Focus Groups

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What Is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a focused discussion group that follows a structured questioning route. It typically consists of a facilitator who runs the group, sometimes a co-facilitator or note taker, and 6 to 10 participants. The facilitator uses a script that includes a set of questions that are posed to the group.

A focus group looks and feels informal, but it's actually carefully planned and orchestrated. The format is designed to evoke rich information and insights that would be difficult to get through other data collection methods—for example, through a survey or one-on-one interviews.

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About ETR Best Practice Guides

Research and evaluation matter! It is becoming more common for funders, boards and communities to require evaluation of programs. When you understand the different aspects of evaluation, you're better prepared to identify and carry out the type of evaluation that will be useful for your organization or program.

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For over 30 years, ETR's evaluation group has worked throughout the nation, across a broad range of topic areas, with an impressive array of organizations. ETR performs sound, science-driven evaluations that help you build a foundation for data-based decision making.

When Is It Best to Conduct a Focus Group?

Before implementing a survey, you can use focus groups to help decide what questions to ask

Focus groups are most useful when you need to delve deeply into focused topics and generate an in-depth understanding of complex issues. For example, you would use a focus group when you want to:

1. **Invite and explore depths and nuances of opinions.** For example, you want to find out how participants in a program believe they have changed as a result of their participation.
2. **Understand the what and why of opinions and behaviors.** Focus groups can illuminate what factors influence opinions and behaviors.
3. **Test products, services or programs.** Focus groups can help test how well people understand or like educational materials or products. They can explore reactions to actual or proposed services or program adaptations. For example, you might find out what potential users of a new curriculum think about the curriculum and obtain suggestions for improvements.
4. **Design a large quantitative study.** Before implementing a survey, you can use focus groups to help decide what questions to ask and what the response options should be.
5. **Understand the results of a large quantitative study.** After a survey, you could use focus groups to find out why participants responded a certain way, or to gather more detail on some of the survey answers.

Focus groups are not as appropriate when you want to capture a broad range of information about a population. They also are not appropriate when you're collecting very sensitive or personal information.

What Are the Advantages of Focus Groups?

The primary advantage of focus groups is that they allow you to explore key issues in depth in a venue that encourages the exchange of ideas and opinions among participants. Participants often build upon the comments of others in the group. This give and take makes focus groups more powerful than one-on-one interviews.

The facilitator has the opportunity to immediately follow up on comments made by participants, something that isn't possible during survey data collection. The qualitative data from focus groups often provides powerful illustrations of, or explanations for, particular behaviors. Focus groups also can make it easier for participants with poor reading or writing skills to provide information.

What Are the Disadvantages of Focus Groups?

Conclusions based on focus-group data can only refer to the individual participants themselves, not to a population in general.

The biggest disadvantages of focus groups are that they generally reach fewer people than surveys, and participants are not selected randomly. This means that the findings are not statistically representative of any particular group. Conclusions based on focus-group data can only refer to the individual participants themselves, not to a population in general.

Focus groups can also be somewhat costly. They're time consuming to implement and analyze, and often include costs for travel and meals or snacks. If your population of interest is very diverse, you will have to conduct many focus groups for your data to be useful.

Focus Groups Vs. Surveys

Focus Groups	Surveys
• Provide depth over breadth	• Provide depth over breadth
• Use small samples, but have low generalizability	• Have high generalizability, but require large samples
• Give the researcher the opportunity to vary questions or explore answers, but lack standardization	• Are standardized, but do not allow researchers to explore answers in depth
• Generate rich, complex (textual) ideas, but are complex to analyze and prone to subjectivity and bias	• Can be relatively simple to analyze, objective and free from bias, but yield less rich data that typically can be reduced to categories or numbers

How Do I Develop and Implement a Focus Group?

There are many important steps to developing and implementing focus groups. These include: (1) identifying your purpose and objectives, (2) identifying your target population, (3) creating your focus group script, (4) pilot testing your protocol, (5) arranging your focus group logistics, (6) deciding on the number and types of groups you'll conduct (7) recruiting participants, (8) identifying an experienced group facilitator, (9) conducting your focus group, and (10) analyzing focus group results.

Let's take a look at each step.

(1) Identify your purpose and objectives

The more thought and effort you put into selecting objectives for data collection in general, and your focus group in particular, the more likely you are to collect useful, quality information.

Often focus group development will be guided by a set of research questions. Determine what information you already have about your population of interest and what more you want to know. Be clear about these interests upfront and, as you are developing your focus group, check back periodically to make sure you are effectively addressing your research questions.

