Focus Groups and CRC Card Methodology

Modified from a draft courtesy Jessica Losego, How to Conduct a Focus Group Using CRC Cards, by Jessica Losego, Burrell Montz, and Ken Galluppi at the UNC Chapel Hill's Institute for the Environment.

One useful technique to learn about partners' processes, decisions, and weather information needs is to conduct focus groups of 4–6 participants in an adaptation of the Class, Responsibility, and Collaboration (CRC) Card methodology (Beck and Cunningham 1989). Originally used for object-oriented software design, CRC cards are a simple and consistent way to collect information from small groups in response to given scenarios.

Preparing for the Focus Group

<table>
<tr>
<td colspan="3">4–6 participants from the community you're interested in learning from
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<td colspan="3">Facilitator
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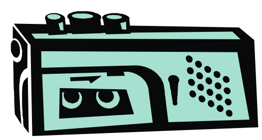
<td colspan="3">Audio recording device
</td>
<td colspan="3">4x6 inch index cards
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<td colspan="4">Prepared weather scenarios
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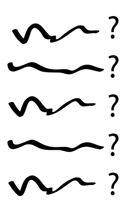
<td colspan="4">Prepared general questions
</td>
<td colspan="4">2-3 hours
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Prepared Weather Scenarios

Each session generally includes several scenarios that, together, capture moments of one weather event over time: before, during, and after the hazard you are interested in. These are read to the participants to focus their thinking as they fill out the CRC cards. Each scenario should be short, reference timing in relation to the event. It can mention a watch or warning, if applicable.

Keep the scenario short and somewhat general. Why? The questions participants ask will provide good insight into their concerns.

Scenario should not be too easy for the participants in regard to making decisions; it should make them think. For example, telling a school official in North Carolina that 8 inches of snow are forecast to fall overnight makes their decision very easy — they will likely close schools. However, if you tell that same official that 1–2 inches of snow is forecast to begin starting at 6am, their processes and resulting decisions will be much more telling.

Participants

4-6 Participants: You must first decide who you want to invite to participate in the focus group. Think about what you want to learn and from which Emergency Support Function (ESF). Many times gathering a mix of ESFs that work together instead of gathering all of the same type of ESF is useful because their discussion is more revealing. For example, if you are interested in learning how school officials make decisions during winter weather you may want to invite not only school reps, but also a county emergency management director or transportation official.

It is recommended that you limit the number of participants to six. More than six participants can be difficult to facilitate effectively, and there will not be enough time to hear from everyone.

Email or call your prospective participants to ask if they would be interested in participating in a focus group that is aimed at learning about their job — specifically, you are seeking information about their concerns, responsibilities, and collaborators. Provide a reason why coming may benefit them: by talking with you in this group setting, they and their colleagues will help you understand how to better serve them during events.

Where

Focus groups should be held in person at the office of one of the participants if possible. This provides a less intimidating setting than if it is held at a WFO. The room does not need to be equipped with any audio/visual presentation equipment since none will be used. If it is not possible to hold the focus group in-person due to significant travel times then conducting one via web conferencing can be considered. It is best to use a method that allows you to read body language; in-person focus groups are strongly preferred.

Body language allows you to see discomfort so you can either follow up to learn about disagreements among the group, or take a break to ask off-line. You will better be able to see when someone wants to share, but perhaps misses an opportunity to speak up. You can better tell if everyone is engaged in the discussion. These (and more) help you lead an effective focus group.

About Facilitation

Take on this mindset: "I am the student. They are teaching me what they know."

Facilitator: One facilitator will conduct the focus group. Others are allowed to observe the session, but should not speak at all so as not to bias the group.

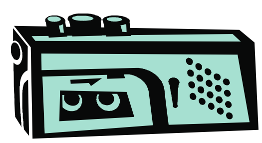
Ask only non-leading, unbiased questions. This means, for example, that the facilitator would not ask “Do you like product x?”, but instead ask “What do you think of product x?” Additional examples of questions will be discussed later.

This is critical: **Don't** correct a participant during a focus group. This could embarrass the participant or intimidate them into speaking less. Similarly, **don't** tell participants about products they are unaware of that may fill a gap until *after* the focus group concludes. Informing them of an existing product during the session will bias future answers.

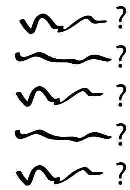
Encourage all to participate: Be deliberate right from the start, and specifically invite anyone who does not speak up to add to the conversation. When it is time, ask each participant to read his/her card so that each person gets a chance to share his or her perspective. Do not allow one participant to completely dominate the conversation.

Preparing for the Session

Audio recorder: Each focus group should be recorded so that you and others can go back and listen to the session afterwards for important points. This is especially useful for the facilitator because he/she will not have time during the session to take notes.



4x6 inch index cards: Participants will use the index cards to complete the CRC card exercise. Participants should write their job title on the top line, their responsibilities on the left side of the card, and their collaborators on the right side. Additional information can be written on the back of the card. Using a set of multicolored index cards where a different card is used for each scenario is very helpful in keeping the cards organized.



