

Practice Makes Perfect Data Collectors

train·ing *noun* |trā 'ning|

The process of bringing a person [or team] to an agreed standard of proficiency by practice and instruction. Collins English Dictionary

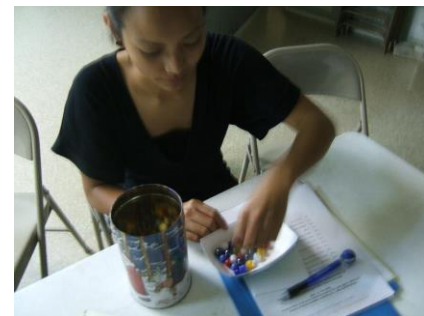
Although it's often tempting to think that conducting a survey or an observation is a fairly straight-forward thing that anyone can do, a lot can actually go wrong with data collection -- especially when a number of people are involved. To make sure everyone gets it right, it's crucial to train your team how to use the data collection instrument in the same way.



A good training consists of more than just looking at each item on the tool and asking if your team has any questions. The training needs to create a shared understanding of what is being asked or observed, how to collect and record the responses or observations, and how to handle potentially problematic issues. It also should assess the capabilities of team members to collect data accurately.

Two types of evaluation activities usually involve multiple data collectors and so require training -- surveys and observations. We'll start first with how to conduct a training for face-to-face surveys:

1. Start by explaining how the data will be used by the program and the importance of collecting quality data.
2. Discuss the sampling technique that will be used to select survey participants. Demonstrate how to approach people and get them to participate. Go over the introduction, which should outline who is collecting information, what the survey is about, and the level of confidentiality being offered.
3. Read through the survey with the team, explaining the meaning of each question and why it's being asked. Talk about each answer choice -- what it includes and does not include. Describe how to record the answers.
4. Once you've covered the entire survey, break it into manageable chunks -- say 3-4 questions at a time. Demonstrate how to ask the questions and read the answers; point out which words to emphasize, where to pause, etc.
5. Have pairs practice asking each other the questions and recording responses so they can get a feel for the inflection and rhythm of the process.



Don't lose your marbles
over sampling

6. After each section, ask trainees about any problem areas they encountered. Discuss how to record answers that don't fit neatly into one category. Anticipate questions that actual respondents might have and discuss with the team what constitutes allowable clarification vs. what is too far off script. Explain the importance of minimizing variability among collectors.



Have pairs practice asking the questions

7. Demonstrate how to handle such problems in front of the group and then have trainees practice in pairs. Encourage mock respondents to be ambiguous, ask for clarification on choices, etc. Walk around and listen in on pair practice. At the end, debrief the group about any needed corrections or commendations you observed.
8. The last and most important element of the training is to

9. assess inter-rater reliability. Do a demonstration of the entire survey (including introduction and thanks) with a well-chosen partner and instruct all team members to observe and record the data accurately. At the end read the correct answers everyone should have recorded and see how many of the team got 100% accuracy. Practice repeatedly (with different response scripts) until the team reaches an acceptable rate of compliance. Note which team members are still having problems and watch them in particular during field practice.



Practice the survey with real folks

10. Before beginning actual data collection, take the team to practice with "real" respondents similar to your intended sample population. Observe where your team might still be having problems. Note anyone who may have to be cut or repositioned in the team. Debrief thoroughly with the team to correct any errors and address remaining questions and issues.

Observations call for a slightly different emphasis in training.

1. Go over every data field on the form and explain the purpose of each and what information to record.

2. Demonstrate how and what to observe: boundaries, types of litter, how to count smokers or pieces of trash, etc.
3. Have team members practice observing simulated conditions. Set up an observation site and let pairs work together to record the data. Afterwards, specify the correct answers and debrief about how answers should have been arrived at.
4. Practice with new simulations until the team achieves a high rate of inter-rater reliability.
5. Again, field test the team in a real observation location to practice before actual data collection begins. Watch for errors and problematic team members and debrief thoroughly.



Record observation data on the form

For more information about training data collectors, tune in to our March 31st webinar on the subject, access previous webinars and recorded videos, and download helpful how-to tools from our website.

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