



Tips for Focus Groups

What is a focus group?

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (CDC, 2008):

A focus group is a group interview of approximately six to twelve people who share similar characteristics or common interests. A facilitator guides the group based on a predetermined set of topics. The facilitator creates and environment that encourages participants to share their perceptions and points of view. Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method, meaning that the data are descriptive and cannot be measured numerically. (p. 1)

Why use a focus group?

- A focus group is a useful way to collect in-depth, subjective information on individuals' thoughts, insights, beliefs, and suggestions on a particular topic. A focus group supplies information that is qualitative, or non-numerical. These qualitative data can be used alone, but are often collected along with quantitative data (a "mixed methods" approach).
- A focus group allows you to include key stakeholders and community members in the process of developing or evaluating a program. Including key members of the community is essential, both because they have valuable input to offer and because their "buy-in" is critical to any initiative's success.

How do I conduct a focus group?

- Decide on the specific purpose and objectives of the focus group.
- Select the interview questions ahead of time and pre-test them with colleagues or community members. Use simple wording and as many "open-ended" questions as possible ("How do you feel about ____" or "What are your thoughts about ____"). Focus groups tend to work best when there are fewer questions. On average, focus groups use 4-5 questions.
- Choose a facilitator, a note taker, and a technician (the note taker and technician may be the same person, if necessary). The facilitator should be a neutral party, or at very least someone who can maintain objectivity while participants express their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs.
- Recruit attendees. Eight to twelve participants is a good number and allows time for each person to contribute. Consider offering an incentive that communicates your appreciation for each person's participation.
- Select a location with a comfortable and inviting space for the number of participants you have invited. Neutral, common spaces often work best.
- Decide the length of time and stick to it. Typically, effective focus groups are between 60 and 90 minutes. Be respectful to participants by ending on time.
- Practice, practice, practice. Facilitating a focus group is an acquired skill. Moreover, each topic and audience requires a different approach and flexibility on the part of the facilitator.



Practicing enhances a facilitator's skills and also helps focus group planners to refine questions and anticipate challenges that may arise.

- A few days before the focus group, call or send participants a note or an email to confirm their participation and communicate logistic information (CDC, 2008; Office of Quality Improvement, 2007).

What makes a focus group facilitator effective?

According to experts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (2007, p. 5), the following are characteristics of effective focus group facilitators:

- Are **comfortable with the content** of the questions asked.
- **Skillfully probe** participants' answers and comments to identify underlying beliefs, reasoning, and experience.
- **React in real time** to the dynamic of a life group and nurture it into focusing productively on the topic of interest.
- Are **compatible with the group** being interviewed.
- Are **impartial** and do not have a reporting relationship with those being interviewed.
- Are **insightful and genuinely interested** in hearing others people's thoughts and feelings.

What do I do with the information gathered from a focus group?

Analyzing the results of a focus group can take a number of different forms. Summarizing what group members have said is an important first step. The summary then may be used to generate action steps. There are software packages available for analyzing transcribed focus group interviews that can be useful, but they can be expensive and time-consuming. Whatever the method chosen, **plans regarding confidentiality and sharing of information (with participants, researchers, or any other audience) must be made clear to all involved parties prior to asking participants for their input).**

References and Resources on Focus Groups:

Barnett, J. *Focus Group Tips for Beginners*. Brian, TX: Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning at Texas A & M. Available at <http://www-tcall.tamu.edu/orp/orp1.htm>.

Center for Disease Control (2008, July). *Data collection methods for program evaluation: Focus groups*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief14.pdf>.

Kiernan, N. E. (2005). *Focus group moderator critique. Tipsheet #73*. University Park, PA: Penn State Cooperative Extension. Available at: <http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/pdf/TS73.pdf>.

Office of Quality Improvement (2007). *Focus groups: A guide to learning the needs of those we serve*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison. Available at http://oqi.wisc.edu/resourcelibrary/uploads/resources/Focus_Group_Guide.pdf.

Rennekamp, R., & Nall, M. *Using Focus Groups in Program Development and Evaluation*. University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. <http://www.ca.uky.edu/AgPSD/Focus.pdf>.