

Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

*Drawn from Conducting Focus Group Interviews by USAID, available at:
http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABY233.pdf*

A focus group is when a facilitator guides a small group of people in a discussion about their experiences, feelings, and preferences about a topic. The facilitator follows a discussion guide prepared beforehand. They use probing techniques to solicit views, ideas, and other information. Sessions typically last one to two hours.

Advantages

This technique has several advantages. It is low cost and provides speedy results. The format is flexible, allowing the facilitator to explore unanticipated issues. It encourages interaction between participants. Participants provide checks and balances, thus minimizing false or extreme views.

Limitations

The flexibility makes the technique susceptible to facilitator bias, which undermines the validity and reliability of findings. Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few especially vocal individuals.

Focus groups generate lots of qualitative information, but no quantitative information from which generalizations can be made. Information can be difficult to analyze. Comments should be interpreted in the context of the group setting.

Tips for Conducting the Focus Group

Establish rapport. Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is helpful for the facilitator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session, and set the group at ease. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome.

Phrase questions carefully. Certain types of questions impede group discussions. For example, yes-or-no questions are one dimensional and do not stimulate discussion. "Why" questions put people on the defensive and cause them to take "politically correct" sides on controversial issues.

Open-ended questions are more useful because they allow participants to tell their story in their own words and add details that can result in unanticipated findings. For example:

- What do you think about the criminal justice system?
- How do you feel about the upcoming national elections?

If the discussion is too broad the facilitator can narrow responses by asking such questions as:

- What do you think about corruption in the criminal justice system?
- How do you feel about the three parties running in upcoming national elections?

Use probing techniques. When participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can probe for fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques:

- *Repeat the question*—repetition gives more time to think
- *Adopt "sophisticated naiveté" posture*—convey limited understanding of the issue and ask for specific details
- *Pause for the answer*—a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer
- *Repeat the reply*—hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation
- *Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions*—they provoke more detailed information
- *Use neutral comments*— "Anything else?" or "Why do you feel this way?"

Control the discussion. In most groups a few individuals dominate the discussion. To balance out participation:

- Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk
- Give nonverbal cues (look in another direction or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period)
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion
- Take advantage of a pause and say, "Thank you for that interesting idea, perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session. Meanwhile with your consent, I would like to move on to another item."

Minimize group pressure. When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure is occurring. To minimize group pressure the facilitator can probe for alternate views. For example, the facilitator can raise another issue, or say, "We had an interesting discussion but let's explore other alternatives."