Prepared general questions: Before the focus group think of a few non-leading questions that can be asked to start generating discussion. Examples include asking a participant more about a specific responsibility, why they collaborate with another agency, and how they normally first hear of an approaching weather event.

2-3 hour timeframe: You should schedule your focus group for a minimum of 2 hours, but no more than 3 hours. This may seem like a lot of time, but you will see that once you get started participants are generally very talkative and you will naturally come up with questions for discussion. Remember that you have 4–6 participants that you need to hear from during each scenario.

Conducting the Focus Group

On the day of the focus group arrive early at the meeting location to make sure that the room is set up in a way that encourages discussion, i.e. a round or rectangular table that allows everyone to sit around it and see each other.

Once everyone arrives and is settled, ask permission to audio record the session. If all are agreeable, start the audio recorder before asking each person introduce himself or herself. You should give a brief introduction as to what you're after, again stating what benefit they will receive.

Consider whether brainstorming would help: If it seems appropriate you can start with a short brainstorming session of concerns that participants have for a generic event (e.g., winter storm). This may be especially useful if the hazard(s) in your weather scenario(s) are not in season and far from the participants' minds. For example, brainstorming about winter storm concerns when your session is held in July may help participants better recall their processes.

Begin the CRC cards: After the brainstorming session, hand out one card to each participant. Explain what you want written on the card: job title on the top line, responsibilities on the left side of the card, and collaborators on the right side of the card. Additional information can be written on the back of the card. *Tip:* Consider marking the columns on the cards before handing them out.

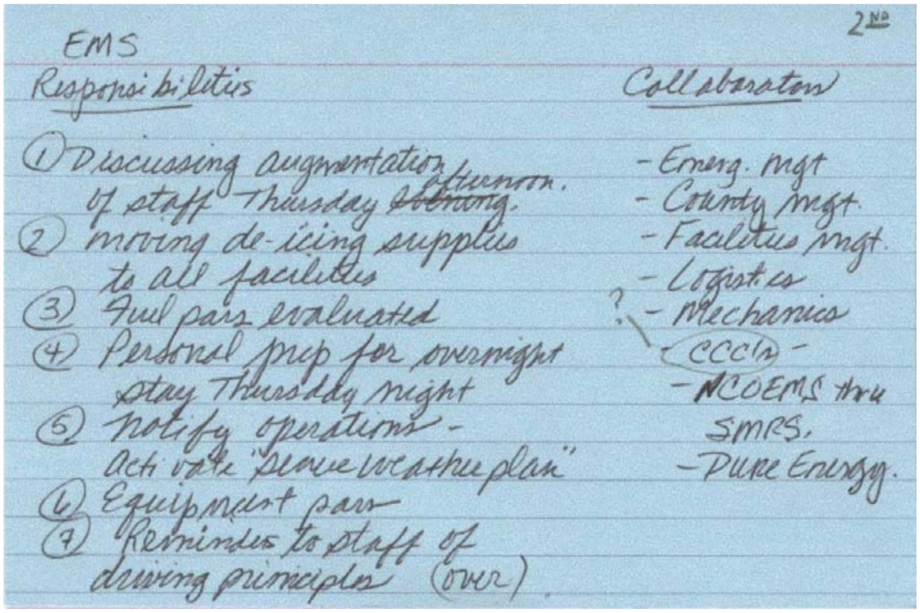


Figure 1: Actual CRC Card from a Focus Group session. Courtesy Jessica Losego, UNC Chapel Hill.

Read your first scenario. After you read it, allow the participants to think and write on the front of the card in silence for a minute or two. Additional information can be written on the back if they fill the front. They may have questions about your scenarios; answer them even if you have to make something up on the spot. Consider reversing the question onto them... example: a DOT official asks “How much rain will fall before winter precipitation starts?” Instead of answering, ask him, “What amount changes what you need to do?” This Q&A exchange with participants provides a great deal of insight into their thinking process.

Start discussion: After they have had a chance to write down most or all of what they want, ask someone to start reading their card. As they read, think of non-leading questions you can ask about their responsibilities or collaborators. Move on to the next participant, and follow the same process — let them read their card, and then ask questions to learn more. Participants usually question each other during this phase, providing help in learning about their processes, particularly the differences between them.

Start the next scenario: When you have exhausted all the questions for that scenario collect the cards, hand out new ones, and move onto the next scenario. Often the first two scenarios take up a lot of time because you ask the most questions to become more familiar with their process.

Last words: At the end of the focus group ask participants if they have anything else they’d like to add. If not, you are done collecting the first round of information. You are now ready to go back to your office to review each card and listen to the audio recording for things you may have missed. It is easiest to type the information from the cards into a document or spreadsheet then add additional information from the audio recording. It is not necessary to transcribe the recording. *Tip:* Doing this promptly will help because you will remember the sound of their voices and have a better chance of identifying who says what.

From the information collected during the focus group you will begin to understand what responsibilities, decisions, and concerns and EM has, as well as how they use weather information. From this information you may begin to see gaps emerge between what an EM needs and what NWS provides.