

Focus Group Facilitation Guidelines

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Focus Groups

A focus group is a group of ten or more people, led by a facilitator in a group interview format, and brought together to discuss a particular topic or issue. Focus groups provide a forum for an organization to discuss issues and explore subjective matters, such as service expectations, attitudes, feelings and experiences, with their stakeholders.

Key characteristics

Focus groups are usually:

- Held with a group of ten to twelve people
- Participants are homogeneous on the basis for recruitment but unknown to each other
- Led by a facilitator (usually two) in a group interview format
- Of 1 ½ to 2 hours in duration
- Used when largely qualitative information is required
- Produce qualitative data - the goal is not to reach a consensus, solve a problem or make a decision
- Seek to obtain insights into attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and feelings of participants
- Questioning route uses predetermined, sequenced, open-ended questions

Frequently a brief questionnaire is used during the focus group interview as a method of structuring feedback and of obtaining more precise data such as priorities and preferences.

Purposes

Focus groups are appropriate methods to use for:

- Identifying stakeholder needs and expectations
- Obtaining regular 'snap shots' of your stakeholder service
- Testing attitudes to proposed service enhancements or new methods of delivery
- Probing for perceptions and experiences relating to a particular service or service feature
- Obtaining feedback on a recently introduced initiative

- Getting feedback for improvement
- Understanding how stakeholders think
- Identifying key issues that should be addressed in a quantitative survey
- Obtaining more detail about service gaps identified in quantitative research

Advantages of focus groups

Some of the advantages of using the focus group method are:

- They allow probing for more in-depth responses and opinions
- Clarification can be obtained if statements are ambiguous or obscure
- They are flexible and offer the opportunity to go in different directions if desired
- Group discussion allows respondents to build on each other's responses
- Provide real-life data in a social environment
- Flexibility allows changes to be made to future focus groups
- Provide high face validity
- Can generate speedy results
- Can be of low cost

Some disadvantages of focus groups

- They don't provide a representative view of the whole population
- They do not provide quantitative information of statistical significance
- Mainly subjective and qualitative information is obtained
- Unless managed well, the discussion can go in directions that are unproductive
- More articulate individuals may dominate the discussion
- Personal bias—of the facilitator and of the participants—may distort the data
- Some participants may feel inhibited in expressing their opinion

- They take time to conduct, write up and analyze
- Groups can vary considerably
- Groups can be difficult to assemble
- Environment must be conducive to discussion
- Facilitators require special skills
- Data can be difficult to analyze

Planning focus groups

Focus groups require a lot of planning especially if a large number of groups will be conducted. The following steps need to be followed:

1. Determine your purpose in holding a stakeholder focus group

- Keep your attention to one general purpose
- Ensure that focus groups are the best method for addressing this purpose
- Choose appropriate participants for that purpose
- Restrict your focus of enquiry to issues that can be addressed in about 1-1/2 hours

2. Determine focus group scope and process

- Aim for a sampling process, particularly for a large stakeholder population
- This may mean more than one focus group or interview, to obtain the full spectrum of input
- Arrange separate focus groups for sub groups within a larger more diverse stakeholder group
- Ensure that each group has reasonably similar membership, so that all people feel they have the opportunity to contribute
- Determine other elements of the process, such as the exact issues to be addressed, how they will be addressed, the specific nature of the questions to be asked
- Use a standard format so that the findings can be reliably interpreted

- Develop a discussion guide or interview schedule, so that this standard format can be followed
- Plan and design the means by which the results should be recorded, collated, presented, analyzed and communicated
- Choose facilitators who are of sufficient experience and seniority to have the respect of participants
- At the same time, make sure they are people who are familiar with the service, who can interpret feedback accurately and clear up any misunderstandings
- Aim to have two facilitators in a focus group; this has the advantage of allowing you to choose facilitators according to the above criteria. Also, one can conduct the discussion while the other takes notes and acts as backup
- It goes without saying that your preference should be for people with good communication and 'people' skills

3. Consider using a structured questionnaire

There are many advantages to having a structured interview fill-out questionnaire (as opposed to your interview schedule) to use as an interview tool. They:

- Provide opportunities for everyone to participate
- Ensure that you cover all areas, even if some don't come up in discussion
- Allow for more private views to be aired
- Provide some structure
- Allow for more quantifiable information to be collected, through the use of measurement devices such as rating scales

Generally the administration of a questionnaire would occupy a small amount of the total interview time (say 5-10 minutes), and the facilitator would supervise the completion of the forms. Questionnaires should be well designed and administered, to ensure the results are valid and not distorted by poor design or undue influence of the focus group facilitator.

