

Focus Groups

Focus groups: It is strongly recommended that training be obtained PRIOR to developing and conducting focus groups. This will add a great deal to the experience and the quality of findings.

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Focus groups are another commonly used method of collecting information about program needs, development, and implementation. Focus groups are an excellent means of bringing people together in order to develop a clear idea about how a group or different groups are thinking about a topic. A major advantage of focus groups over key informant interviews is the ability to generalize findings to a wider population. However, focus groups are more expensive to conduct and more difficult to analyze. In some instances, key informant interviews may be a good way to develop and test focus group questions.

In general, at least one group for each chosen stratum (e.g., women, men, night workers) should be conducted. There are many excellent resources for conducting and evaluating focus groups. Individuals who wish to conduct groups should obtain one or more of these resources:

Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M. (2000). *Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, CA.

Krueger, R.A. (2009). Asking Questions: Asking questions that yield powerful information. Available at: http://www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/focus_aq.html.

What are focus groups? We have all been part of a group or a group discussion. Many of those groups have had an agenda with specific questions to be answered. However, these meetings are not focus groups. The obvious question is: What makes a group a focus group? The question is probably best answered by describing why focus groups are conducted.

Focus groups should be used to gain an understanding of how people “feel or think about an issue, product, or service. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group.” (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Discussions are held several times with similar groups of participants. This allows the evaluator to identify trends and patterns in the ideas that emerge.

When should focus groups be conducted? Prior to conducting a focus group, it needs to be decided WHY one is wanted. What questions need to be answered? Are

these questions best answered by bringing together groups of volunteers? Focus groups should be considered when it is felt that a group interaction will widen the range of responses and will provide a synergy with regard to understanding a particular question or set of questions. Focus groups will help understand the depth of an opinion and understanding.

How should focus group questions be developed? Focus group questions should be:

- Open ended. Avoid asking questions that can be answered as “yes” or “no.” An example of an open ended question is, “what did you think of the program?” A closed question would be, “did you like the program?” The latter might be answered as “no” and provide little information.
- Related to participants’ prior experiences.
- Able to engage individuals in a discussion.
- Sequenced from the general to the specific.

Choosing a group? The following are basic guidelines for selecting a focus group:

- Determine how many participants are needed and how many to invite. It is reasonable to assume that one or more participants may not be able to attend.
- Develop a list of attributes for participants based on the purpose of the focus group.
- Use the list of attributes to decide on a recruitment strategy. For example, where will potential participants be found?
- Obtain the names and contact information for the different groups. Be sure the groups are reasonably balanced. For example, would it be awkward to have one woman and eight men?
- Avoid enrolling people who know each other, especially close friends.
- Avoid having supervisors in groups with those they supervise.

Focus groups should consist of 6 to 12 participants. Fewer than six participants may limit the conversation because there is not enough diversity to spark energy and creativity. A group larger than 12 gets to be unwieldy and voices are lost. The number of invitations may depend on the number of anticipated no-shows and the ability to confirm attendance.

Facilitating a focus group? An experienced and trained moderator should conduct focus groups. The moderator should begin the focus group by introducing himself or herself. This should be followed by a brief explanation of the program and how information will be used, and an overview of the agenda. Be sure to note that sessions will be recorded. Next, review and ask participants to sign an informed consent. They should be assured that their names will not be used in reports.

Explain the overall ground rules. In particular, it is important that each participant feel that their opinions are valued, and they need not defer to others. While disagreement may take place, everyone's opinion is to be respected.

Questions should be carefully worded. Questions should be used as they were developed. If an adequate response is not obtained, the moderator should use prompts to clarify the question that is being asked. A brief summary should be given at the end of each question.

It is important, but often difficult to ensure even participation. Going around the table is often a good way to accomplish this. However, start at different points of the table to avoid always having the same person start with her or his answers.

Close the session by offering a brief summary of key points. Ask the participants if they have any additional comments to add. Each participant should be asked by name and personally thanked for attending.

How is focus group information analyzed? It is best to begin the analysis of focus groups as soon as possible after they are conducted. This will avoid forgetting important information. The analysis of focus groups entails the careful review of transcripts to find key ideas and repeated themes. In general, this process will be conducted by reading the transcripts and notes. However, specialized software is available to assist with the analysis.

When reviewing focus groups, transcripts may be used to understand recurrent themes, key words, and important phrases. Responses are usually best organized by question. This will allow the comparison of responses between groups and different populations. Leave behind individual ideas of what participants should have said or what was wished they had said.

