

Conducting Focus Groups

Guidelines & Tips

I. Things to Consider When Deciding on a Facilitator(s):

- ◆ **One or more facilitators:** Ideally, two facilitators is helpful especially if you will not be recording the conversation.
- ◆ **Gender:** Just like you should consider the balance of gender of the focus group think about the gender of the lead facilitator.
- ◆ **Peer:** This is something to consider when meeting with a group that may feel uneasy as to whether the facilitator can relate to them.
- ◆ **Language:** Find out if some focus group members speak another language; if so, it may be worthwhile to conduct a focus group with them.
- ◆ **Knowledge/Involvement with topic:** It helps in the memorization of the instrument.

II. Group facilitation skills: Things to consider in being an effective facilitator

a. Kind but firm

- ◆ Disciplined detachment with empathy (e.g., "was that difficult to handle...")
- ◆ Permissive attitude with attention to agenda (e.g., "I want us to continue talking about this but in relation to [next topic here]...")
- ◆ Encourage group leadership while maintaining leadership (e.g., "thank you [name of person] for providing us some detail, what do others think, do you agree...")

b. Permissiveness

- ◆ Be alert to group disintegration (e.g., side conversations)
- ◆ Pursue clues in flow of conversation (e.g., "I want to pause and consider something you all have raised...")
- ◆ Be prepared to cope with unusual opinions and personality clashes (e.g., "thank you [name of person] for providing us some detail, what do others think, do you agree...")
- ◆ Encourage expressions of differences of opinion

c. Involvement

- ◆ Immerse self completely in topics of discussion but not to the level of becoming part of the conversation
- ◆ Encourage and stimulate intensive personal involvement (e.g., identify individuals by name)

d. Encouragement

- ◆ Be aware of unresponsive members & body language
- ◆ Try to break down reserve

- ◆ Address over stimulation or changing directions

e. Flexibility

- ◆ Commit topic outline to memory
- ◆ Be ready to connect topic outline to random conversations

III. The body of the focus group: An effective focus group structure

Beginning the focus group

- ◆ Start out with chatting; give group time to relax and get oriented.
- ◆ Give welcome and make introductions.
- ◆ Set tone as relaxing, informal.
- ◆ Ask everyone to share about their commonality (e.g., school, community, family) [provides an opportunity to speak to each person at least on a well-known topic; can show interest in in-depth replies using probing questions].
- ◆ Give general overview of what you will be doing and the topic.
- ◆ Set ground rules (everyone will have a chance to speak).
- ◆ Encourage focus group participants to define community strengths, resources, challenges and concerns in terms that are as specific as possible.

Pacing

- ◆ Have fixed period of time; enough to build rapport (1 -2 hours)
- ◆ Pace to finish on time
- ◆ Give "weight" to questions to determine time allowed
- ◆ Order questions from easy to hard; logical connection
- ◆ Nonessential (nice-to-know) questions at end
- ◆ Anticipate the flow of the discussion

Responding to participant comments

- ◆ Encourage by questions or active listening to more in-depth answers
- ◆ Watch body language and responses; don't nod or make comments ("Uh huh," "good," etc.)
- ◆ Pause and Probe — these are two essential techniques in conducting focus groups.
- ◆ **Pause for 5 seconds** after a contribution to give others a chance to respond. The 5-second pause most often is used after a participant comment. This short pause often prompts additional points of view or agreement with the previously mentioned position.
- ◆ **Probe when others "just agree."** In most group discussions there is a tendency for people to make vague comments that could have multiple meanings or to say "I agree." When this occurs, the probe is an effective technique to elicit additional information.
 - Suggested probes:

- Would you explain further?
- Would you give me an example of what you mean?

Would you say more?

Is there anything else?

- Please describe what you mean; I don't understand.
- ♦ Be able to recognize beneficial topics of discussion as opposed to dead ends
- ♦ Give license to expressing differing points of view: "Does anyone see it differently?"

Balancing participation

- ♦ Encourage less forward participants.
- ♦ Ask directly to comment.
- ♦ Call on those who "look" like they want to speak.
- ♦ Use Round Robin technique.
- ♦ Don't allow suppressing of others' contributions.
- ♦ Avoid eye contact with dominating pseudo-experts who intimidate others; be direct in asking them to let others express opinion.

Notes and recordings

- ♦ Write ideas on flip chart; put up on wall.
- ♦ Have an assistant write notes (more detailed quotes, etc., and impressions of body language, tone of voice, etc.)
- ♦ Audio-tape session; have good microphone and long tape.
- ♦ Type up flip chart and notes (leave space for notes, i.e., double spaced with wide margins)
- ♦ Listen to audio recording; make comments on typed notes reflecting further insights, feelings, etc.
- ♦ Goal: find out not only what they said but what they "meant."
- ♦ Have several persons review notes and come to a consensus (general orientation for each question , content, process)
- ♦ Use professional judgment in using data.