of our competitors. He’s incredibly intelligent, well liked, and came with great credentials.”

“I think I may have heard his name. So the problem with productivity is really in Todd’s group?” Cassandra asked.

“Yes. Since he arrived his team has led three new product releases. Two were product upgrades and one was a new product. Two of the three were delayed beyond their original expected release date,” Patrick said.

“How did the laser products group perform before the reorganization and before Todd joined?”

“Just fine,” Patrick said. “That’s what’s so frustrating about these product delays. There’s no apparent reason for them. Before, the group was like a machine. They would get a product design request, and they would do it. Many times they operated under budget. Now they’re over budget and missing deadlines. It’s really getting embarrassing to me personally, actually. Since Todd’s arrival the group’s performance has
declined considerably. That leads me to my second request. I'd like to ask for you to engage Todd in some management coaching to build his management skills."

"Before we talk about Todd, let me ask you a few more questions about the group and its history. Who led the group before?" Cassandra asked. "How was that person perceived by the engineers in the group?"

"Ed Herman was a very popular manager. We were sorry to lose him. He was really a good company guy who knew how things were done around here, but he is now on a golf course in Florida having a great time in retirement. I envy the guy."

"So when Ed left, what happened to the group? How would you describe the team's reaction?" Cassandra inquired.

"Ed left right before the reorganization. In fact, it was Ed's departure that led me to rethink how we would organize things differently. In order to get some cross-pollination of Ed's excellent and productive team, I moved a few of them into satellite technology, and a few of them into custom design. I figured that would enhance the skills of both of those teams, since satellite is a new team, and custom design is a high-margin business. Ed's team was really close-knit. After that move was announced, a couple of the remaining engineers that were left behind asked to be moved with their colleagues into the other two groups. I guess they missed their old colleagues, but I couldn't afford to have the entire team disbanded like that, so they stayed behind."

"After you hired Todd, how did the team respond?" Cassandra asked.

"The team was small at the time, but they participated in the interview process, interviewing each of the candidates and providing feedback to me, and I agreed with their recommendation to hire Todd. I think that was a good process to get their buy-in for their new manager. Once Todd arrived, he had the responsibility of hiring about six new engineers to replace some of the staff that were reassigned during the organizational structure change," Patrick offered.

"The team is a mix of new and tenured engineers, then," Cassandra said. "What else can you tell me about the composition of Todd's team?"

"Let's see. There are probably a dozen engineers, ranging in age from late twenties to mid-sixties. Most are in their late forties to early fifties. The new ones joined only within the past year, obviously, and among those that were already a part of the team, the average tenure is probably 15 years or so. They have extensive educational backgrounds and are among the most highly skilled engineers I've met."

"What's been the morale among those engineers that were transferred and those that stayed behind in the laser group?" Cassandra asked.

Patrick shrugged. "Fine, I assume. I haven't heard any specific complaints."

"Other than Todd's group, how are the other engineering teams doing, in your assessment?" Cassandra asked.

"Very successful," Patrick said. "I haven't been more pleased with the performance of the satellite and custom design teams. They've really come through during a difficult time, especially with budget cutbacks that have affected each of our teams a great deal. That's what makes it so strange that Todd's team, with the existing tenured employees that he has on his staff, just can't seem to contribute in the same way that the other teams have."

"It sounds like Todd came with an excellent background with a wealth of experience as a manager and engineer, and that the team was fully behind his hiring," Cassandra
summarized. "With those qualifications, under the circumstances what leads you to think that he needs management coaching?"

"Well, there’s management experience and there’s management at AeroTech. We have our own unique ways of doing things here. I think that Todd just needs to understand the Aero way specifically," Patrick said.

"Tell me more about what you mean by the ‘Aero way.’ You’ve said that Todd’s group is missing deadlines and is over budget?"

"Right," he said. "We ask each of our engineering managers to develop a quarterly plan that we use as commitments across the business. I take the product development timeline that they send to me, and I share it with marketing and sales so they know when to begin the major sales push. I send it to operations so they know what components and parts to order in advance of volume manufacturing. I use the financial commitments to share with our chief financial officer so that she can make revenue projections and calculate financial projections. My credibility rides on those commitments. Todd’s projections are consistently inaccurate, which has caused problems, obviously, for the marketing, sales, and finance teams."

"What do you think is causing the inaccurate forecast for budgets and delivery times?" Cassandra asked.

"There could be many things, but I have to say that when I was a manager of an engineering group, I could always come up with a realistic forecast," Patrick reminisced. "Maybe I didn’t always get it right, but even when I got a commitment from an engineer that it would take him 2 months to deliver, I always added 10 to 20% to the budget and cycle time, just to be safe. My group may not have been the fastest, but we were always within projections." Patrick smiled.

"Is that a standard practice in most engineering environments?" she asked.

"Yes, it’s pretty typical in my experience," Patrick said.

Cassandra looked through her notes. "OK. So let me summarize. There is a new manager with a team composed of new employees and tenured employees. That’s the newest team in the division and also the team with lowest productivity compared to other similar teams in the division. Specifically, Todd’s team is not producing products within his own projections of cycle time and budget. You’re asking me to conduct two interventions. One would be a training program for the engineers on Todd’s team that would teach time management, prioritization, and project management. A second intervention would be management coaching for Todd to help him better work through the management issues with his team, including cycle time and budget projections. Do I have that right?"

"That’s it exactly." The phone rang on Patrick’s desk. "I’m afraid I have another meeting scheduled now. Is there any other information I can provide to help you get started?"

"Perhaps. At this point, however, I’m not sure that the training and management coaching programs that you wanted me to work on are the right solutions to your problem. I’m not exactly certain what the true problem is, but I have some ideas. I think I’d like to gather some additional data before I make a recommendation. How does that sound?" Cassandra asked.

"What kind of additional data do you want to gather? How long will that take?" he asked.
“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t I write up a short proposal that specifies the additional data I would like to gather, and I can explain what I think the data would tell us. I’ll include some of my thoughts about our roles in this project, including what I would need from you and what you can expect from me. I can send that to you within the next week.”

“That sounds fine, but keep in mind the time pressure we’re under here. I’ll look forward to hearing back from you,” Patrick concluded.