HOW TO ORGANIZE AND FACILITATE AN EFFECTIVE FOCUS GROUP

INTRODUCTION

Focus groups involve collecting in-person input from a group of individuals, using a series of intentionally designed questions to answer research questions of interest. Focus groups can be effective tools to collect direct stakeholder input on the effectiveness of programs and services, assess needs of a population of interest, identify how to solve a key problem facing your organization (e.g., low participation in a program), or support your interpretation of quantitative data and application of data in your practices. While focus groups are not necessarily appropriate for collecting data from large (and representative) volumes of individuals, they provide a number of benefits including: demonstrating willingness to engage participants and stakeholders; ability to ask probing questions and collect in depth data that takes into account human contexts of your priority groups; and establishing a group environment where participants can feed off of each other’s perspectives, leading to rich conversations and information. This tool will help you design, plan, and facilitate an effective focus group.

DO I NEED A FOCUS GROUP?

USE THEM WHEN:
You need to gather a range of experiences about a certain topic. You should be interested in hearing, in detail, what people have to say about a topic, and how opinions interact with one another
• You want a deeper understanding of thoughts on a topic at hand, rather than a surface level understanding
• You need to explore quantitative data that have a correlation but no explanation. This can also be helpful when you want to develop a rich understanding of how individuals’ or groups’ experiences are leading to differences that can or have been measured quantitatively

DO NOT USE THEM WHEN:
• You need to ask questions that can be answered by “yes” or “no”
• You only have a few (defined as 3 or less) deep questions to ask.

BEFORE THE FOCUS GROUP

DEFINE THE PURPOSE OF THE FOCUS GROUP
Briefly articulate a focus group purpose (a few sentences) to address the following questions:
• What motivated you to conduct the focus group?
• Was there a specific gap in knowledge, or challenge you were experiencing with a specific program or service that required you to gather more information or perspectives
WHO ARE YOUR PARTICIPANTS?
• Do you need expert opinion or the average individual?
• Are there specific age, gender, or education requirements?
• 7-8 individuals is ideal; maximum of 10
  ○ Best practice is to overbook your participants to account for no-shows (around 15 people is a good cap for registration)

WHEN WILL YOUR FOCUS GROUP BE RUN?
• Reach out to your participants and ask them to fill out a poll with their availabilities. Ensure a wide spread of times (i.e., mornings, evenings, weekends) to capture the entire scope of possibilities.
• If you already have a general idea of your target participants’ schedules, try to provide options that align with their availability (i.e., outside of regular class times for students, after work hours for outside employers or organizations).

HOW LONG WILL THE FOCUS GROUP BE?
• Generally, 2 hours is a good window to schedule a focus group and keep participants engaged.
• Consider the following when deciding on length and facilitating the focus group:
  ○ How much information are you aiming to collect?
  ○ How long do you think your specific target population will remain engaged with the topic area?
  ○ How much information will participants want to share, and how the conversation may unfold
  ○ Let the conversation evolve organically: just because you booked 2 hours doesn’t mean you need to fill it.

WHERE WILL YOU HOLD YOUR FOCUS GROUP?
• Once you’ve organized a time, pick a space that’s equally accessible by all participants. You want to make it easy for them to attend your focus group
• Pick somewhere quiet, comfortable, and confidential
• Good examples: college or university boardroom, library room, hotel boardroom, research centre

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS
• Participants are taking their time to help you – ensure they are appreciated in some way (i.e., honoraria, food).
• If participants need to travel, cover parking and mileage costs
• Ensure you provide all the information participants need to comfortably make it to your focus groups (i.e. campus parking map and instructions)
• Will you have a note taker or record the sessions? Ensure note takers are available and you have a recording device. Good practice involves recording discussions and transcribing notes later to ensure accuracy.
DURING THE FOCUS GROUP

INFORMED CONSENT
- Ensure participants are aware of how their contributions will be used. Explain the purpose of the group and have them fill out a waiver allowing them to:
  - Leave at any time
  - Have anything said redacted
  - Have their contributions used for your explicit purpose
  - Conversation is being recorded for record-keeping purposes - identity of contributors will not be included in notes

KINDS OF QUESTIONS
Generally, you can organize your focus group based on the four sections identified below. Ensure all questions asked are open-ended (i.e., cannot be answered with “yes” or “no”). Generally, 5-8 general or higher level questions will fill a 2-hour focus group. Include specific prompts under each question that you can use to guide the discussion and ensure you get all the information you want. Often, the conversation will unfold to cover these topics without need to actively facilitate or ask prompt questions.

1. Introductions (~15 minutes)
- Consider beginning by establishing a group agreement and asking participants not to share other people’s experiences discussed in the group
- Break the ice and get participants chatting
- Do not actively uncover major differences among participants unless required by the topic (i.e., sexual orientation, political stance, socioeconomic status).
- Consider whether there is any non-controversial introductory information that would be helpful for you to know in facilitating later questions and prompts (i.e., might experiences vary by where students live or their program of enrolment? If so, ask about this in your introductions)
- Ex. Share your name, program of study, and where you’re from

2. Introductory questions (first 1-2 questions, ~30 minutes)
- Provide a surface level discussion of the topic
- Opportunities for participants to provide information on their individual experiences
- Ex. When was the first time you experienced X? Tell us about your experiences with program Y? What experiences have you had that made you interested in attending the focus group/drew you to this topic?

3. Main questions (3-4 questions, ~60 minutes)
- Begin with establishing a deeper understanding of participants experiences related to your focus group purpose
- Ensure you move toward specific questions and prompts that draw out specific information you are interested in (reference the focus group’s purpose and learning outcomes, when relevant)
- Ex. How frequently should someone use program Y? What student needs make program Y relevant (or not)? What are the main benefits for participants who use program X? What are some of the flaws with program X? What are potential solutions to X? What would be the most effective marketing strategy for program Y? How can we improve participants’ experiences with program Y?
4. Ending questions (~15 minutes)
   - Conclude the discussion
   - Reflect upon and add to past answers
     - Ex. Is there anything anyone feels was missed? Does anyone have anything to add about topic X?
   - End with a summary of how data will be used

**CHALLENGES**

1. Recruitment
   - Finding participants with specific characteristics
   - Developing a registration form or survey (Google/Microsoft Office 365 forms can be useful for this purpose)

2. Maintaining focus (see xx. resource - facilitation tips and tricks)
   - There may be a main voice in the group
   - Some people may not feel comfortable speaking, requiring the facilitator to direct questions to them
   - Ensure that everyone is heard and has the opportunity to speak; listening promotes participation

3. Confidentiality
   - Cannot guarantee other participants will keep what is said within the group
   - Confidentiality clauses in consent forms are not binding

4. Recording
   - Using a recorder requires central placement
   - Transcription requires the ability to distinguish different voices
   - Consider human resource needs for transcription. Do you have a work study student or research assistant who could help with this?

**AFTER THE FOCUS GROUP**

- Transcribe data verbatim and look for keywords, themes, and ideas. You can have a content expert identify themes, or use qualitative data software analysis tools (e.g., NVivo)
- Focus on topics where individuals agreed or disagreed with one another. This is where a lot of data can come from
- Organize your own understanding of the material based on what was said. If you feel there is more to be discussed with regards to specific things said, invite the group back for a second session
- If you would like a different perspective with a new group, conduct a second focus group with new participants.