

No nonsense interviewing

Expert Interview is a tool for helping clients gain confidence and embody their expertise.

Julie Flower reports

About the tool

Expert Interview is an exercise from improvised comedy in which a client is endowed with 'expert' status in a specific (usually nonsensical) field and is asked questions on the topic, in the style of a radio, TV or conference interview.

It's designed to build confidence in clients, increasing their spontaneity and flexibility of thinking, enabling them to feel more comfortable thinking on their feet and reacting 'in the moment'.

Through practising with a 'nonsense' subject, the client may observe patterns, frameworks and approaches that can help when it comes to exploring 'real' subjects. The approach also generates humour in a situation that many people would naturally find terrifying.

When does it work best?

It can be of benefit to clients who are struggling with their confidence and spontaneity when speaking in public or who want to develop their personal style. It's also well-suited to those who are moving into a new field, such as starting a new business or navigating a change of career.

Clients who are open to new ideas and have a sense of playfulness and fun are likely to enjoy it more but the most learning will likely come for those who find public speaking and thinking on their feet uncomfortable. The coach is well placed in this exercise to reflect back observations with respect to body language, facial expression and voice.

Expert Interview can work well in both one-to-one coaching and group

and team learning environments. The key point is to offer participants the chance to reflect and connect with their thoughts, feelings, physiology and behaviours. New entrepreneurs, recent graduates, experienced coaches and developing leaders are some of the groups and individuals I've worked with using Expert Interview.

How is it used?

- The coach endows the client with a 'specialism'.
- It should be a subject that appears to defy logic or is something that no one would normally be an expert in (such as being a fashion designer for worms or manufacturing edible cars).
- The coach sits or stands across from the client and asks them questions, as if



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they were being interviewed on a chat show or as part of a conference Q&A session (in a group setting, another participant can be the interviewer).

- The questions should be open and encourage the exploration of themes that have parallels with the client's real situation (such as how they came up with such an innovative idea, how they dealt with detractors, what their dreams are for the future of the project, or what are the secrets of their commercial success) but are always specifically related to the nonsensical subject. It's a great opportunity for the interviewer to practise their listening skills and build on what's been said.
- In the debrief, explore how it felt for the client (emotions, thoughts, physical sensations) and the techniques/resources they used to respond as the 'expert'.
- Encourage the client to draw out the learning. It may then be helpful to repeat the exercise with a 'real' subject.

What they say

● **Future entrepreneurs**

“Expert Interview was one of the improvisation techniques that Julie brought to a workshop with students at the University of Kent, UK, who were interested in starting their own business. Although it might not seem a

natural link, there is a huge amount of risk and so many unknowns involved in start-ups, as there is in improvisation.

“This workshop, and this technique in particular, aimed to make the students more comfortable with that uncertainty. It worked brilliantly. Not only did we have an absolute scream doing it, but the students were clearly more comfortable with not having all the answers upfront than they were before the workshop. As well as this idea of uncertainty, the techniques were a huge confidence boost to the students some of whom were not at all at ease in speaking publicly.”

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● **Rebecca Smith** is external engagement manager at Kent Business School

● **Experienced coaches**

“This technique was a lot of fun! Being the interviewee was an exercise in being willing to let go of any knowledge one might have and totally stand in the unknown. We had to be completely present to what was happening in the moment and willing to be courageous and blurt out what came up (with no assumptions or judgement of what we were saying).


“I could say exactly the same thing about being the interviewer – again, being present, being willing to take risks, being courageous and responsive in the moment and being okay with not knowing. These all sound like pretty foundational coaching skills. Fun, brilliant and much food for coaching thought.”

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● **Nicky Chambers** is a leadership, career and team coach, external tutor and ICF-accredited mentor at Henley Business School and co-chair of the London Coaching Group

Conclusion

Expert Interview is a playful and powerful technique that is relatively simple to access and use as part of a

coaching session. It can offer a range of insight and learning for clients, particularly those who are seeking to explore and embody a new specialism, or who wish to feel more confident in working spontaneously, in the moment.

Interestingly, the learning is rarely that it's okay to 'wing it'. Quite the contrary. In a very experiential way clients can gain a greater sense of who they are and how they are. The exercise helps people connect with their skills, experience and natural presence, building greater self-awareness and resourcefulness that they can apply in new and unexpected situations. 

● This series showcases a range of coaching tools, drawing from the books, *Coaching Tools: 101 coaching tools and techniques for executive coaches, team coaches, mentors and supervisors* – volumes 1 and 2.

Reference

● J Flower, 'Expert Interviewer', in C Day, J Flower, M Grieve, J Jovanovic Moon and J Passmore (eds.), *Coaching Tools, 101 coaching tools and techniques for executive coaches, team coaches, mentors and supervisors: WeCoach! Volume 1*. Libri Publishing, 2021.

About the author

Julie Flower is a leadership and team development practitioner and coach, with a specialism in improvisation and navigating complexity. She is also External Tutor in Coaching at Henley Business School and co-editor of J Passmore, et al. (eds.) (2021 & 2022) *Coaching Tools*. Libri. Volumes 1 and 2.

She runs her own practice, *The Specialist Generalist*, and works internationally as an associate with leading consultancies and flagship leadership development programmes. Julie is an experienced improv performer, including with award-winning *Improbots*, a group which explores AI and human interaction.