

Appendix 16: Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

The following materials provide guidance on conducting focus groups. Focus groups are small, structured group discussions during which respondents reply to open-ended questions in their own words. Focus group subjects (or participants) are chosen to represent the larger group of people about whom you want information—your target audience. Discussion typically focuses on one or two specific topics.

A. Developing Questions—Focus Group Protocol

A1. Develop a protocol

A focus group needs a plan. Give some thought to what you want to learn from the group and the questions that will best elicit this information. Develop a written protocol that includes primary questions, potential follow-up questions (or probes), the order in which these questions should be asked, and introductory and closing statements.

A2. Rely on a small number of core questions

Your protocol should include between 10 and 12 questions. When developing a protocol, imagine that each participant will respond to every question. Focus groups should not last more than 90 minutes.

Use broad, open-ended questions. Don't ask questions that call for a "yes" or "no" response, as they tend to end discussion and make it harder to learn why people believe what they do.

A3. Ask participants to speak from their own experience

In general, it is more useful to have participants speak from their own experience than to ask them what other people do or think or to predict what they might do or think in the future.

A4. Start easy

Start with a question that everyone should be able to answer and that doesn't require much disclosure. This will help get everyone talking and provide you with an indication of people's styles so you can better manage the group.

A5. End by asking if participants have anything to add to the discussion

This may result in some incredibly useful information that you did not anticipate.

B. Group Characteristics and Composition

B1. Focus groups are typically composed of 8 to 10 participants

If the group gets much smaller, it can be difficult to sustain a lively interesting discussion. If it gets much larger, people have less opportunity to participate, which often leads to disruptive side conversations among small clusters of two or three participants.

B2. The environment should be conducive to open discussion

It is the job of the facilitator to create an environment that nurtures differences in points of view, protects participants, and does not pressure participants to reach consensus or vote on issues discussed.

B3. Typical focus group discussions last 60–90 minutes

In addition, you should allocate another 30 minutes (15 minutes at the beginning and 15 minutes at the end) in order to check people in, orient them to the group, have them introduce themselves, and lay out the ground rules for the discussion, and then to debrief at the end and allow them to ask any questions they might have about the study and or how the information will be used.

B4. Participants should share characteristics that relate to the topic being investigated

For example, you may convene a group of first responders (police, EMT workers, etc.). You should not recruit participants who know little or nothing about the issues being discussed.

B5. Participants should be similar to one another (though not in their opinions about the topics being investigated)

The rule for selecting focus group participants is commonality, not diversity. This is based on research that shows that people are more likely to reveal their opinions and beliefs and to talk about sensitive issues when they are with people they perceive to be like themselves. People tend to defer to those whom they perceive to be more knowledgeable than they are, wealthier than they are, and more influential than they are. You don't want to combine dissimilar people in focus groups—for example, don't put together people with high levels of education and people with low levels of education.

B6. Participants should be selected so that they are likely to represent the views and opinions of a defined population

For example, focus group members might be chosen to represent all police officers in a community, or all ED nurses.

B7. Participants should be unfamiliar with one another

This helps to ensure the validity of the data by encouraging participants to state their real opinions and views. When participants know one another, (1) they are often less likely to reveal highly personal or sensitive information, (2) they are more likely to express views that conform

to those of others in the group (especially others who they perceive as having some power or influence outside the group), and (3) they may respond to questions based on their past experiences with one another, which can confound the data.

C. Locating and Recruiting Participants

C1. When recruiting participants, try to define the group as precisely as possible

It usually makes sense to consider gender, age, occupation, geographic location, ethnicity, and language. First think about what you want, then about how you might identify potential members who match your needs, then about whether they are so diverse that you need to eliminate some or put some in a separate group.

C2. Finding participants

There are several ways to reach potential focus group participants. One way is to go where they are. For example, to recruit law enforcement officers, you might work with their unions. You might also put announcements in local newspapers and on public access cable stations or post notices in public places such as libraries, supermarkets, or public health clinics. Once you find potential participants, simple screening questions can help you decide whom to include.

C3. Convincing people to participate

Make an upbeat pitch. People may be more likely to participate if they believe that the project will benefit their community. Remind them that participating in the group gives them a chance to offer their opinions and experience to the project.

Make it easy. Schedule groups at a convenient time (one that will not interfere with, for example, the participants' jobs) and in a convenient place (one that is easy to reach by public transportation and has adequate parking).

C4. What do you say?

