



MANAGING FOCUS GROUPS

PURPOSE

The purpose of conducting focus groups is to collect information from a small group (for instance, five to 12 participants) in a systematic and structured format. An effective focus group is designed around a clear and specific goal. Participants interact with a facilitator who presents the participants with questions designed to yield insight into current and/or desired results in relation to a specific topic or issue.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT APPLICATIONS

Attaining the information required to complete a needs assessment will oftentimes require that you interview a number of people at the same time. The focus is an opportunity to gain valuable information related both to current results as well as desired results at each level of the program/project results chain. While focus groups can also be used to identify alternative activities to improve performance, during the needs assessment it is important to maintain attention on the collection of information that will help you identify valid needs (i.e., gaps between current and desired results), evidence to support the validation of those needs, and information that will allow you to prioritize needs prior to selecting a course of action for addressing the high-priority needs.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

ADVANTAGES

- Through a focus group format you can "interview" multiple people at one time.
- Focus group discussions allow members of the focus group to build on each other's comments and reactions. This can yield synergy of discussion around topics or themes.
- With a focus group you can help groups of people come to consensus and make challenging decisions (such as, prioritizing needs).

DISADVANTAGES

- Group members may not contribute equally to the discussion in a focus group format. More reserved members may not feel comfortable inserting their contributions in the discussion. Other participants may try to dominate discussions.
- Gaining consensus from the group can be challenging.
- Discussions may take too long to cover all of the relevant topics and to offer everyone a chance to participate.

- Because of the presence of others, participants may not feel comfortable sharing more sensitive information or views.
- Focus group's can easily get "off task" if the facilitator does not maintain structure and control throughout the process.

GENERAL PROCEDURES

1. From the list of information required for the needs assessment, identify those elements that may best be attained through focus groups. For instance, identification of needs, validation of needs, root causes of needs, and/or alternative solutions identification.
2. Prioritize the information requirements for each focus group and use this to create a facilitator's guide or protocol for each focus group.
3. Select a focus group decision-making technique for each focus group. While unstructured focus groups may be useful on limited occasions, more structured techniques are often valuable and can ensure that the focus group provides the information you require for making needs assessment decisions. Here are some sample small group decision-making techniques to consider:
 - a. **Nominal Group Technique:** In response to an open-ended question, participants individually brainstorm and prioritize their own ideas before sharing them with others in the group in a round-robin format where each participant offers their ideas or opinions. After discussion the group members anonymously vote on the prioritization of the ideas listed by the group members.
 - b. **DACUM:** Uses groups of six to eight high-performing experts to describe the frequently performed duties and tasks (as well as connected knowledge and skills) associated with a given occupation, job, or role within an organization. The DACUM technique is most often used with focus groups when the decision has been made that a learning activity (or training event) is going to be one of the performance intervention included in the set.
 - c. **Critical Incident Technique:** In their responses to focus group questions, participants are asked to provide past events as examples. Each event should include a description of the conditions or context for the event, the people involved in the event, the place of the event, and the associated activities or behaviors of people in the event. The focus of the discussions is then on previous incidents related to the topic rather than speculations and generalizations.
 - d. **SWOT:** Focusing on the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats can guide the discussion of a focus group. Further, SWOT items can then be assessed for the relative amount of "control" the group has over the item and the relative "impact" of the item in order to prioritize.
 - e. **Delphi technique:** Although Delphi is not a technique often used in focus groups it is valuable tool in preparing for a focus group or community meeting. The technique reaches consensus by asking a small group of experts on the topic to give their input through a survey. Results of the survey are then tabulated and re-circulated to the experts for additional input and prioritization.

Several rounds of surveys may be required in order to reach consensus among the experts on the prioritized topics that should be address in the focus group or community meeting.

