

Organizing and Conducting Focus Groups

What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a structured conversation used to obtain in-depth information from a group of people about a particular topic. The purpose of a focus group is to collect information about people's feelings, values, and ideas, not to come to consensus or make a decision. Focus groups are often used as a planning tool when developing a new program or service, or as a way to get feedback on specific topics.

A focus group is a good data collection option when . . .

- You are considering the introduction of a new program or service.
- Your main concern is with depth of opinion or shading of opinion, rather than simply with whether people agree or disagree.
- You want to ask questions that cannot easily be asked or answered on a written survey.
- You want to supplement the knowledge you can gain from written surveys.
- You want to obtain information about relevant questions to include on a survey.
- You know or can find someone who is an experienced and skilled group leader.
- You have the time, knowledge, and resources to recruit a willing group of focus group participants.
- You are conducting formative research and want to get feedback from a target audience about a product or service that is being developed.¹

Focus groups should not be the first step in a data gathering process. Focus groups are used after completing formative research on the topic such as a literature review or a few key informant interviews. Focus groups will help you confirm what you have learned, and also obtain more detailed and in-depth information.

A focus group always has a facilitator whose role is to guide the conversation, making sure all opinions are heard and keeping the group from wandering too far from the topic. The facilitator should have a clear goal in mind for the discussion, and a structured set of questions to use to guide the conversation and reach the intended goal. Focus groups usually run 1-2 hours.

Who Attends a Focus Group?

Focus groups should have between 7-10 participants. Focus groups work best when they have enough people to have a good discussion, but not so many that the discussion takes too long or people get left out.

In order to create a safe environment where every participant feels comfortable voicing his or her opinion, consider factors such as occupation, socio-economic status, age, status in the community and, in some cases, gender, when putting together a target list of participants. The idea is to minimize cultural or status issues that may act as obstacles to free and open discussion. For example, if the purpose of the focus group is to get feedback on a new clinical training program for health care providers, you may want to have one focus group with nurses, another focus group with physicians, and a third focus group with hospital administrators and managers. Participants usually feel more comfortable expressing their opinions when they are in a group of their peers.

Be especially careful to protect the privacy of your focus group members. Ensure participants know what kind of personal information will be shared with the group (if any). For example, in a focus group discussion about challenges to providing quality HIV services, is it important for participants to know each other's occupation and workplace? Can participants speak freely about issues at their workplace without fearing disciplinary action if word gets back to their supervisors? If the focus group's purpose is to discuss criteria for quality care from the perspective of people living with HIV/AIDS, do participants agree to have their HIV+ status known to other people in the group? These are the types of questions the focus group organizers must answer ahead of time.

Advantages and Disadvantages of a Focus Group

There are many ways to collect the data and information you need from a group of people, so make sure a focus group is a good fit for your needs before you start planning.

Focus groups provide a depth of information that is difficult to get from a one-on-one interview or a survey because you have a group of people with potentially diverse perspectives listening to each other and participating in the discussion. Participants generate discussion by building on each other's comments and ideas. In an interview, the facilitator asks questions about areas that he/she thinks are important. In a focus group, topics might emerge that the facilitator did not think of, but that are relevant to the subject of the focus group. The facilitator triggers discussion, but the conversation among participants often brings out additional concerns and ideas.

Focus groups generally take more logistical effort than individual interviews and require a highly skilled facilitator to obtain meaningful data.

Advantages of a Focus Group²

- Reveal a range of opinions on a topic.
- Help to clarify or validate information learned from individual interviews, surveys, or other data collection methods.
- Can lead to exciting insights and new information for both facilitators and for group participants.
- Are often enjoyable for the participants as they provide both a networking opportunity as well as an opportunity to voice an opinion.

Disadvantages of a Focus Group

- Generally do not provide findings that are "generalizable," meaning that you cannot assume that the results reflect the beliefs or opinions of a total population.
- May be time-consuming and difficult to organize.
- Individuals in the group may be swayed by the opinions of others or may not feel comfortable voicing their true opinions in a group.

Tips for Organizing a Focus Group

Start well in advance. Attending a focus group will require participants to take a few hours out of their day. Since a focus group takes place on a specific date and time, advance notice is needed to ensure that your participants are available.

