



Hosting a Focus Group

Description:

This tool provides an overview of focus groups, a step-by-step guide to conducting a focus group, a template, and a checklist.

How it can be used:

Focus groups are a good way to gather in-depth thoughts, perceptions, and opinions on a topic from a small number of people. They can be used in many different contexts to engage with stakeholders. It is important to be prepared when conducting focus group to ensure that participants feel safe and you gather the information you need.

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a small-group discussion (six to twelve people) guided by a trained moderator. It can be an effective way to collect participants' perceptions and experiences on a designated topic. The group's composition and discussion should be carefully guided to create a non-threatening environment, so that participants feel free to talk openly and give honest opinions.

Focus groups are structured around a set of carefully predetermined questions – fewer is better, a good number is less than five. Ideally, participant comments will stimulate others and encourage the sharing of perspectives.

Key principles

Whether this is community-based or a more formalized research process, there are some key principles:

1. Voluntary Participation – Individuals agree to participate in the process of their own free will. A consent template is included in this tool.
2. Confidentiality – All personal information must be kept confidential and not shared with anyone not included in the process. This also includes any information that would identify who participated in the focus group. All information that is shared must be cleared of any identifiers.

Preparing to conduct a focus group

Be clear on the purpose of the focus group.

What do you hope to learn from this process? The value of a focus group is to gather perspectives from a small group of people on a particular situation or initiative.





Decide who should be invited.

Focus groups should include six to twelve participants. Fewer than six means that you might not get enough diversity to create a good conversation. More than twelve gets too big and voices may get lost. If you need to hear from more people in a certain group (e.g., Elders), then consider hosting two or more focus groups.

Ideally, you should seek a *representative sample* of participants. You might “over-invite” as there are often no-shows (but not more than 15 participants). Contact each one to give them the time and location of the focus group and get their verbal confirmation.

Develop your questions.

There are three types of focus group questions:

- Engagement questions which help participants become comfortable with the topic;
- Exploration questions which help get to the meat of the discussion;
- Exit question which check to see if anything was missed in the discussion.

Focus group questions should be:

- Short and to the point, focused on one aspect each;
- Clearly worded;
- Open-ended (not worded so they can answer with a “yes” or “no” answer);
- Non-threatening and not embarrassing.

Encourage participation.

Consider offering an incentive to participate such as a gift certificate. You can also reduce barriers to attending by offering:

- Evening or weekend focus groups for those who work during the day
- Transportation
- Child care services
- Interpreter services

Provide preparatory information.

Inform participants of the length of the focus group (generally about one and half to two hours). Give them a starting time that is 15 minutes prior to the actual start of the focus group to allow for filling out consent forms, having a bite to eat, and settling in to the group.

Find a good moderator.





This is important as this person will determine the success of your focus group. Depending on the situation, you might consider looking for someone outside your organization, someone that specializes in facilitating these kinds of groups. Consider seeking a moderator that:

- Has experience facilitating groups;
- Knows something about the topic;
- Has good listening skills;
- Is sensitive to community issues.

Moderator responsibilities include:

- Keeping participants focused, engaged, attentive, and interested;
- Monitoring time and using time effectively;
- Using prompts to stimulate discussion;
- Ensuring all necessary topics are covered;
- Enforcing ground rules politely and diplomatically;
- Making sure everyone participates in the way they are comfortable;
- Limiting side conversations.

Find a recorder or note-taker.

This is often neglected but is very important. Arrange for this in advance. Recorder/note-taker responsibilities include:

- Bringing the materials for recording or taking notes;
- Recording major themes, ideas, comments and observations;
- Remaining an observer, not a participant.

Prepare the logistics.

Arrange for a comfortable room, with a door for privacy and tables and chairs. Often a circle is used. Arrange for food and beverages. Have flipcharts and/or whiteboard if necessary.


Conducting a focus group

As people arrive, greet them and have them sign the consent form (if it hasn't already been done). Begin with an icebreaker to relax the group. Thank people for coming and review the purpose of the focus group. Explain how the meeting will proceed.

Introduce the moderator and note-taker. Establish ground rules or group norms such as:

- Only one person talks at a time.
- Confidentiality is assured. "What is shared in the room stays in the room".
- Everyone's ideas and opinions are valuable and respected.



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- There are no right or wrong answers.
 - Cellphones are to be put away.
 - Ensure all acronyms are explained.

These may be displayed on a flip chart in a clearly visible location. Consider inviting participants to establish their own ground rules or guiding principles for the discussion.

The moderator has a responsibility to adequately cover all prepared questions within the time allotted. It is important that all participants talk and fully explain their answers. Some helpful probes include:

- *“Can you talk about that more?”*
- *“Help me understand what you mean”*
- *“Can you give an example?”*

The moderator must be neutral and tactfully deal with challenging participants. Here are some strategies that can be used:

- Self-appointed expert: *“Thank you. What do other people think?”*
- The dominator: *“Let’s have some other comments.”*
- The rambler: Stop eye contact; look at your watch; jump in when they stop to take a breath.
- The shy participant: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.
- The participant who talks very quietly: Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.

When all the questions have been asked, ask if anyone has any other comments to make. Tell participants about any next steps. Give out the honorarium/incentive (if relevant) and thank the group for coming.

After the focus group

1. Create a written summary of the focus group. Do this quickly after the focus group to help avoid memory lapses.
2. Analyze the summary. Start for reading all the notes. Did any patterns or trends emerge? Were there any surprise or unexpected comments that arose? Remember that context and tone can be as important as the actual words. What are the common themes?
3. Write the report. Include all information about the background and purpose of the focus group, and the key results and conclusions.
4. Translate the results into action. This can be where the value of a focus group gets lost. People have invested their time and feelings as they’ve shared their perceptions, don’t let them down. Follow up with participants by sending them the summary with a thank you note. Also remind them of how the information was or will be used.





Templates

Focus Group Checklist

Remember to bring the following:

- Writing utensils (include extras for participants to sign consent forms)
- A notepad with sufficient paper for taking notes during the entire focus group
- Script or questions
- Flip chart(s), markers, and tape for attaching flip charts to the wall, as needed
- List of participants
- Name tags or badges
- Note taking form (if note-taking)
- Refreshments
- Consent forms (enough copies for all participants)

Consent to Participate in Focus Group Study

I consent to take part in a focus group about *(insert topic of focus group)*. The purpose of the group discussion and the nature of the questions have been explained to me.

My participation is voluntary. I understand that I am free to leave the group at any time. If I decide not to participate during the discussion, my decision will in no way affect the services that I receive.

None of my experiences or thoughts will be shared outside of this process unless all identifying information is removed. The information that I provide during the focus group will be grouped with answers from other people so that I cannot be identified.

Please Print Your Name

Please Sign Your Name

Date

