

Using Focus Groups in Program Development and Evaluation

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Surveys and interviews are common methods for gathering information useful for planning and evaluating programs. Recently, however, a group method for gathering such information has become increasingly popular. This method is the ***focus group interview***.

What is a Focus Group?

Focus groups are a special type of group used to gather information from members of a clearly defined target audience. Unfortunately, many people confuse focus groups with a number of other group methods used for collecting information such as town meetings, public forums, nominal groups, advisory councils, hearings, and study circles. These, however, are not focus groups. Nor are committees or task forces charged with carrying out a particular assignment. Rather, a focus group is...

- composed of six to twelve people,
- who are similar in one or more ways, and
- are guided through a facilitated discussion,
- on a clearly defined topic,
- to gather information about the opinions of the group members.

The goal of a focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. Because a group, rather than an individual, is asked to respond to questions, dialogue tends to take on a life of its own. Participants “piggy-back” on the comments of others and add a richness to the dialogue that could not be achieved through a one-on-one interview.

Focus groups arose in the early 1940’s as social science researchers were looking for alternatives to interviewer-dominated methods. One of the first uses of focus groups was to explore morale of U.S. troops during World War II. Later, focus groups were used extensively by the business community as a way to stay in touch with customers. It was not until recently that focus groups were embraced in the academic community.

Uses of Focus Groups

Information gathered through focus groups is used for a wide variety of purposes. A few of these include...

- determining program needs,
- program design,
- pilot testing curricula and products,
- program improvement,
- customer satisfaction,
- organizational development,
- policy making and testing, and
- outcome evaluation.

Again, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of a focus group is to gather information, not to make a decision or complete a task. Focus groups are used to gather the information needed for decision-making or guiding action.

Clarifying Expectations

Even when a focus group appears to be appropriate for the context at hand, it is important to know exactly what is expected from the focus group. What is the purpose of the focus group? What specific kind of information is needed from the group? How will the information be used? The answers to these questions help determine who should be invited to participate in a focus group.

Sometimes a single focus group is not enough. For example, the process of gathering information about the nature of a proposed after-school program might require that separate focus group interviews be conducted with parents, teachers, **and** students. The purpose determines how many focus groups are needed and who should be invited to each one.

Selecting Participants

Members of a focus group should have some characteristic that they share in common. For a focus group conducted with new employees, the common characteristic they share would be "limited years of service with organization." Other characteristics used as criteria for determining focus group membership include occupation, past use of a service, age, gender, family characteristics, or a combination of these.

Even though participants in a focus group are homogeneous in terms of one or two desired characteristics, the group must also include enough diversity in other characteristics to provide an accurate portrayal of the group's collective opinion.

For a focus group of elementary school students it may be seen as desirable to ensure diversity of race, gender, residence, and socioeconomic status. The goal should be to build in enough variation for contrasting ideas but not so much that participants are inhibited and defer to those they perceive to be more experienced or knowledgeable on an issue.

Often members of the target audience are a wonderful source of information regarding the recruitment of focus group participants. They can often provide valuable information about who to invite, the best time and place to hold the focus group, and even insight into what questions to ask of the group.

Getting People to Attend

Occasionally, people avoid using focus groups because they are afraid that the people they invite won't show up. However, by following the steps below, consistently high attendance rates can be achieved.

- Using what is known about the individuals that are to be invited, set an appropriate date, time, and location for the meeting.
- Make personal contacts with potential participants. This is often done through a telephone call or personal visit.
- For those who agree to attend, send a personal letter that confirms their participation and communicates the relevant details of the event.
- Make a reminder phone contact the day before the event.

What Happens at the Focus Group Interview?

Focus group interviews typically last no longer than 90 minutes in length. Many are shorter. In many instances, the actual "interview" is preceded by a snack or light meal. They can be conducted around a large table or with participants seated in a circle of chairs. Participants are typically given name tags to wear. A moderator welcomes the group and asks a series of six to ten open-ended questions. An assistant moderator or recorder takes notes. The discussion is often tape-recorded for later playback. It is important, however, to let participants know that they are being recorded.

