

DEFINITION OF A FOCUS GROUP

“...Carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is relaxed, comfortable, and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion.” [From Krueger, R. A. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. In Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., and Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational Research*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers USA.]

ADVANTAGES

- Participants can “feed off each other” as they respond to each other’s comments.
- Participants can support or disagree with one another, creating more energy and thus more data.
- Focus groups can get at perceptions, attitudes, and experiences more than a quantitative survey.

DISADVANTAGES

- Open-ended structured interview format must be used.
- Groups are more difficult to manage than one individual; interviewer must keep track of what is going on in the group.
- Unexpected conflicts, power struggles, and other group dynamics may inhibit discussion.
- Shy persons may be intimidated by more assertive persons.
- One person may dominate to the exclusion of others.
- Data may be more difficult to analyze.
- Moderators need to be skilled in working with groups.
- The environment can have an impact on the responses.

FORMAT

- Each group should have no fewer than 6 and no more than 10 people. (You may need to invite up to three times that number to fill the focus group.)
- Each group should have a facilitator who will engage the group in conversation, but will not join the conversation.
- Each group will have a recorder/observer who will not engage in conversation, but will jot down relevant ideas.
- The group should talk no more than about an hour.
- The group should be in a circle where all participants can see and hear one another.

FACILITATOR ROLE

- Engage in small talk before the group begins to build rapport with individuals.
- Help participants feel comfortable in an environment where they may not know anyone and where they may express an unpopular opinion.
- Maintain impartiality, particularly in facial expression and verbal comments.
- Maintain eye contact with people who are speaking.
- Do not join the conversation.
- Ask open ended questions.
- Involve all participants. Use eye contact with quiet members when asking a question to encourage their response.
- Be prepared to deal with a group member who wants to dominate without criticizing or insulting that person. Use body language (not look at the dominator) or statements such as “Thank you for that comment. Would someone like to add to that or express another idea?”
- Avoid asking leading questions or using non-verbal cues (shaking of head, rolling eyes) to get at preferred responses.
- Do not ask people to hold their comment or question until the end, because that could shut the person down and you might not get back to it.
- Know the questions to be answered by the group. Keep the group semi-structured, but let the group move away from the script if they have relevant discussion.
- Keep the conversation moving, without stifling opinions.

RECORDER/OBSERVER ROLE

- Be totally familiar with the interview questions (protocol) before the group begins. You will understand the types of information the facilitator will be seeking and as a result will be able to concentrate on the discussion and note taking rather than figuring out whether everything will be covered.
- If the session will be audio recorded, be sure to be completely familiar with the equipment and test it before starting.
- Agree on an approach to communicate with the facilitator during the group session.
- Ensure that the room is quiet.
- Discipline yourself to focus on the big picture rather than on the comments of the minority. Concentrate on the sense of the discussion by the entire group, rather than on information generated by one or two dominant people.
- Draw a diagram of the session room and make brief notes about the comments of each participant.
- Focus on the big issues, not the small ones.
- When the session ends, write or note in your notes a summary of the most important things you learned for each question to share with the group
- Conduct a brief post-group session with the facilitator.

ALL ABOUT: FOCUS GROUPS

PROCESS

- Prior to participants arriving, set up the room and any technology, set up refreshments if appropriate, set up tables as chairs as desired.
- Introduce yourself and welcome participants.
- Point out where restrooms and refreshments are.
- Explain the purpose and outcome of the focus group.
- If you are recording the session, ask for permission (may be using a consent form), and explain if they need to do anything specific when speaking.
- Explain how they were chosen.
- Explain the Ground Rules. (See below.) Ask if there are any other ground rules that anyone wants to add. Ask for agreement with the ground rules.
- Have group members introduce themselves.
- Begin asking the questions with the opportunity to let the group guide discussion.
- With about 15 minutes left, the facilitator should assess whether the group needs to get back on track to address important questions not answered yet. Try to cover all of the questions, though not necessarily in sequence.
- Near the end, you may want the Recorder/Observer to summarize the discussion to get concurrence from the group about what they said.
- At the end, thank participants for their willingness to share honestly and explain what will happen with their comments.

GROUND RULES:

- This is a voluntary process. You have the right to pass answering any or all questions.
- Respect others' opinions, even if you disagree with them.
- Only one person talks at a time, so everyone has the opportunity to hear each other.
- The facilitator and the recorder will not express their opinions.
- What's said in the room stays in the room (confidentiality).
- Use "I" statements when expressing an opinion, rather than speaking for ("we") or about ("they") an entire group.

QUESTIONS:*

- The questions should be focused on one topic, rather than several ideas or areas.
- The facilitator should begin with important, but relatively easy, questions.
- If no one responds at first, either repeat the question a different way, or maintain silence until someone begins conversation.
- The questions should stay on track, although they can veer off if it is important.

*The facilitator should feel comfortable asking follow up questions, or saying, "tell me more about that idea.", "That's interesting. Does anyone else want to address that?", or "I'm not sure I completely followed what you were saying. Can you elaborate?". Keep questions unbiased—ask "What is your opinion of ____?" rather than "Do you favor ____?"