Keep the topic of your focus group fairly narrow and well defined. It isn't possible to cover many different topics in a one- or two-hour discussion.

(2) Identify your target population

Once you determine what you want to know, you need to decide whom you want to invite to your focus group. What are the distinguishing characteristics of your target population? You might be interested in talking to individuals who live in a particular geographic area, those who have received a particular service, or people who share a particular characteristic (such as ethnicity or HIV status), and so forth. For example, you might narrow your population to "Latino/a teachers at Washington High School," or "youth who recently completed after-school program X."

(3) Create your focus group script

Keep the topic of your focus group fairly narrow and well defined.

You can begin developing your focus group script once you've identified your research questions or objectives and target population. Here are some things to think about when developing your script.

Focus Group Script: Script components

Every focus group needs to include essential elements to help participants feel comfortable answering sensitive questions and achieve a sense of closure before they leave. These elements include:

- **An introduction** that describes the purpose of the study and focus group. This should also include information about the confidentiality of information shared in the group.
- **Group agreements** about participant conduct during the discussion.
- **A neutral ice-breaker** question to help participants and facilitators get to know each other.
- **Warm-up questions** that help participants start thinking about the topic of interest and gradually lead them to your main questions.
- **Two to three main question sets** based on the topic(s) selected.

- **Transition questions** that guide the discussion from one main question set to the next.
- **One or two wrap-up questions** to mark the end of the discussion and give participants one more chance to share their thoughts and opinions.

Focus Group Script: Questioning route

Make sure your questioning route or sequence makes logical sense. You want to gradually lead your participants to your main questions. You also want to start with broad discussions, and then become more narrow and detailed. Finally, if you're asking participants to give both positive and negative comments, give them the opportunity to present both points of view. Begin with the positive to avoid the tendency to dwell on the negative.

Focus Group Script: Transitions

When you create your protocol, begin discussion of each new topic with an introductory phrase, such as "I'd like to start by talking about what teens do in their leisure time," or "Now I'd like us to discuss what teens think about contraceptives."

It's important to follow the script closely. Use the same wording during every group discussion to ensure that participants in all discussions are responding to the same questions.

Example of an Effective Questioning Route with Appropriate Script Components

Note: This example is not the complete script for this focus group, but a shortened version that illustrates the various components of an effective questioning route.

Introduction	Hello and welcome. My name is Pam Drake and I'm from ETR. I'm so glad you decided to come here today and help us with our study. As we explained to you on the phone, we are going to ask you some questions about smoking in the car with young children. *[Review details of the study, confidentiality, consent, and how long the group will take. Go over group agreements about participant conduct.]*
Ice Breaker	Let's find out a little more about each other by going around the table and introducing ourselves. Please give your first name and the age of your children and, just for fun, tell us what your favorite food to cook or eat is.
Warm-Up Question (Participants begin to talk about topic)	I'd like to start with just a few general questions about your smoking. • First, how long have you been smoking? • OK. Now tell me about any times you've tried to quit smoking or tried to smoke less.

(table continued)

Example of an Effective Questioning Route with Appropriate Script Components *(continued)*

Transition	Now, I'd like to talk a bit about when you smoke in the car.
Main Question Set 1 (Broad, moves toward next question)	When do you typically smoke in the car? • Do you smoke every time you drive? • Do you smoke when you're a passenger?
Transition	Now, I'd like to talk about your smoking behavior around children.
Main Question Set 2 (More narrow, the primary research question)	How many of you smoke while a child is in the car? • For those of you who do, what if any differences are there in how often or how much you smoke when a child is present versus when there's no child present?
Wrap-Up Question	These are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you'd like to know about our project or about secondhand smoke exposure? Thank you for your time. It was a pleasure to meet all of you. Your answers will be very helpful as we move forward with this project. We'll give you your gift certificates and a packet of information you might find useful on your way out.

Focus Group Script: Question format

Make sure your main questions are open ended. Using yes/no questions, or those that require a single-word answer—also called closed questions—doesn't encourage discussion. For example, "Did you like the program?" is a closed question, and participants might easily offer one-word answers that are neither rich nor informative. Instead, ask, "What did you think about the program?"

Notice in the *Example of an Effective Questioning Route* above that the warm-up question begins with a closed question that can be answered in one or two words ("How long have you been smoking?"). Warm-up questions are often closed. This provides an easy way to give everyone a chance to talk at the outset. In this script, the first warm-up question is followed by an open-ended question that invites richer answers ("Tell me about any times you've tried to quit smoking, or tried to smoke less").

Avoid Likert-type items such as, "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you like the program?" Such information can easily be gathered through surveys. This type of question wastes valuable time in a focus group.

