

## **Master's Series on Field Research**

A series of interviews with major figures in field research conducted in the early 1980s  
by Peter Blanck

### **Transcript of an interview with Jay Lorsch**



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Peter Blanck: My first question would be how do you decide where you're going to enter an organization? How do you make your initial contact?

Jay Lorsch: Well I think that there's no question about it. I mean you have to start at the top, because whatever that means in a specific setting - because if you're looking at a plant, maybe the permission of the plant manager is sufficient. If you want to study a whole company, you may need the president or the chairman's agreement. But if you don't have that kind of access, I think that you're in difficult situation because first of all you can always have the rug pulled out from under you. And I've had examples of that which have happened to us. We've had it recently on a case lead. We were trying to write a case. We had the permission of the division manager and what we didn't know was that he had never talked about it with his boss, one of the group vice presidents. The group vice president thought it was a bad idea and we were three weeks into the project and we get it pulled out from under us. So that's an example of what can happen to you and why I think it's important to have that access cleared as far up in the organization as you can get. The other reason is that I think if you have - there's another reason for it too, which is that if you have the commitment of the top people, you're more likely to get the cooperation of subordinate levels of management.

Peter Blanck: That's good on the access question. Now I want to ask you - in the interviewing process itself, do you usually go in, observe the culture for a couple days, and that influences the types of questions you ask or do you usually go in with a pre-arranged schedule of interview questions depending on the topic?

Jay Lorsch: Well I don't see how, I mean maybe some people can do it the other way but I don't see how you can go into an organization and just kind of observe. You're in the way. You have to have some reason to be there and I think the reason for being in an organization is in order to - or let me see, a reason for being in an organization is just a simple act of asking questions. Now you may start with a fairly simple agenda as to what you want to find out and you may, and I think you should always allow plenty, and particularly in exploratory research you want to allow flexibility and , and you want to allow for the possibility of complicating the kinds of questions you want answered. But I think that you have to start with the assumption that you've got questions that need answering, even initially and then try and broaden them out as you go along because that gives you a reason to be in the organization and it gives you a chance to observe other things. But I can't - I for one can't learn just by sitting in a chair and watching an organization. I think you have to get people. You have to be talking to people. Then what you see makes sense.

Peter Blanck: What sort of things do you look for in an interview? How do you, how do you arrange your questions?

Jay Lorsch: How do you arrange the questions?

Peter Blanck: How do you decide on what types of questions...?

Jay Lorsch: Well I think you always have some broad reason for being in an organization, whether it's to write a case, whether it's to do a piece of more systematic field research - sort of what your basic hypotheses are and you start out by arranging a set of questions which relate to them, or maybe you store some factual questions which help you to kind of understand the context but you're, but there's plenty to learn and you start by asking some questions, the most basic questions and then let them build. And as people talk you may learn more and you may think of ways of complicating them.

Peter Blanck: How do you keep track of what people are saying? You take notes, use a tape recorder?

Jay Lorsch: You write them down. I've never had much success with tape recorders.

Peter Blanck: And specifically how do you write, do you write it down after each question?

Jay Lorsch: I write it down, I keep writing as fast as they're talking.

Peter Blanck: How do you quantify that after the interview?

Jay Lorsch: Oh I never - I don't, I don't. I've never tried to quantify that kind of data. I mean it seems to me if you want quantifiable data then you'd better use a questionnaire. Otherwise you're using impressionistic data and you're taking notes. I mean you can always go through afterwards and count the number of people who said something. But I trust my own impressions more than I do that kind of counting, frankly.

Peter Blanck: And how do you use the answers then in writing the final project? You draw from...?

Jay Lorsch: You draw from that, either as anecdotal or clinical evidence of what people have told you and what it means. If you want more systematic studies, then I guess what I'm really talking about when I talk about field research - I'm thinking about clinical research of kind of an anthropological sort where you really are out observing and trying to understand the total social system and you do it by using your own head, your eyes and your ears as your data gathering tools and I don't think quantification is really going to help you very much in that respect, because the reader's really depending on your interpretation of what's being said and why it's being said and all the inferences you can draw from it.

Peter Blanck: If you're the only interpreter how do you remain objective then or what type of exercises do you go through in order to step back?

Jay Lorsch: Well, it's nice if you have more than one person involved. That helps to maintain your objectivity. The second thing that I think is important is that you try to get a number of different data points and you do it by being systematic in what you write down, you try to check it against it, and I usually go into a project with several different people, we have conferences about what we're seeing. We're seeing the same things,

we're seeing different things - why are we seeing different things? Is that our differences in kind of where we're coming from? Is it differences in the different parts of the organization we're talking to? Well, let's try to establish differences. I mean that's kind of where we start.

