

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

The value of a focus group is that it invites an opportunity for individuals to formulate thoughts and opinions in a safe environment. While written surveys are of value in some circumstances, they do not offer the same opportunity to listen and learn how the individuals feel. Focus groups can reveal both information and deep insight. Focus groups must be well facilitated and carried out in a comfortable environment that puts those interviewed at ease to thoughtfully answer questions in their own words. What follows are key steps in planning, executing, and documenting a quality focus group.

STEP 1: ESTABLISHING PURPOSE

- What is our goal?
- Why is this important?
- How will the information we learn today be used?

Craft a brief script that can be used to introduce the focus group process to individuals being invited to participate, as well as to guide question formation.

STEP 2: DEFINING THE GROUP

- The focus group should be comprised of individuals within a specific target constituency. Perhaps it is “teens” or “elders” or “new residents.” Ideally a focus group is a group of ‘strangers’ or individuals that are not a pre-established team. This invites a broader range of thinking.
- A focus group must be small to enable a depth of conversation. I would recommend a group of 5-6 individuals, with a maximum of 8. Beyond this size it is difficult to hear from all voices in an open discussion. A rule of thumb is often large enough to generate discussion, but small enough to ensure there is no domination or voices left unheard.
- A focus group should have a defined time limit. While this could be anywhere from 45-60 minutes, the most productive groups are likely 1 hour or less in duration. “Would you please give up an hour to help us out?”

STEP 3: THE INVITATION PROCESS

- Find a date and time for the group that is convenient for the persons to be interviewed. The date and location can make or break a focus group, so make sure to plan ahead to secure the optimum experience. Having the right (neutral and distraction free) environment lets participants know they are important to the task at hand.
- Be sure to identify any accessibility needs. If there is food/beverage provided, make sure that dietary restrictions are known.
- Provide individuals with a print invitation. It is also good to have email addresses and send reminders as the date and time approaches, to ensure full participation. Make sure any travel or other location information is clear.
- You may need to consider Zoom conversations and/or live. Ask your proposed audience about their preference. If live, be sure to include the mask and social distancing language. Or consider an outside location.
- Be sure to send 24 hour or less reminders.

EXAMPLE: XYZ Focus Group Confirmation Letter

Date:

Dear _____:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in our focus group. As we discussed when we spoke, we would value your ideas and opinions regarding [our organization] and its role in our community both now and into the future. You will be in a group with _____ other individuals, all representing _____ (teens in our community, e.g.) Your responses to questions in the group will be kept anonymous. Here is the location information for our group:

Date:

Time:

Place:

We will be providing snacks and beverages. If you have any dietary restrictions, please let us know in advance. In addition, if you need directions, or will not be able to attend for any reason, please contact me.

Sincerely:

Name, facilitator title, and contact information

STEP 4: QUESTION DEVELOPMENT

The structure described below will help you create strong informative questions. In a 1 hour focus group, there should be no more than 4-5 questions max. for discussion. There may be additional questions of a “multiple choice” nature to launch a discussion. See page 4 of this document for potential interview questions to begin our thinking about what we seek to know.

QUESTION STRUCTURE

1. Questions should be asked in an open ended format that requires participants to answer with more than yes or no. Open ended questions allow the participant to answer without ambiguity, and they have the potential to reveal undiscovered information.
2. Questions should be short and clear.
3. Questions should sound conversational, informal, and use words that are familiar to the participants.
4. Each question should ask only one thing.
5. Questions should be neutral and not lead the participants towards a particular question.
6. Consider a maximum of 4 questions.

STEP 5: CONDUCTING THE SESSION

ROOM SET UP

Ideally the group should sit in a circle with no obstructions, so there is good eye contact around the group. Similarly, ensure that everyone can easily hear one another. Do NOT assume that there is no hearing loss in the group. Check in and make sure there are no issues in hearing one another in the group – both in terms of speech pattern as well as any ambient noise distractions from outside of the circle.

FACILITATOR SKILLS

- Offers a warm and inviting presence to invite participation
- Keeps the conversation focused on the question at hand
- Listens attentively and sensitively, with empathy
- Is able to listen, think, and document at the same time. (You might consider 2 individuals, one as the designated recorder)
- Is attentive to ensure that all voices in the room are equally heard; comfortable in gently reminding, when necessary, of the need for short answers and inviting opportunity for all.
- Absolutely diligent in keeping personal opinions and ego out of the facilitation. Objective listener, not a voice within the discussion. “Never say ‘don’t you agree with me that....’”

SCRIPT/INTRODUCTION

FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome. Thanks for agreeing to be a part of this group. We appreciate your time and willingness to share your thoughts with us.
2. Introduce yourself, and your colleague if you have an assistant.
Make it clear that you are not an advocate or a marketing agent or providing station information, but a listener.
3. Purpose of the group:
(Repeat what was written above for the invitation process)
4. Documentation. We will be taking notes (or if in a virtual environment, recording). As we promised when you were invited, this process is anonymous. In summarizing what is learned from our conversation today, there will be no attribution of any comment to one participant. Reporting will be only done at the aggregate level.
5. Guidelines for Participation. Note, these should also be posted in the room or shared as a handout.

FOCUS GROUP CLOSING:

Let people know once again how helpful they've been. Make them aware of how they can reach you if they have any questions or additional thoughts.

Guidelines for Participation

1. Listen more than you speak. Let everyone participate. Please don't dominate.
We would like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.
2. Listen without judgment. Listen with an open mind.
Each person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.
3. Maintain confidentiality.
We want everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.
"What is said in this room, stays in this room."
4. Take risks—actively engage: Contribute your thinking. Share your creative ideas—imagine.
5. Be positive! Have fun! We value you and your input.

STEP 6: DOCUMENTATION

1. It is important that all ideas are captured. A suggestion is to have open on your computer or tablet the interview questions and jot responses within that document as the meeting goes along. Your documentation will be done when the group is done!!!
2. Report back with your notes and your debrief. In a timely manner. Timely is generally defined as **SAME DAY**. This is an important habit. Experience would suggest that thinking that the hand-scrawled notes will be transcribed some other day tends to create both lag in getting the results tabulated, but also that memory begins to flag as time passes. Please be prompt.

Thank you for your interest and generosity of time in consenting to leadership in this process!