Finally, avoid asking “Why?” questions. They are overly broad and sometimes put people on the defensive. Instead use questions such as, “What about X did you like or not like?” or “What was the main reason you did X?”

Examples of Effective Questions

Use Open-Ended Questions	**Wrong:** Do you think we should develop pregnancy prevention programs for youth in middle school? (Closed question, invites one-word answer) **Right:** What are your thoughts about developing pregnancy prevention programs for youth in middle school? (Open question, invites rich responses)
Don’t Use Likert-Type Questions	**Wrong:** “On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you like the program?” (Invites narrow answer that could easily be addressed in a survey, wastes time) **Right:** “What are some of the things you liked about the program?” “What are some of the things you didn’t like about the program?” “How would you compare this program to similar programs you have participated in?” (All of these are open-ended questions that invite rich responses.)
Avoid Why Questions	**Wrong:** Why did you like the training session? (Overly broad, can put people on the defensive.) **Right:** What features of the training session did you like best? (Open question, invites rich responses.)

Focus Group Script: Wording your questions

According to Krueger and Casey (2009), good focus group questions:

- **Sound conversational.** You want to engage participants in a natural way. Formal questions discourage informal, open sharing.
- **Use words the participants would use when talking about the issue.** You don’t want participants to be confused about meanings (for example, by using complex medical terminology) or be intimidated by language that may leave them feeling they don’t understand the topic. Participants are the experts in a focus group, and familiar language emphasizes this.
- **Are easy to say.** You want to make it easy for the group facilitator to focus on the substance of the group, not the complexity of the script. Participants can respond comfortably and reflect back content from each question.
- **Are clear.** Do everything possible to eliminate ambiguity or confusion in the questions.

- **Are usually short.** The longer a question, the easier for participants to be confused, lose the train of the discussion or become distracted.
- **Are usually one dimensional.** This means the question asks only about one clear idea. Asking about more than one thing can confuse participants and confound answers. For example, the question, "How will you use these skills now, and over the coming year?" won't clearly indicate which time period a participant is addressing in his or her response.

  One-dimensional questions also avoid the use of synonyms. While you might use synonyms to create emphasis or provide clarity in everyday conversation, they can actually obscure the information gathered from a focus group discussion. For example, a focus group of high school students could be confused by the question, "When you have a question, how approachable or available is your health teacher?" "Approachable" and "available" are not necessarily the same thing.

Example of One-Dimensional Questions

Wrong: "What materials and information do you need, and what are the barriers to getting these?" (Asks several questions, can confuse participants, may not be clear which question is being answered)

Right: "What materials do you need?"

"What barriers do you face in getting these materials?"

"What information do you need?"

"What barriers do you face in getting this information?"

(All are open questions, clear and precise)

Think carefully about your participants' attention span when determining the length of the focus group.

Focus Group Script: Length

Ideally, a focus group should last between one and two hours. Think carefully about your participants' attention span when determining the length of the focus group. Estimate the time needed for each question as you're writing your script. Time your script, reading the questions out loud and thinking through possible responses. It's better to overestimate how long a question-response will take than find yourself rushing participants through the questions.

Focus Group Script: Prompts

Focus group scripts often include prompts or probes that the facilitator can use to get more information or clarity from participants. These may be general prompts, such as, "Tell me more about that," "I'm not sure I understand," or "Is there anything else?"

Prompts or probes may also be *specific* and written to elicit responses to a particular question. For example, you might ask the main question, “What are the characteristics of a successful pregnancy prevention program?” Specific prompts could be useful if participants don’t cover some of the important elements in their initial discussion. Ask, for example, “What about group size?” “What’s an ideal length for the program?” “How long should individual sessions be?” It’s important to make sure that facilitators know what prompts are allowed in their group.

Examples: 10 Useful General Prompts

- Tell me more about that.
- Please explain your response.
- Go on.
- What else do you have to say about…
- Give me an example.
- Now let’s hear some different thoughts.
- Say more.
- Describe that for me.
- What do others think about this?
- Who can add more to this idea?

Focus Group Script: Script layout

Once you’ve developed all of your questions, you need to lay them out in a format that’s easy for a facilitator to follow. Use a large, easy-to-read font and leave a lot of white space. Clearly mark where major sections begin and end, and include the suggested time for each section. It’s helpful to leave a large margin down one side so there’s space to write notes to the facilitator. The facilitator can also jot down notes in the margin.

Example of Script Layout

Note: This example is not the complete script for this focus group, but a shortened version that illustrates an effective layout style.