Developing Questions for Focus Groups

An important step in preparing for the focus group interview is the development of a set of questions which encourage participants to respond and solicit the information needed from the group. Good questions sound conversational and natural. They are usually short, open-ended, and one-dimensional (they ask only one question at a time).

There are five general types of questions used in focus group interviews. They are typically arranged in the same order as presented below.

- **Opening questions** are used to get people talking and feeling comfortable. They should be easy to answer, but should not emphasize differences among group members.

Example: Tell us your name and how long you have been participating in the program.

- **Introductory questions** are used to get the group to start thinking about the topic at hand. They help focus the conversation.

Example: How was it that you first learned about the program?

- **Transition questions** provide a link between the introductory questions and the key questions. They typically ask participants to go into more depth than introductory questions.

Example: Think back to when you first became involved with the program. What were your first impressions?

- **Key questions** focus on the major areas of concern. The majority of the time is devoted to discussions of these questions.

Example: In what way is your life different because of your participation in the program?

- **Ending questions** bring the session to closure.

Example: Is there anything we should have talked about, but didn't?

The specific order in which the questions are asked is called the questioning route. A good questioning route has an easy beginning, flows logically and naturally from one question to another, and moves from the general to the specific. It is important to estimate the time required to exhaust the discussion on each question. These time estimates can be used to help manage the focus group discussion.

Moderating Focus Groups

Effective moderating requires preparation, mental discipline and skill in facilitating group interaction. But first and foremost, moderators must believe that all participants have something to contribute to the discussion, regardless of their education levels, experiences, or backgrounds. Moderators must listen attentively with sensitivity and try to understand the perspective of each participant. Lack of respect is quickly transmitted to participants and results in reduced contributions.

Here are some characteristics of effective moderators.

- Shows interest in the participants and the environment in which they live.
- Interacts informally with participants before and after the focus group.
- Looks at participants when they are talking.
- Demonstrates active listening techniques.
- Uses non-verbal communication techniques.
- Demonstrates empathy and positive regard for participants.
- Has working knowledge on the topic.
- Restrains from expressing personal views.

One way that a moderator can communicate respect and encourage participation is through the use of an effective introductory statement. The introduction should communicate the purpose for which the group has been assembled, why the participants were selected, the ground rules for participation, and the opening question. Most importantly, the introduction should make the participants feel comfortable and welcome.

Sample Focus Group Introduction

Good morning and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion about the training needs of new employees. My name is John Doe, and I will serve as the moderator for today's focus group discussion. Assisting me is Mary Doe. The purpose of today's discussion is to get information from you about the training needs of new employees during their first year on the job. You were invited because you were hired within the last year. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I am about to ask. We expect that you will have differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. If you want to follow up on something that someone has said, you want to agree, disagree, or give an example, feel free to do that. Don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about these questions. I am here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. We're interested in hearing from each of you. So if you're talking a lot, I may ask you to give others a chance. And if you aren't saying much, I may call on you. We just want to make sure we hear from all of you. Feel free to get up and get more refreshments if you would like. Mary and I will both be taking notes to help us remember what is said. We are also tape recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. We have name tents here in front of us today, but no names will be included in any reports. Let's begin by having each person in the room tell us their name and the county in which they work. (Based on Krueger and Casey, 2000)

Throughout the focus group interview, moderators often use two common techniques to elicit responses from participants who may be reluctant to contribute to the discussion – the pause and the probe.

The pause is simply a period of silence after the question is asked. Although a five-second pause may seem awkward to the inexperienced moderator, it is usually successful in encouraging a response from the group. There is usually some group member who is willing to break the silence.

The probe is simply a question or statement which encourages group members to add to or elaborate on something which was said. Here are some examples of probes.

- Would you explain further?
- Would you give me an example of what you mean?
- Would you say more?
- Is there anything else?
- I don't understand.

