

Tips for Conducting Good Observations

1. Figure out how observation can be used to complement or corroborate the data you receive from other sources (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups). Establish goals for the observation, but be willing to modify them on site. You may even want to write some questions to guide your observations, such as: How do participants react to the project environment? Do they appear to feel secure? Are staff members treated as equals? How do they address one another?
2. Be practical. If your time is limited and the project you are evaluating is large or scattered over several sites, you will not be able to observe everything. Decide what is most important or what cannot be learned from other data sources and concentrate on these areas.
3. Be systematic. Once you have established a focus (for example, staff relations), approach the matter from different angles. Observe the project at different times of day; observe a variety of different individuals; ask if you can attend a staff meeting.
4. Be prepared. Develop instruments for recording your observations efficiently so that you can concentrate on what is happening on site.
5. If the instruments do not work well, modify them.
6. Be inquisitive. Set aside some time to discuss your observations with the project director or other staff members. This will help you to put the events you observed in context and gain a better understanding of what happened.
7. The most effective work is done by researchers who view informants as collaborators.
8. The findings are considered to be more trustworthy, when the researcher can show that he/she spent a considerable amount of time in the setting
9. Conducting observations involves such activities as “fitting in, active seeing, short-term memory, informal interviewing, recording detailed field notes, and , perhaps most importantly, patience”
10. Be unobtrusive in dress and actions
11. Become familiar with the setting before beginning to collect data

12. Keep the observations short at first to keep from becoming overwhelmed
13. Be honest, but not too technical or detailed, in explaining to participants what he/she is doing
14. Look at the interacting occurring in the setting, including who talks to whom, whose opinions are respected how decisions are mad. Also observe where participants stand or sit, particularly those with power versus those with less power or men versus women.
15. The research should not talk to anyone after observing, until he/she has written down his/her field notes.
16. The research should maintain naiveté, assuming an attitude of learner and being guided by participants teaching without being considered stupid, incompetent, or dangerous to their well being.