A. Introduction 5 minutes	Hi, I'm (name), and this is (name). We're both part of the Healthy Schools project. We're working with your school to find out how healthy kids at your school are.
Tell participants you are going to read the introduction so you don't miss any important information.	Today we're going to talk about the foods kids your age eat and their healthy behaviors. This will take about one hour. I'll ask questions for you to answer. You don't have to raise your hand or talk in any special order.
B. Ice-Breaker 10 minutes	Before we begin, we're going to loosen everyone up in a quick activity. So, let's all stand in a circle. I'm going to start this activity by throwing this ball to one person. That person will say his or her name as well as favorite and least favorite foods. Then you'll throw the ball to another person who has not yet had the ball. You need to remember the person who threw the ball to you and who you threw it to.
Throw ball to first participant and remind participants of the steps as needed.	Now we're going to toss the ball around the circle in the same order. At some point I'll add more balls or reverse direction.
Throw in a second ball. At some point add up to 5 balls. You also may have participants reverse direction. End the exercise by slowly taking the balls out of circulation.	Great! Good job! Now you can all return to your seats.

(4) Pilot test the protocol

Pilot testing helps you fine tune a protocol before conducting formal focus groups. Pilot tests give you a chance to try out the questions with a group of participants similar to those who will participate in your focus groups to see how the questions work. You can find out if participants are able to answer the questions in ways that yield the information you need, and get an idea of how long the discussion will take.

If pilot testing isn't possible, you should at a minimum gather two or three individuals with demographics similar to your population of interest, and try out the questions with them. As you move through the questions, or at the end of the discussion, ask for specific feedback and suggestions for improvement. Revise the protocol based on your testers' comments and suggestions.

It's also useful to have your script reviewed by people who are knowledgeable about data collection and your population of interest.

Prior and in addition to pilot testing, you also may need to have your focus group script reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) at your organization or funders. This is to ensure that no human subjects are being harmed in any way by participating in the focus group, and that all subjects are able to give informed consent to participate. If an IRB review is required, you will need to complete a detailed application and follow a clear protocol. For more information about IRBs, check the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/.

It's becoming more common to conduct focus groups via web conferencing. This can make it easier for participants to attend, but adds a whole host of new factors to address.

(5) Arrange your focus group logistics

Several arrangements need to be made prior to conducting your focus groups.

Focus Group Logistics: Select a site

The first step is to select a site. Choose a location that will encourage attendance and participation by your target population. Look for the following characteristics:

- Easy access using public transportation.
- A central location, and/or a location that's well known to participants.
- An environment in which participants will feel safe and comfortable sharing sensitive information.
- Enough space for the participants to sit around a table without distractions.
- Acoustic setting and outside noise level that allow everyone to be heard.
- Ability to serve snacks and beverages.

It's becoming more common to conduct focus groups via web conferencing. This can make it easier for participants to attend, especially when you want to cover a broad geographic area, but adds a whole host of new factors to address.

For example, some participants may speak more freely because they feel anonymous in a web conference. On the other hand, facilitators can't see participants' expressions or read body language. Participants in web conferencing may be easily distracted, and it's difficult for the facilitator to know whether all participants are attentive at any given moment. Web conferences can also make it more difficult to get feedback on something in print, such as a pamphlet, poster, lesson plan or activity sheet.

In addition, organizers/facilitators will need to have sufficient technical expertise, or available support, to troubleshoot any problems participants may have with signing in to the web conference.

Focus Group Logistics: Arrange for food

Snacks are not only popular, but actually help create a comfortable, informal atmosphere in which participants are more likely to relax—and talk. Cookies, popcorn, fruit or cheese trays are all good options. If you plan to serve meals, consider cultural preferences and check with participants during the recruiting process.

One food issue unique to focus groups is noise level. Keep water pitchers on a separate table, and avoid crunchy snacks like pretzels or potato chips. Otherwise, your recording of the focus group may contain a couple of hours of crackling and gurgling noises!

The purpose of the focus group drives who is invited.

Focus Group Logistics: Arrange other services

Depending on your participants, you may need to offer other services to ensure they will be able to attend. For example, consider helping with transportation (rides, taxi vouchers, bus tokens, reimbursement) and childcare. If childcare will be provided, arrange for a separate room for children and use licensed caregivers.

Focus Group Logistics: Gather materials

At some point prior to the focus group, you'll need to gather all the needed materials. These might include a voice recorder (and a back-up), extra batteries, memory cards or media, a microphone, flip charts and pens, name tags and any items participants may be reviewing. Make a checklist of all materials to be sure you are fully prepared for the group.