4. Determine how many and which stakeholders should be invited

- Aim to invite people who can give you the highest quality information for the topic you are addressing

- Consider who is likely to obtain most from the interview; they are likely to be the people who are most likely to respond to your invitation (for example, people who frequently use your service are more likely to attend than infrequent users; people who have problems with your service are also more likely to want to come)
- Be aware that results can be distorted because of ‘sampling bias’ (for example, there may be some people who will want to participate because they have a particular line to push or represent a particular interest group; this may not be the best forum for them to have their say, as there is the risk that they may dominate)
- Involve your front line staff and managers in the selection process, as they will have the best ideas on appropriate focus group membership
- Remember you will need to invite more people (at least twice as many, sometimes more) than the numbers you want. Even so, be prepared for fewer or greater numbers than you plan for
- If large groups are involved, you will need to use a sampling approach; consider calling in external experts
- Sampling can be done on a random basis, if the population is uniform, or it could be stratified, if there are variations in that population that warrant the use of sub groups.

5. Determine the times, dates and locations of the focus groups

- Choose a time and venue that are likely to be attractive and appealing for your invitees
- Make sure your arrangements are as convenient as possible for prospective participants, even if they are at some inconvenience to you
- Remember that these people are going out of their way already in giving up their time to assist you
- If participants need to travel, it is appropriate to reimburse their travel costs and to provide adequate refreshments
- Generally refreshments are offered on arrival in all focus groups, but do make sure this doesn’t occupy too much time!
- Sometimes an incentive may need to be offered to encourage participation

6. Invite focus group participants

- Agree a method for inviting focus group participants. Many organizations will issue invitations by telephone and confirm them by mail or email; some will make the first contact by mail

- Ensure invited participants have a clear understanding of the purpose of the focus group and the use to which the findings will be put
- Ensure consent is freely given, based on that understanding
- Always make sure there is some phone contact, preferably initiated by someone known to the participant, to remind people of the details and to answer any questions
- Be aware that many of your stakeholders may not have participated in focus groups and may want some information about what they involve—and particularly what their role is expected to be before they will agree to participate

Conducting focus groups

The actual conduct of focus groups generally follows the sequence outlined below.

1. Preparation

- Ensure the room is comfortable and that the seating allows participants to see and interact with each other
- Select two people to conduct each focus group
- Agree who will take lead interviewing role and who will take notes and keep time
- Provide refreshments on arrival, but make it brief!
- Bring with you a copy of any correspondence to the participants, the interview schedule, copies of any questionnaire used and writing paper
- Ensure you understand each of the service elements in the questionnaire

2. General discussion

- Greet each participant and start the session with introductions
- Open by thanking the group for their time
- Introduce yourselves and group members – quickly!
- Restate the purpose of the focus group, the beginning and ending times, and the respective roles of the two facilitators – i.e. one to manage the discussion and one to take notes

- Outline any ground rules of the session
- Make a clear statement about the confidentiality of the information provided by participants—that no statement made will be attributed to a particular person and no identifying details—about both participants and any people referred to—will be disclosed
- If the group come from the same area, ask them to respect confidentiality too
- Ask if they have any questions before you start. Keep further explanation brief and to the point
- Remind them of the main purpose of the focus group—to collect information about the issue, not to simply have a gripe session or to solve problems
- Explain what will be done with the information after it is collected
- Work through your general questions with the group; encourage discussion but keep the pace moving, to be sure you cover the areas you wish to cover
- Ensure all members to participate, especially about more complex issues; encourage those who talk less to share their thoughts and don't allow one or two members to dominate the sessions
- Ensure all participants have reasonable airspace; invite quiet members to comment
- If there are criticisms of your service, probe for information to better understand the issue and ask how it could be done better
- If necessary explain (briefly) why problems may have occurred and perhaps apologize briefly but don't become defensive, as this will stifle further criticism
- Ensure the discussion is focused on key elements of the service under discussion. If your interview is concluded without having learned about the most important aspects from your client's point of view, it has failed to achieve its purpose. Don't concentrate on one topic at the expense of others.
- If there is specific positive feedback, record it to pass on to the people involved
- If there is a specific problem aired, take notes and follow up later
- If you begin to run out of time, there are several options. (You will need to be sensitive to the atmosphere in order to propose the best option):
 - ask if you can extend the current interview time
 - work quickly through the key questions in the remaining time
 - finish before having all your questions answered
 - allow for follow up feedback to be given – e.g. by email

