

# HOW TO CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS FOR DATA COLLECTION



## WHAT is a focus group?

A **focus group** is essentially a group interview or small group discussion run for the purpose of collecting data to guide future action. It is a type of qualitative research in which the interviewer (aka moderator) asks a group of people about their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, or experiences. The moderator asks questions in an interactive group setting where participants are encouraged to talk with each other as well as with the moderator.

## WHY use a focus group to collect data?

Focus groups offer the opportunity to go deeper and add detail and variety to a dataset – much more than would be obtainable with surveys. Focus groups allow a moderator to ask probing questions (e.g., can you say more about that?) when participants respond to questions. Focus groups can potentially produce *a lot* of information in a short time. They are a good way to gather in-depth information about participants' thoughts, feelings, experiences or opinions on a specific topic.

## HOW do you run a focus group?

### BEFORE:



#### 1.) Set a goal.

Think: "WHY are we conducting a focus group? WHAT do we hope to learn?" "HOW will it help us answer our research or evaluation questions?"



#### 2.) Find a note taker.

The note taker should write down what is said, similar to taking minutes at a meeting, but with much greater detail. The ideal is for someone to be able to record *exactly* what each person says (or capture as close as possible). Alternatively, you can record electronically (with the group's permission). This will take more time however, for someone to transcribe the recording, but you will have a more complete, accurate, and permanent record of what was said.



#### 3.) Carefully plan who will form the focus group.

WHO should be invited? People who represent the larger group of those whose thoughts you need to answer research or evaluation questions should be asked to participate. The ideal size for a focus group is about 5-8 people. Consider whether you may have people from different levels of an organization in the room together (e.g., managers and those they supervise) and whether that would enhance or detract from the goal and topic.



#### 4.) Obtain consent.

Be open and transparent about how data will be collected (Will there be a note taker in the room? Audio recording? Video?), who will have access to raw data, and how it will be used, reported and disseminated. At the very least, obtain verbal permission after sharing these details. You can also use a basic letter of consent that participants sign. Samples are easy to find. A basic letter of consent outlines the nature and purpose of the overall study and of the focus group, and indicates how data will be shared and with whom.



### 5.) Prepare the topic for discussion and some specific questions in writing.

This will be your focus group protocol or guide. Below are examples of generic questions. The exact language and question order you will use depends on your topic and group.

- "What are your thoughts on this?"
- "Are you satisfied with the current situation?"
- "What are you satisfied with? Why is that?" (Or, "What's going well...?")
- "Is there anything you are not satisfied with, or that you would like to see changed?" (Or, "What's not going well...?")
- "What are you dissatisfied with? Why is that? What would you like to see happen?"
- "How about this aspect of ...? What do you think about that?"
- You may want to repeat some questions for different aspects of the topic, with some variations in question wording. Here are more examples:
- "Some people say that one way to improve is to do ... Do you agree?" (Or, "How do you feel about that?")
- "Are there other suggestions or recommendations you would like to make?"
- "Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish?"



### 6.) Prepare a set of generic "probes" or follow-up questions you can use to elicit more information from participants on a given question.

Of course, your actual probes will follow from what participants say. Here are examples of generic probes:

- "Can you say more about that?"
- "What do you mean by ...?"
- "Can you give me an example?"
- "How about you [call a participant by name]?" Or, "How about someone on this side of the table? Do you have anything you would like to share?"
- "Would anyone else like to add to what we've heard so far?"



### 7.) Consider incentives.

While not necessary, it is nice to provide basic refreshments for participants. Incentives such as books, gift cards, or passes/fee waivers to events (such as professional learning courses) can help garner participation from potential respondents.

### DURING:

Create a comfortable environment, so that participants feel free to talk openly and give honest responses. Encourage participants to express their own opinions in response to questions posed by the moderator, but also invite them to respond to other participants as appropriate.

A focus group often goes something like this, where the moderator will:

- **Welcome and thank participants** for attending.
- **Review the purpose** of the focus group, and what you hope to learn from them.
- **Go over the meeting agenda** -- how things will proceed, and how everyone can participate.
- **Set a few ground rules or group norms.** Usually this includes agreements to speak one at a time (easier to record) and to keep the focus group conversation confidential.

- **Start with an opening question.** This should be a very easy general question such as "What are your general feelings about X?" but could also be more specific.
- **Move through all questions** as time permits.
- Before closing the session, **ask if anyone has any other comments to make.** This can be an effective way of gathering additional opinions that have not yet been discussed (e.g., "Before we close, is there anything else that we didn't discuss today that you would like to share about this program/topic?").
- **Tell participants about any next steps** that will occur, and what they can expect, if anything (e.g., will they see a final report for the program or otherwise get to learn results and how their input was used?).
- **Remind participants about their agreement of confidentiality, and thank them again** for their participation.

### AFTER:

- **Read through the notes** taken. If the focus group was recorded, make a transcript.
- Try to **"code" the notes.**
  - What patterns do you see?
  - What are some common themes?
  - What new questions arise for you?
  - What conclusions might you draw?
- It's a nice gesture to **share results** with the group.
  - They gave you their time. The least you can do is to give them feedback.
  - This can be done in person or electronically.
  - Consider whether to assemble the group for another session to review results, verify the accuracy of your findings, or dig even deeper to explore some of the themes that emerged.

**Bonus:** Perhaps participants have now become more interested in the issue or program, and would like to contribute or become involved in news ways. Consider offering opportunities for this. In this way a focus group, can also serve as a way to recruit people.

### POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

**Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.** Not everyone has to ring in on each question, but each person should have the opportunity to do so if they wish. Common strategies to encourage participation (especially in those moments when no one is speaking) include:

- Summarize what participants have said so far, and ask if the group agrees.
- Rephrase some questions in a different way to elicit more responses.
- Ask if anyone else has anything to add to what others have said.
- Ask follow-up questions.

Make brief eye contact with each participant over the course of the session, especially with quieter participants; it's OK to call on specific people and ask if they would like a chance to share.

**The moderator's job is to NOT to judge.** All opinions should be received and respected. Thank participants for sharing, but don't add your own judgement, even if you like or agree with the response – e.g., Avoid saying "that's good!" or "I agree!"

Though you may feel uncomfortable **interrupting or redirecting certain respondents,** there are times where the group needs you to do just that to keep moving forward and have enough time to accomplish the objectives. Have a few phrases you can use to gently redirect a participant. Ex. "Great information, but I want to make sure everyone has a chance to share" or "Thanks for that. I'd like to hear some other perspectives now." "I appreciate that, thank you. I need for us to move on now."