Peter Blanck: Are there any specific skills that you think an effective interviewer or observer or field researcher has to develop?

Jay Lorsch: Yeah, the capacity to listen and not make value judgments too quickly.

Peter Blanck: And, and in a little more detail. What do you mean not make value judgments?

Jay Lorsch: Well I mean, I mean not to try to understand what's going on but not be judgmental about whether it's good or bad. Now you, I think this kind of listening is very much like the psychiatrist or the psychologist, the clinical psychologist. You're really trying to understand another person's point of view without drawing judgments about whether it's good or bad. It enables you to - it encourages people to keep telling you what they feel and think, but importantly, most importantly it enables you to be - by suspending judgment in that way it, in a sense I said more importantly, equally importantly is what I mean, it should help you to get people to tell you what they really think is going on.

Peter Blanck: Are there certain ethical issues? Confidentiality seems to be a major point. How do you - across interviews within the same organization - how do you approach topics of confidentiality or assuring people that what they say won't make a - understanding that the experiment has to be reasonably confident and reasonably understand the issue of ethics, but more generally you're going to go through a series of interviews and build on each one and learn from each one, how can you go through each interview and say, "Well, it's.... I hear that some people in your organization."

Jay Lorsch: Well I, I would never say "I hear." That implies that you've heard from some other place. You can ask the question without saying "I hear" and you certainly don't have to attribute to any other individuals. I mean I certainly - just the standard practice. I would never say "I hear" or "I've been told." I would just ask questions.

Peter Blanck: And you say your question....

Jay Lorsch: And what's to be gained by saying "I hear?"

Peter Blanck: Well, you say something like "I've heard" or "I've seen in your organization that there's a problem in such-and-such area. What's your opinion on this problem?". It may not be blatant - it may not be in, well....

Jay Lorsch: Well I - you may want to do some things like that but then I think you've got to do it in such a way that you're not revealing where the sources of the information are

coming from. And I think that's terribly important to the whole question of building trust. You're not going to get good information unless people feel you're trustworthy.

Peter Blanck: What types of methods do you use besides interviewing methods? Do you think it's good to use a lot of different methods to come up...?

Jay Lorsch: It depends upon what you're trying to do. What kind of information you're trying to get - I think questionnaires have their value. A lot of things have their value if you understand what it is you're trying to do.

Peter Blanck: In your own work, what technique do you use most generally? Does it vary with the problem?

Jay Lorsch: Well, it varies with the problem and it varies with the thing I'm trying to study.

Peter Blanck: Do you want to talk about an example of field research that you're done and say how you'd use different approaches?

Jay Lorsch: Well....

Peter Blanck: A specific problem?

Jay Lorsch: I think it just depends - I mean, it depends so much on what one's trying to get at. I think to go way back to the study we did in Organization and Environment is a good example of multiple methods because we used questionnaires to get at certain kinds of issues, the structure and relationships, but then when we got right down to it, we wanted to try to understand why these differences existed in an organization, we wanted some explanation and then we really found out we had to rely on interviews. I mean getting people to tell us what they did and then comparing what we heard in one organization with what we heard in another organization.

Peter Blanck: How did you learn how to do field research? Through practice?

Jay Lorsch: Through practice. It is the best way to learn.

Peter Blanck: And do you think - well then you just answered the question. Graduate student or doctoral students here....

Jay Lorsch: Well, you can learn. I mean, there's no question. You can take courses and get instructions from people who know how to do it but you've got to go out and practice it. I mean it's not a skill which you can learn in the classroom and then expect to be perfect the first time you go out. I suppose it's like any other complex skill: it requires a lot of training and a lot of experience.

Peter Blanck: And....

Jay Lorsch: And the experience is the important component.

Peter Blanck: Experience being just doing it.

Jay Lorsch: Doing it - yeah. I think it's helpful to do it with somebody who's experienced at it and who can give you some feedback about how well you're doing and things that you may not see yourself.

Peter Blanck: I want to get - we've talked about a lot of the surface issues. But what about the real practical - I want to get a sense across in the film of, if you walk into a guy's office and you see how his desk is arranged or you see what kind of suit he's wearing or if you go to IBM to wear a three-piece suit - how do you gauge your own behavior to what you're trying to find in the culture?

Jay Lorsch: What do you wear to a party or to social engagements? You get some sense of what's appropriate dress and God help you if you're wrong. And the same thing's true in this business. You just have to think a little bit about - if I'm going out into a factory, I wouldn't dress like this. If I'm going to see a banker or something, I wouldn't dress like this either. I would wear a white shirt - but it depends on what you're trying to do.