2. Note-taking

- Both facilitators may take brief notes, but one should have primary responsibility for note taking
- Notes should summarize the key points being made by focus group participants
- Try to record the comments in the appropriate space of your interview schedule so that minimal sorting has to be done later
- Avoid bias; ensure comments are recorded accurately and objectively
- Where there is agreement between several group members on an issue, just tick the comment by the number of people who agreed (even nonverbally) to it
- Record good quotes verbatim, as they can provide a flavor to the report

4. Closure

- Summarize the key issue raised and key points made
- Explain that the focus group records will be returned to them to check for accuracy
- Repeat what actions will be taken as a result of their feedback, and how this will be communicated
- Thank the group for their time and input

5. Follow up

Clean up and clarify your interview records immediately so that they can be understood at the report writing and collating stage.

Responsibilities of the focus group facilitator

The focus group facilitator is clearly the most critical factor influencing the effectiveness and usefulness of focus groups. They conduct the whole session, and guide the flow of group discussion across the specific topics selected. It goes without saying that focus group facilitators need to have particular skills and characteristics. Key amongst these are experience in handling small groups, enthusiasm, self-organization, energy and open-mindedness.

Key tasks of focus group facilitators are to:

- Be clear about the nature and purpose of the focus group they are running
- Prepare well, so that the topics and issues are understood before the focus group begins

- Establish rapport with the group, and set the scene for productive discussion
- Achieve a good balance between encouraging lively discussion and maintaining a focus on the topics to be discussed
- Stay alert to group dynamics, to recognize threats to productive group discussion
- Manage group dynamics so that discussion flows smoothly and people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts
- Stay open-minded themselves so that preconceptions about the topic and the participants are minimized
- Prepare a report that accurately captures the responses of the group
- Maintain confidentiality

Ethical Issues

There are a number of ethical issues that focus group facilitators need to be aware of and to address appropriately. The most important are:

- The voluntary nature of focus groups
- The need to respect confidentiality and anonymity

Consent

No person should be compelled to participate in a focus group, nor should they be made to remain if they want to leave. Consent (in most cases, verbal consent is sufficient) should be obtained from each participant prior to the focus group, and a clear statement of the purpose of the focus group should be provided, to allow prospective participants to make an informed decision. No use should be made of the information provided in a focus group other than for the purpose for which consent was given.

Confidentiality

People who participate in focus groups must be assured that no information will be revealed that can identify them, and that comments they make are not reported (either verbally or in writing) in such a way that specific people or incidents can be identified. People will either not participate in a focus group if they are not given that assurance, or they may distort or suppress information if they feel it is going to be used for other purposes.

In addition to these two key issues, the actual conduct of focus groups requires attention to more subtle matters of ethics. In conducting a focus group, facilitators need to:

- Avoid judging focus group participants by their appearance or other known characteristics
- Treat all people and the comments they make with respect
- Avoid influencing a response by asking leading questions
- Observe confidentiality with focus group discussions so that minimal information is revealed that could be used to identify personal details of focus group participants or any people to whom they refer

Communication skills

There is a set of communication skills that need to be employed in focus groups. The facilitator needs to judge when particular skills are needed.

Nonverbal skills

- Adopt a relaxed open posture
- Listen with your eyes as well as your ears-look at the speaker
- Listen for basic fact and main ideas
- Listen for attitudes, opinions, or beliefs
- Do not interrupt the speaker
- Use positive, non-verbal communication to prompt the speaker
- Be aware of the speaker's non-verbal communication

Active listening

Active listening is a valuable but underused skill. It basically consists of summarizing your understanding of what the other person is trying to say by:

- Repeating key phrases: 'more specific information ..'
- Summarizing messages: 'So, what you're wanting to see here is...'
- Showing empathy: 'It must have been really frustrating'

- Repeat your understanding of their comments in your own words
- Ask the speaker if that is correct and for any clarifications
- Make sure key points by the speaker are captured
- Ask as a check to verify understanding

Use active listening when:

- The person isn't being clear
- You are reacting defensively to what is being discussed
- You want to demonstrate that you understand
- You want to defuse the situation
- You want to sum up what has been said
- You want to elicit more information
- You want to move on

Probing Questions:

In order to gain additional insight into the process, use some of the following types of probing questions:

- **Open probe:** Questions that begin with how, what, which, when, and who. Effective to encourage responsiveness and reduce defensiveness.
- **Compare and contrast:** Questions which ask the other person to look for and discuss similarities or differences, these types of questions help the responder to develop and express ideas while allowing the interviewer to steer the direction of the interview.
- **Extension:** A question that builds on information already provided
- **Clarification:** Questions designed to get further explanation about something already said
- **Laundry list:** Techniques where the interviewer provides a list of choice options to the interviewee. This encourages the other person to see beyond a single choice and to state a preference

Assertion skills

Assertion skills – being clear, firm and respectful – may be called for when a focus group is not going in the desired direction. Key assertion skills are:

- Active listening
- I statements – ‘I’d like to move on...’
- Using appropriate muscle level–low to high
- Selective ignoring–don’t overuse
- Address the process, not just the content–‘We’re going off the track here’

How we react to criticism

Generally we react to criticism by becoming defensive – a natural response to perceived attack. Focus group participants may criticize us, our service or our organization in ways that make us feel defensive. As a result we react by:

- Giving reasons as to why things are the way they are (frequently seen as excuses)
- Not listening
- Reacting angrily

Handling criticism

- Get sufficient information to report the criticism accurately
- Understand the nature of the problem - use open questions, clarifying questions, active listening
- Understand the extent of the problem
- Show concern, empathy
- Indicate willingness to ensure it is fixed
- Don’t attempt to problem-solve

Aim for balance between

- Questions as planned and unexpected directions
- An individual’s desire to tell their story and the need of the group to fully participate in the discussion

- Positive and negative feedback. If an individual has a horror story to tell, you may need to see whether there are more positive stories of the same service
- Emotions—your own feeling response to what is being said—and reason—your professional responsibility to manage the discussion
- Empathy with a participant and bias that prevents you from seeing the situation from another point of view

Remember

If the going gets tough....

- Use your own (very good) judgment
- Tune in to atmosphere of the group
- Two heads are better than one
- Use a combination of listening skills and assertion skills

Preparing a focus group report

Organize input

The feedback from your focus groups should be collated, aggregated (if you conducted any structured questionnaires) and presented in such a form as to make decision-making reasonably straightforward.

More qualitative information, such as that obtained from interviews and focus groups, can be difficult to organize. However, it is important that feedback is documented and presented in a digestible form, otherwise the purpose in holding the discussion has been lost.

Keep in mind that information obtained from focus groups can go through various ‘filters’, depending on how carefully you listened to what was said, how accurately you recorded it, how promptly you developed a more detailed focus group report, and how carefully you then collated all your focus group findings.

Generally a focus group report will consist of summaries of key points made in response to each question. These should be as objective as possible, and should try to capture the mood or response of the whole group. If divergent views were expressed, this should be reflected in the report too. Frequently quotations will help illuminate the general meaning of what was said, though again, quotes should only be used when they reflect a widely held view. Otherwise, the report could be seriously distorted.

Remember that focus group results are qualitative and not perfectly representative of the general population. Care must be exercised in constructing a report for readers and decision-makers who were not there to pick up nuances or differing views.

Once again, the objectives of the focus group project should determine how and for whom the information needs to be reported. As a general rule, numbers and percentages are not appropriate for focus group research and should not be included in report. Reporting should be descriptive and present the meaning of the data as opposed to a summary of data.

- Report participants' words but do not identify them by name
- Describe main participant characteristics
- Use descriptive phrases or words used by participants as they discussed the key question
- Identify themes in the responses to the key questions
- Identify sub-themes indicating a point of view held by participants with common characteristics
- Include a description of participant enthusiasm or other group characteristics if relevant
- If there is inconsistency between participant comments and their reported behaviors, record this
- Suggest new avenues of questioning that should be considered in future: should questions be revised, eliminated, added, etc.
- Summarize the overall mood of discussion
- In giving meaning to the descriptions, be careful about your own biases in interpretation

Communicate your findings

Communicate the results—even an executive summary—to the relevant groups, keeping in mind that the stakeholders who participated in the focus groups should be at the top of your list