



Some Tips for Running a Good Focus Group

When to Use Focus Groups: The Advantages

- quick and cheap, and relatively easy to assemble
- able to obtain rich data in participants own words and develop deeper insights
- people are able to build on one another's responses and come up with ideas they might not have thought of in a 1:1 interview
- good for obtaining data from children or people who can't read
- provides an opportunity to involve people in data analysis (e.g.: "as you look at this list of issues we have generated, which ones seem most important for the program?")
- produces results which are easy to understand
- may help to form new connections among people which will be useful beyond the evaluation
- quality of data may be improved as participants act as checks and balances on one another - identifying factual errors or extreme views.

Limitations of Focus Groups

- convenience sampling and small sample size limit ability to generalize
- responses of each participants are not independent
- a few dominant focus group members can dominate the results
- focus groups require a fair bit of skill to lead well
- the data which result, though rich, can sometimes be difficult to analyze because they are so unstructured

Designing a Focus Group

- be aware of the energy levels of your participants and plan your time management accordingly, but do not go beyond two hours
- questions should be open, should not imply specific answers, and should be relatively few in number (less than 12 according to one text)
- pilot-testing is important

Types of Focus Group Questions

- very unstructured questions provoke discussion of an issue or a situation without identifying any aspect of it - e.g. "so what's your perspective on the program? How is it going?"

- somewhat more structured questions may identify an aspect of the situation but not specify what kind of response they are looking for - e.g. "I'd like to hear your thoughts on the handbook."
- even more focused questions may be very concrete - e.g., "what would you say were the two or three most useful things you learned from the handbook?"

Setting Up The Focus Group

- use a room with few distractions, in an area where you are unlikely to be interrupted
- sitting around a table may be more comfortable for many people, although people may share more openly if they simply sit in a circle without a table
- name tags can sometimes help - at least, the interviewer should know everyone's name
- consider the implications of cross-stakeholder groups vs. within-stakeholder groups
- be sensitive to issues of power and privacy

Dealing with Challenging Group Members

- THE (REAL OR SELF-APPOINTED) EXPERT who controls conversation or intimidates others - assign a special role, use nominal group technique, where facilitator invites each person, in turn, to speak
- FRIENDS WHO SIT TOGETHER AND FORM A "CLIQUE"- avoid interviewing friends in the same group if possible, or have them sit apart
- THE HOSTILE GROUP MEMBER - avoid personal confrontation - allow the group to police itself - e.g. "do others in the group feel that way too?"
- THE QUIET PERSON - take them aside during a break and give them a chance to share their ideas 1-to-1 - respect their right to be quiet - use the nominal group technique to get their opinions out
- THE OUTSIDER (A PERSON WHO HAS A VERY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE THAN OTHER GROUP PARTICIPANTS) - make their differences into strengths - use them as a topic of discussion - avoid taking sides
- CULTURAL, PERSONALITY OR PARADIGMATIC DIFFERENCES - use visualizing or drawing to identify areas of shared vision and expose paradigmatic differences, allow time for people to feel comfortable together

*For more information,
or to arrange a workshop on focus groups,
contact us!*