- f. **Brainstorming:** This technique can be used to quickly generate new ideas or to identify and consider alternative solutions to a given problem. To initiate a productive brainstorming session, identify the specific topic that you would like group members to concentrate on. Introduce the topic, and encourage group members to brainstorm freely for a given amount of time. Encourage "on-the-spot" thoughts and ideas. Record all contributions from group members (it is helpful to record these thoughts in a format that is visible to all group members, such as an LCD-projected concept map or word processing document). Categorize and combine ideas under overarching headings. Analyze and evaluate the ideas with the group and prioritize them in terms of their "usability" in the needs assessment.
 - g. **Straw Polls:** An informal voting method that can be used to quickly probe opinions of participants. Straw polls give all participants the chance to give their opinion through a response such as a "yes" or "no" to a question. It is important to recognize that straw polls are not generally considered to be binding, official votes. Instead, they are used to get a sense of the "pulse" of a group in relation to a specific issue or theme, and/or to orient the subsequent discussion. Straw polls can be used effectively in situations where there is a long list of ideas, and you want the group members to eliminate ideas that have little or no support. Using the straw poll approach, you can let each group member choose a given number of items from the list for inclusion or elimination.
 - h. **Round Robin Reporting:** This technique can be implemented in at least two different ways, both of which are based on you having a specific question or suggestion. One approach is to share the question/suggestion with all the group members, and to ask each of the group members to write down their ideas in relation to the question/issue. You then go around the group, with each person taking turns to share one idea from their list. You continue this process of going around the room until nobody has any ideas left to share. Another approach is to share the question/suggestion with the group, and then ask each person to give their reactions and ideas in relation to the question/suggestion you presented. In both formats, the round robin approach allows each group member to share equally in the group process, thereby ensuring that no one person dominates the discussion.
4. Create a facilitator's guide or protocol to guide each focus group. Ensure that required information regarding both the current results and the desired results of the needs assessment are represented, along with the required information at each level of the program/project results chain.
 5. Locate an experienced facilitator if possible. Using an experienced focus group facilitator will generally lead to better results than if you facilitate the group yourself; though you may want to be present as a note taker during the focus group in order to capture some of the data first hand.

6. The facilitator can use the facilitator's guide or protocol to generate a few specific questions that can be used to open the discussion in the focus group (he/she can also consult the information on current and desired results based on the needs assessment to come up with these questions).
7. Schedule a time for the focus group when the highest priority participants are all available. Verify that you have both a focus group facilitator and a person to take notes during the meeting available at the scheduled time.
8. Implement the focus group session. Allow the facilitator to manage the focus group process. If you serve as note-taker for the focus group, avoid being tempted to interrupt the group. You are simply there to record data and observe the focus group.
9. Immediately after the focus group has ended the facilitator and note-taker should verify that all of the essential information from the group has been captured in a written document.
10. If appropriate, run several focus groups. This ensures that you gather enough information for the needs assessment.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Have a clear and specific goal for the focus group.
- Create a survey to be given out to participants in order to capture information that may not be discussed in the focus group due to time limitations.
- Carefully present each of your questions to the group, and allow the group members a couple of minutes to think about the question and record their answers.
- Complete a test-run of the focus group in order to identify potential problems, changes to questions, or additional materials that should be available to participants.
- After a question has been answered, and before moving on to the next question, verbally report back a summary of what you heard. This confirms for the group members that they communicated what they intended to, and allows them to make any suggestions for adjustments in the event that their thought(s) was not accurately represented.
- Don't be afraid to ask participants to leave if they are not willing to let others in the focus group participate. After all, the goal of the focus group is to gain multiple perspectives on the issues.
- If you are going to video or audio tape the focus group be sure to get the consent of all participants. Communicate to the group members what will be done with the video/audio recording of the session (e.g., who will get to listen to it, how it will be stored, how long it will be stored, etc). Such issues have consequences for how open the group members feel to sharing their true opinions rather than those that they think you (or the organization) will want to hear.
- Write down any observations that you made during the focus group. For example, note if the audio/video equipment failed, if something unexpected took place, etc. These notes may help elucidate comments when you analyze the data that you gathered through the focus group.
- Plan for the focus group to take between 40 minutes and three hours of time.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Witkin, B.R., & Altschuld, J.W. (1995). *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Sage Publications, Inc.

WEB SITES

Small Group Techniques

<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/smlgroup.htm>

The Focus Group Interview and Other Kinds of Group Activities guide

http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Focus.pdf

Focus Groups-A Needs Assessment Tool

<http://www.joe.org/joe/1992spring/tt2.html>

Brainstorming Process:

<http://www.businessballs.com/brainstorming.htm>