You might mention the following:

- The name of the agency or organization sponsoring the research or conducting the focus group
- The reason the focus group is being conducted
- How they were selected
- What they will do in the group (for example, "If you agree to participate in the group, you will be asked to take part in a one-hour discussion about misuse of drugs containing opioids. The discussion will include 8–10 other community members and two discussion leaders")
- Who is eligible to participate in the group
- How their confidentiality will be protected and how they will be expected to respect the confidentiality of the other participants

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- When and where the focus group will take place, and how much time it will take
- (Optional) That a reminder letter will be sent to participants
- Your name and telephone number so they can call you if they have additional questions or discover they are unable to attend the group

C5. What can be done to ensure that participants attend?

Send a follow-up letter, and telephone each participant the day before the meeting. Recruit more subjects than you need. Recruit 12 people with the hope that 10 show up.

D. Setting and Other Conditions

D1. Provide refreshments

It is a good idea to serve light refreshments. Sometimes members are served a meal and given a chance to socialize under the supervision of the group leaders. The theory is that this increases their willingness to converse once the group convenes. If you do this, it is not wise to allow subjects to speak about the content of the group before it begins—it tends to solidify positions and to make the group discussion something of an anticlimax.

D2. Use a comfortable and private meeting space

Don't hold focus groups in high-traffic areas. The surroundings should be comfortable and private so participants feel free to speak openly. For example, use a private conference room.

E. Typical Opening Procedures

E1. Keep an attendance list

Keep a checklist of those expected to attend the group.

E2. Determine how to deal with late arrivals

Generally it's best to dismiss people who arrive late because it is difficult to integrate them successfully into a group discussion that has already started.

E3. Obtain informed consent if needed

Generally, informed consent is not necessary, provided that the group comprises adults, the topic is not sensitive, and the questions do not focus on members' illegal or potentially embarrassing behavior. With minors, informed consent from a parent or guardian is always needed.

E4. Distribute name tags/cards (first names only)

Distribute name tags/cards with the participants' first names written on them. You can also have participants fill out their own cards/tags (instructing them to use their first name only).

F. Conducting the Focus Group

F1. Use two facilitators—a primary and a secondary leader

There is a lot to manage in a focus group, and while it is possible to use one leader, two are better. One person is primarily responsible for putting questions to the group and managing the group process. This person must be experienced with group process. The assistant leader can assist in the discussion but is mostly responsible for taking detailed notes. Both leaders should take notes, but the assistant will have more time to keep careful notes. He or she is also responsible for managing latecomers, housekeeping issues, etc.

F2. Read the opening remarks statement

Begin the group by reading the opening remarks statement to all group members and having group members introduce themselves to one another.

F3. Follow your focus group protocol

Ask the questions in the order specified in your protocol. Not following your plan can get confusing, both to you and the participants.

F4. Invite and promote participation by all members

At times it is necessary to ask participants who have not spoken to contribute. Use prompts such as, “John, we haven’t heard your opinions about this issue yet. What do you think?” But don’t put people on the spot if they just don’t have anything to say.

F5. Wait for responses

Give people time to think. Don’t bias their answers by suggesting possible responses.

F6. Clarify responses using neutral probes

For example: Can you explain further? Can you give us an example of what you mean? Is there anything you would like to add? Can you say more about that? I’m not sure I understand, can you help me out?

F7. Elicit and protect minority opinion

Focus groups should help you understand the perspectives and experiences present in your target population, not just the perspectives and beliefs of the majority of that population.

F8. Do not state or show your opinion

Avoid body language that reflects how you feel—especially nodding or shaking your head. Avoid approving or disapproving comments after people speak, such as saying “Good” or “Correct.”

F9. Maintain order

It is the leader's job to cope with our favorite group members—the expert, the endless rambler, the shy participant, and the dominant talker. It is better to intervene with them a bit early than it is to let things go.

G. Note Taking

G1. Some Tips for Taking Notes

Use a “Focus Group Notes” form to assist you in taking notes. Here are some other helpful tips:

- Indicate individual responses or different points of view held by several members by beginning notes for each on a new line.
- Try to identify speakers so you can keep track of individual themes.
- Try to record the number of people holding various views.
- Try to record important comments verbatim.
- Review your notes and summarize them immediately after the group ends.

H. Debriefing

H1. Record observations of the group process

The two leaders should meet immediately after the group ends to share and record their views about the group. Consider the following issues:

- Were there any major departures from the protocol?
- Were there any unusual events? If so, how were they handled?
- Was there sufficient time to complete the protocol comfortably? If not, why not? What issues were cut short?
- Was the group fairly unified in its views, or was there diversity of opinion? If there was diversity, did it seem associated with particular types of participants, such as males versus females?
- Were there any major disagreements in the group? If so, what were they?
- What was the group process like—were people bored, restless, excited, angry, silent, confused?
- What, if anything, should be changed for the next group?