Dedicate adequate staff time to recruit participants. It can be difficult to find participants for focus groups, so assume that you will need to use a variety of methods for recruitment. Start with a letter or e-mail, and then follow

up with phone calls or other more personalized contact to confirm attendance. If you are trying to recruit a hard-to-reach population, such as people living with HIV/AIDS, try identifying potential participants through community partners, or individuals with established and trusted relationships in the community.

When recruiting participants, make sure you are clear about why you want their opinion and the importance of the discussion. Also, because the term “focus group” may not be understandable or appealing to all audiences, you may want to consider calling the gathering a “group discussion.”

Find appropriate space. A comfortable and suitable space can improve the focus group discussion. It is best if the participants face each other, either sitting in a circle or around a conference table, so that they can easily interact with each other. Classroom seating or auditoriums do not make good focus group spaces.

Provide incentives for participation. Drinks and snacks should be provided for the focus group participants. This will make them more comfortable, show them that you are grateful for their participation, and keep hunger or thirst from distracting them during the conversation. Most focus group organizers also provide a cash stipend to participants. Providing a cash stipend shows that you value the participants’ time and opinions. It may also help facilitate recruitment.

Identify a good facilitator. Finding an experienced facilitator is the most important thing you can do to ensure good results from your focus group. The facilitator will guide the conversation by asking questions, probing respondents to clarify answers, keeping the group on topic, and making sure that everyone is heard. These skills take practice, so make sure your facilitator has run focus groups in the past.

Identify a good note taker. The note taker plays a vital role in a focus group discussion. The note taker must capture as much accurate detail from the discussion as possible and note participant comments, group dynamics, and interesting shifts in conversation. While it is best to make a tape recording of your focus group to make sure there is a complete record of what was discussed, it is still important to have a note taker present. Both the note taker and the facilitator should sit down immediately after the focus group and write down as much detail as they can remember from the conversation while it is still clear in their minds.

Set group ground rules. Always start the focus group by setting group ground rules. Ground rules help build trust among participants and give the facilitator rules to use if someone is dominating the discussion or not respecting others’ opinions. Some common ground rules include:

- Respect the privacy of others in the group by not repeating what is discussed outside of the focus group.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Respect the opinions of others — don’t put down or criticize others’ comments.
- Give everyone an equal chance to participate in the discussion.

Developing a focus group discussion guide. A focus group discussion guide should be developed in advance by the facilitator to outline the flow of the questions and topics to be covered during the focus group. The focus group discussion guide should include key topics and issues to be addressed but should not limit the discussion. A key purpose of focus group discussions is to generate ideas or reveal sentiments that were not predicted ahead of time. The facilitator should build extra time into the discussion guide to pursue topics of interest that are raised by participants during the discussion.

Building a relationship between the facilitator and participants, as well as between participants, is important to encourage good conversation. Start the focus group with participant introductions, and a description of the

purpose and format of the focus group. The first topic or question should be one that is non-threatening and will be relatively easy for everyone in the group to answer before moving to more difficult, specific, or potentially controversial topics and questions.

Good focus group questions are open-ended, meaning they cannot be answered with just a “yes” or “no” reply. Open-ended questions often begin with “how,” “what,” or “why.” Good questions also avoid leading participants towards a particular answer. Include possible probes in the discussion guide to help the facilitator focus the conversation or redirect the conversation if participants are moving off topic.

Four Primary Stages of a Focus Group³

1. Introduction (approximately 10 minutes)

Facilitator provides an overview of the goals and purpose of the discussion. Participants introduce themselves.

2. Rapport building stage (approximately 10 minutes)

Facilitator asks questions that are easy for participants to answer to start the talking and sharing.

3. In-depth discussion (60 – 90 minutes)

Facilitator starts asking questions related to the main purpose of the focus group, encouraging conversation that reveals participants' thoughts and feelings. This is where the key data are collected.

4. Closure (approximately 10 minutes)

Facilitator summarizes the impressions or conclusions from the discussion, and participants clarify and confirm the information. Facilitator answers any remaining questions from participants. Facilitator thanks the participants and indicates next steps.

Tips for Facilitating a Focus Group

The facilitator's role is very important to the success of a focus group. The facilitator is responsible for leading the discussion, keeping the group on track, and making sure everyone has a chance to participate. Following are some tips to help with successful facilitation:

Encourage discussion. The facilitator should maintain a warm and friendly attitude throughout the focus group. Be careful not to judge what participants are saying either through verbal response or body language. Establish eye contact with participants to encourage them to speak. If a participant gives a vague answer, probe with questions like “Could you say a little more about that?” or “Would you give me an example of what you mean?”

