

Capacity Interview Tips

1) What's the point?

- The Capacity Interview is the only opportunity staff gets to ask the founding group clarifying questions about their application.
- Focus on the questions that will drive you from a “no” to a “yes” overall or in specific areas of weakness. Without being proscriptive, think about what answers could change your assessment from a “does not meet” to a “meets.”
- Try to assess the strength of the team. Are they smart? Have they done their homework? Do they have somebody with a track record for getting things done? Are they careful and detail oriented? Are they resilient and resourceful? Do they have values that embrace equity and quality? Is it all about one person or about a team? Remember that strong teams can overcome a plan with deficiencies, but a weak team can never execute well even the best plan.
- You are trying to get on the record major deficiencies noted in the application by alerting them to the issue and giving them an opportunity to respond. For example, if their budget doesn't support their staffing model, ask them to address it; if they don't speak to students with disabilities, ask if they plan to serve all students and how they would serve this population, as it was vague/non-existent in the application.
- You are trying to clarify points that were somewhat unclear. (e.g. “Learning centers are clearly an important instructional strategy for your school. Can you paint a detailed picture of what a learning center would look like for a particular grade and subject area?” You could follow up to this question with further probing like, “And how would the centers for a fourth grade science lesson differ from the first grade science lesson you just described?”)
- Stick to big ideas. Don't go down a rabbit hole around a small issue that can easily be addressed. For example, don't question where art supplies show up in the budget.
- Don't spend too long in one area. If it is clear that the applicant group cannot sufficiently address an area of weakness, move on and take note of the deficiency. It's worth rephrasing a question once, but if they cannot answer, it's okay to let it go.

2) Before the Capacity Interview

- The team (or lead) should determine *before the capacity interview* how questions will be asked (e.g. lead asks all prepared questions and team asks follow-ups; team takes turns asking questions; team members claim specific questions in advance.)
- The charter applications are dense. Just as I underlined some elements of the Standard for Approval, reviewers should flag some specific elements of the application for the team lead.
- The lead is responsible for preparing the questions in advance, but all reviewers should give the lead high quality, probing questions.
- Leave time for follow-up questions and time for Scott/Naomi and board members to ask questions as well.
- Use the rubric when forming your questions.

3) During the Capacity Interview

- Start with a more general “warm up” question to get the conversation flowing and to help the applicants feel like active participants in the conversation. (E.g. “Briefly describe the proposed school and why you think it will be a valuable addition to the DC education landscape.”)
- Jot down notes. You will get the court reporter transcript, but it won't be for two weeks or more.
- Keep the mission and application in mind. Is the applicant presenting totally new information or plans that won't work for the mission/target population?

- Keep the rubric out and keep referring to it as you decide if their answer moves you from a “no” to a “meets.”
- Be nice but direct. Even if you don’t like the application now, you might have to work with them someday. (Also, it’s just a generally good life philosophy.) Don’t mince words or compliment the applicant if they don’t deserve it. Instead, acknowledge their hard work.
- Be flexible and engaged. Listen intently, even if you’re eager to ask your next question. Give the applicant time to answer the initial question before probing or asking follow-up questions. If the applicant is particularly long-winded, you can interrupt politely.
- Don’t feel like you have to use all 90 minutes.

4) After the Capacity Interview

- Send your notes to the review team lead. You can include them in the Evaluation Form or in a separate document.