As participants speak, effective moderators also use active listening techniques such as a forward lean, head nodding, or short verbal responses, like “go on,” to let participants know that their contributions are welcome. It is important, however, not to communicate a judgment of the participant's contribution by using words like “correct” or “good.”

Data Analysis

Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating or otherwise recombining the “evidence” collected during the focus group to address the initial propositions of the study. The purpose of the study drives the analysis.

There are typically three sources of information that are used in the analysis. First are the assistant moderator's or moderator's notes. The second is memory. The third source is the audio tape-recording of the session, if one was made. Occasionally the tapes are converted to either detailed or abridged text documents called transcripts. Transcripts of tape-recordings, however, are expensive and time-consuming to produce. In lieu of transcripts, an analysis team sometimes listens to the tapes and makes notes of items they failed record during the session.

Analysis of focus group data involves three steps: indexing, management, and interpretation.

- **Indexing** - Involves reading a transcript or notes and assigning codes or “labels” to each piece of relevant information. Often codes are written in margins. The codes or labels link together pieces of text which represent a common viewpoint or perspective related to one of the key questions or central purposes of the study.
- **Management** - Collecting together all of the extracts of text which have been allocated the same code or label. Three management methods are typically used. One method is to cut apart individual responses and use piles to cluster similar extracts. Another method is to use a word processor to “cut” and “paste” extracts. There is also the option of using software specifically designed for analysis of qualitative data.
- **Interpretation** – One technique is analytic induction. This technique involves development of a summary statement which is true of each extract or piece of text in the pile or group. These statements often become key themes which are communicated in reports of the “study.”

After the analysis is completed, a written report of the study is often prepared and discussed with key stakeholders. The report often includes the purpose of the study, description of the procedure used, summary of the findings, and the implications of those findings often presented as recommendations. In the summary of the findings, data is frequently organized around the initial questions which were to be answered by the focus group study. It is typical to discuss several key themes which emerged for each question.

References

Bloor, Michael, Jane Frankland, Michelle Thomas, and Kate Robson (2001). Focus Groups in Social Research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Krueger, Richard A. and Mary Anne Casey (2000). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Stewart, David and Prem Shamdasani (1998). “Focus Group Research: Exploration and Discovery” in Leonard Bickman and Debra Rog, Editors, Handbook of Applied Social Research Methods. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. pp. 505-526.

Checklist for Focus Group Interviews¹

Advance Notice

- _____ Contact participants by phone two weeks (or more) before the session.
- _____ Send each participant a letter confirming time, date, and place.
- _____ Give the participants a reminder phone call prior to the session.

Questions

- _____ Questions should flow in a logical sequence.
- _____ Key questions should focus on the critical issues.
- _____ Limit the use of “why” questions.
- _____ Use “think-back” questions as needed.

Logistics

- _____ The room should be satisfactory (size, tables, comfort, sound, etc.).
- _____ Arrive early.
- _____ Check background noise so it doesn't interfere with tape recording.
- _____ Have name tents for participants.
- _____ Place a remote microphone on the table.
- _____ Place the tape recorder off the table near the assistant moderator's chair.
- _____ Bring extra tapes, batteries, and extension cords.
- _____ Plan topics for small-talk conversation.
- _____ Seat experts and talkative participants next to the moderator.
- _____ Seat shy and quiet participants directly across from moderator.
- _____ Serve food.
- _____ Bring enough copies of handouts and/or visual aids.

Moderator Skills

- _____ Practice introduction without referring to notes.
- _____ Practice questions. Know the key questions. Be aware of timing.
- _____ Be well rested and alert.
- _____ Listen. Are participants answering the question?
- _____ Use probe, pause, or follow-up questions as needed.
- _____ Avoid verbal comments that signal approval.
- _____ Avoid giving personal opinions.

Immediately After the Session

- _____ Check to see if the tape recorder captured the comments.
- _____ Debrief with the research team.
- _____ Prepare a brief written summary

¹Krueger, Richard A. and Mary Anne Casey (2000). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.