

Focus Group Facilitation

What is a Focus Group and When is it Used?

Focus groups are moderated group discussions on a particular topic. Focus groups are useful for gathering information from a group of respondents at one time, to capture perspectives from a cross section of the population.

Focus groups can be less structured than interviews and encourage participants to speak and interact in a more spontaneous, less directed way. Part of what you are looking for is the interaction in the group.

- Where is there consensus?
- Where is there disagreement?
- What surprises the group?
- What seems familiar to all of them?

The focus group highlights how a group responds to a topic and illustrates areas of disagreement and consensus. Focus groups allow for themes to emerge from a conversation. They can also be useful when you want to broaden participation or do not have sufficient resources to interview people individually.

Challenges: Focus groups can, however, be difficult to facilitate in a way that prevents some participants from dominating the conversation. Some participants may also feel uncomfortable being open in a less anonymous group setting. Having multiple participants can also make documentation difficult if the participants do not speak one at a time.

Participants: Six-to-eight people is ideal for a focus group but there can be up to twelve. Participants are often brought together because they have something in common e.g. they are youth in an afterschool program, parents of teens in high school, or share demographic and/or geographic connections. They are sometimes selected on the basis of difference, e.g. there is one person from each neighborhood, people on different sides of an issue, etc.

Questions: You will be following a focus group guide with open-ended questions. Participants should feel encouraged to explain their answers. You, as the facilitator will encourage this by using follow-up questions, such as:

- Say a little more about that.
- Can you give me an example of...?
- Does anyone else feel differently? Has anyone else had a different experience?
- What else do you feel is important? What else would you like to see happen?

Conducting the Focus Group:

Set clear guidelines from the beginning that only one person should speak at a time, that everyone's participation is important, and that you are interested in all points of view – positive or negative.

Outline the purpose of the focus group, the topics to discuss, and the issue of confidentiality.

Cover logistics, ensure all members of the group introduce themselves, and be sure to make a clear time frame, discuss use of cell phones, etc.

In this instance, we will be using a high level of facilitator involvement. This means you will have a specific focus group guide to follow, you can cut off or redirect unproductive discussion, and you should try to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to speak. However, if interesting or important topics come up that are not part of the script, you can use your discretion to decide whether or not to pursue the topic.

A couple of helpful facilitation tips:

- **Be welcoming and pleasant from the beginning.**
- **Acknowledge virtual challenges and opportunities:** Discuss how these are typically done in person and people have the opportunity to feed off each other and build trust quicker. Also, we have an opportunity with virtual settings to stay focused on each other and feel a sense of connection with the “common experience” of virtual connecting.
- **Use active listening skills:** Let the group know you will be listening and not be doing most of the talking. Let them know you might use verbal “nods” in place of body language to indicate you are listening – this will support the participants with them sensing your interest and nonjudgmental engagement, such as “nodding” your head, smiling, and leaning forward.
- **Try not to let your own opinions show; keep a neutral attitude:** Participants often will not want to disagree with you. Reinforce and encourage further comments by saying, “That’s very interesting, say more...” “I’m interested in your opinion/perspective...”. Instead of saying things like “great” or “I love that” after a comment, say, “Okay” or “Thank you” after someone shares.
- **Ask for clarification or more detail** if you are not sure what the respondent means.
- **Invite further reflection.** If someone points out something very close to what you want to learn, ask “What do others think?”
- **Recap** what you heard from the respondents and get their agreement if there was confusion, or if you feel they surfaced a major issue. For example, say “This is what I think I heard you said... Is that right?”

Documenting the Focus Group (face to face and virtual)

Identify two facilitators for the focus group – one (1) who can lead the focus group discussion and another (2) who can document/take notes if face-to-face, or run the platform and manage the chatroom if virtual. As it is near impossible to record every response from each participant, you can try and summarize the responses. Be careful to keep the summary true to what the participant intended and back up with direct quotes from recordings after the group is completed. You should try and include direct quotes where interesting statements are made, to show areas of consensus, or to contrast opinions presented.

It helps to take notes during the focus group that are as detailed as possible, and then expand and clarify the notes immediately after the focus group, while your memory is still fresh. You can use abbreviations during the focus group, and then go back and write the words out afterward.

In person, you should always try to record a focus group. If the group is virtual, a video recording is important but should not be circulated to participants to preserve privacy. You can then go over the notes while listening to the recording. This ensures that you are able to capture as much data as possible.