Peter Blanck: What sort of things do you look for in the environment that tip you off?

Jay Lorsch: Well, you look at how the people were dressed! Simple things: what, how are the formality, the informality, and you just - I mean you - to me, it's like asking how you learn social awareness, social sensitivity. You learn to read a situation. That's what I think you've got to do in this business. You think about how you get inside in the first place.

Peter Blanck: What is the difference - you drew a strong line between consulting and field research. It seems like in field research there has to be this sort of exchange....

Jay Lorsch: Well, the similarity is that there's got to be some trust in both. But the basis of the trust is very, very different and, I mean, the reason for trust. In field research, you're making no commitment to help the other person. You only make a commitment to try to understand that they're making a commitment to really help you by letting you study them and I think the only valid *quid pro quo* is the fact that you're helping me do research and the reward that you're getting for it is some sense of making a contribution to knowledge. Period. In consulting, this contract is very different. I'm there to help you because I know something you don't know. I have some wisdom and I have the power of that wisdom and knowledge, and that gives me a very different relationship with the organization. Then, I have to do some very different things to build trust.

Peter Blanck: In terms of field research, a lot of people would say that you're having a satisfying interview if the person - the interviewee feels that they're getting something out of the interview. Not like in this case, but in....

Jay Lorsch: No. I think that's garbage - I really do.

Peter Blanck: Why is that garbage?

Jay Lorsch: Because I don't think you're really helping people in the sense you are as a - I mean, the consultant is not necessarily helping people in each interview either, right? I don't think that people really - I don't know what they mean by getting something out of the interview, but if you mean to help them to achieve a better understanding of themselves or their situation, I don't think that's necessarily....

Peter Blanck: Making the people feel better about themselves because they get a chance to get things off their chest...?

Jay Lorsch: Well that's different, but that's not help. I mean, everybody loves to talk and loves to feel like they're the center of attention. Too few people too seldom have that opportunity. So, there's no question that that's a motivation for people talking to you, but I think that when you said "help", I was really thinking that you meant that we're going to help people understand themselves, and I don't think that's valid.

Peter Blanck: Have you done any major field research projects recently?

Jay Lorsch: Yeah, I just finished one a couple years ago - I just finished one about a year and a half ago.

Peter Blanck: Do you want to talk about that? And some of the things, briefly, that it involved? What I'm trying to do for the film is to get anecdotal stories in addition to the factual information of what people actually did in the field and what they learned.

Jay Lorsch: Well, we did this - Gordon Donaldson and I did this field study of corporate managers and their processes by which they set corporate financial goals and reach strategic decisions and there's an example where you're really dealing with some very busy people who are under severe limits of time and can - and then you have to really do the best you can to get information as fast as you can and you have to build the relationships very, very quickly. And you really then, I think, are relying very heavily on your position as a professor here and your reputation and the people are coming together - their desire to be helpful is coming together with their respect for you and your reputation.

Peter Blanck: What do you - has that influenced what you'll do in the future in relation to field research projects, or do you have anything...?

Jay Lorsch: No - well, I mean, yeah. It has made me aware of the fact that, to do research at that level, you have to figure out how to do it very quickly with a minimum of time and a maximum of organization, because you don't get access to these people for very much time.

Peter Blanck: It's very different sounding than William Foote Whyte walking around the North End for a couple of years.

Jay Lorsch: You're goddamn right it is. It's a very different kind of process. I mean, you've got to deal with very different individuals who really don't have time - they're living a very busy life and they just don't have time to give you more than an hour or the hour or two they've committed.

Peter Blanck: Now so is there some sort of distinction that's being drawn between this more social anthropological stuff that Bill Whyte and others have done - Peter Blough - and today's field research which is in this rush?

Jay Lorsch: Well, I think that the question is really how valid are the data we're getting in this more rushed environment? It's obviously more up to the interpretation of the people who are telling you that you don't have a chance for first-hand observation. It seems to me you've have to rely much on multiple data points, a number of different people telling you the same thing, either about the individual or about a set of individuals.

Peter Blanck: And do you also observe people - just observe in addition to this?

Jay Lorsch: No, you can't do that with these guys.

Peter Blanck: Why is that?

Jay Lorsch: Because they'd throw you out of their office. I mean I'm talking about very senior presidents and chairmen in large companies. I don't think they're going to let you sit in their office and observe. I mean they don't, first of all - they don't stay, they don't stay put that long. But these are incredibly busy people, I mean they really are.