Keep the group focused. If the group is getting too far off the topic, remind the group of the original question by summarizing the responses and then repeating the question. If the group is finding the question difficult to answer, rephrase the question before repeating it.

Keep individual participants from dominating the conversation. If specific individuals are dominating the conversation, it is the facilitator's job to gently but firmly make sure others have an opportunity to participate. Try avoiding eye contact with dominant participants if they are speaking for too long. Remind the group that everyone's opinion is important. Acknowledge the response of the dominant participants and then redirect the conversation

by directly asking other participants for their opinions. “Thank you, Nurse Y for that contribution. I’d like to hear from others in the group about their opinions. Nurse K, what do you think?”

Encourage shy participants to contribute. Some participants need extra encouragement to feel comfortable giving their opinions. Making eye contact with quieter participants will help encourage them to participate in the discussion. Gently ask quieter participants for their opinions during pauses in the conversation by addressing them by name.

Be aware of group pressure. If the group is agreeing to a specific opinion without much discussion or debate, group pressure may be keeping some participants from voicing a differing opinion. The facilitator can probe for alternate views from the group by raising another issue or specifically asking for other opinions. “That is an interesting viewpoint. Let’s also explore some alternatives.”

How to analyze focus group data

Focus groups generally produce a large quantity of qualitative data that should be analyzed by someone with experience and skills in qualitative analysis. In general, focus group data should be analyzed for themes, trends, and frequently cited or strong opinions. The range and diversity of participant experiences, perceptions, and expressions should also be considered in the analysis. Here are a few strategies to make sure your analysis provides you with accurate information to use to make future decisions.

Compile all the data in one place. First make sure you have all the focus group data in one place. Include transcriptions of all the focus groups as well as any summaries or other notes from the note taker and the facilitator.

Complete analysis as soon as possible after the focus groups. Focus group analysis should happen as quickly as possible after the conclusion of the focus group since memory of the group and the context of the discussion will fade over time.

Work with a team of people to analyze results and determine themes. Each person who reviews the focus group data will have his or her own interpretation of key themes. Having more than one person involved in analyzing the data helps to avoid bias. After all reviewers have reviewed the data and identified themes, meet as a group to discuss the data and to come to agreement on the key themes. Discuss alternate explanations or interpretations of the data with the group to make sure that your themes are accurate and supported by the data.

Focus the analysis on key questions. Summarize responses for each question and then attempt to summarize the discussion. If multiple focus groups were conducted, read the responses from each focus group for each question or topic, and then write a summary indicating where there were differences in opinions between focus groups. Not all questions deserve analysis at the same level. For example, the first few questions are often designed to put participants at ease or to set the stage for the primary areas of concern. Responses to these types of questions should be reviewed, but the analysis should concentrate on areas of critical concern.

Comparing and contrasting comments is often a highly productive analytic technique in analyzing focus group data. Do different focus groups tend to emphasize different themes in their discussions? Was there a level of intensity expressed on some key issues, and was this shared among group members? Is there extensive variation of viewpoints among the participants in each focus group, and does there seem to be any guiding principle of this variation? Do individual participants seem to change their perspectives during the focus group, and if so, what seems to have triggered that change? Were there some expected themes that did not emerge in some focus groups, but were paramount in others?

Consider the context of comments. It is easy to take comments out of context when reviewing focus group data, especially when taking quotes from participants to support a point or a theme. Make sure that you are considering each statement and opinion in the context of the overall discussion. The context should also be informed by any notes on body language, gestures, and tones of voice that were noted by the facilitator or note taker.

1. Adapted from *The Community Toolbox. Conducting Focus Groups*. Available at: http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub_section_main_1018.htm. Accessed on April 26, 2006.
2. Adapted from Bekemeier, Betty and Johnson-Conley, Christina. *Using Focus Groups for Community-Level Data Gathering: A Primer*. Unpublished.
3. Academy for Educational Development. *A Skill-Building Guide for Making Focus Groups Work*. Washington, DC: 1995.

Resource List

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Acknowledgments

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About I-TECH

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