(6) Decide on the number and types of groups you'll conduct

The purpose of the focus group drives who is invited. In general, you'll want participants who share some important characteristics, but who don't necessarily know each other well. For example, you might not want to take over an existing group meeting for focus group purposes.

The characteristics of the participants you include in your sample depend upon the characteristics of the population you want your results to represent. Be as specific as possible. Think about factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and background. What factors are important, and how might these influence participant perspectives?

You'll want to conduct several focus groups so you can compare answers and look for trends and insights across the groups. A good rule of thumb is to run three or four focus groups. Ideally, you will host enough groups to achieve "saturation." This means that you're not hearing any new information from a particular type of group. If you're still getting new information after four groups, you should conduct additional focus groups.

If you want to be able to compare results of various subpopulations, you'll need to include enough people from each of these subpopulations to feel confident you've heard what each of the subgroups has to say. For example, if you want to compare urban and rural populations, or various ethnic groups, you should hold at least three groups for each characteristic or combination of characteristics you're interested in.

Structure your groups so participants will be as comfortable as possible sharing sensitive information. For example, you might think about holding separate groups based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic level and so forth, if some participants might be hesitant to speak or feel intimidated in mixed groups.

(7) Recruit participants

The ideal number of participants for a focus group is 6 to 10. Recruit 8 to 12 people so you'll have enough participants even if a few of those who signed up don't attend.

Decide who will do the recruitment and screening of focus group participants. This person won't necessarily be the facilitator of the focus group. Depending on the group and the topic, you may decide that the initial contact should be made by someone participants already know and trust.

Maintain a waiting list of qualified people, in case some participants cancel at the last minute.

It's important to provide your recruiters with recruitment and screening guidelines. Be sure these guidelines:

- Describe in detail the characteristics of the desired population.
- Provide questions to help recruiters identify desirable participants and screen out people who may not be appropriate because they do not meet your specific criteria.
- Provide sample language to help recruiters describe the project and purpose of the group to participants.
- List all recruitment steps.

Even after you've recruited 10 to 12 participants, maintain a waiting list of qualified people, in case some participants cancel at the last minute.

If people are interested in attending the focus group but don't meet the criteria you've set, thank them, record their contact information, and tell them you'll be in touch if other focus groups are held in the future.

Depending on the target population and topic, it may be difficult to reach potential participants. Give yourself plenty of lead time to recruit participants—allow at least four weeks.

In some cases, you may already have names and contact information for potential participants who fit the characteristics you're looking for. In other cases, you will need to find them yourself.

Recruit Participants: Persuading participants

Getting individuals to agree to participate in a focus group is half the battle. Having them actually show up is the other half. Here are some suggestions that can help boost attendance:

- Enlist a community leader, staff person from a program, or other trusted individual to help with recruitment. Ideally, this person will be at the focus group to greet participants when they arrive.
- Promote the focus group enthusiastically. For example, the recruiter might begin by asking potential participants, "Did you hear about this great chance to help some people and make a little money, too?"
- Reassure participants that you're not interested in immigration status, licensing or social security numbers if issues such as these are likely to be a concern. Emphasize that participation is private and will not be reported to anyone beyond the project.
- Offer incentives to early responders. Bonus gift cards, free movie passes or other appealing items can be offered to the first few individuals who agree to participate.
- Have a drawing for a door prize at the focus group.
- Give out certificates of appreciation for participating in the group.
- Offer exciting incentives, such as gift cards, cash or coupons. Tailor these to the interests of your target population.
- Hold your group before or after another well-attended event.
- Offer food.

Focus groups must be run by an experienced facilitator.

(8) Identify an experienced group facilitator

Focus groups must be run by an experienced facilitator. Facilitation is a skill that takes training and practice. The facilitator must feel comfortable following the script, know enough about the topic of interest to identify when responses are off target, and be able to handle the various personalities within the group.

Ideally, the facilitator will be someone the participants do *not* know. Most people feel more comfortable sharing sensitive information with someone they will not see again.

(9) Conduct your focus group

Keep these things in mind during the focus group:

- **Arrive early and be ready to start on time.** This is an important signal of respect for participants.

- **Thank participants for their time at the outset.** This helps emphasize the value of the contributions participants will make and can enhance their readiness to participate.
- **Remind participants about the purpose of the focus group.** Even if participants have received background information, signed a consent form, and are well-informed about the purpose of the group, a brief review makes it clear that everyone in the room is "on the same page" about the agenda for the meeting.

A brief review makes it clear that everyone in the room is "on the same page" about the agenda for the meeting.

- **Record what participants share with you.** Take notes on a copy of the focus group script or a separate pad of paper. You may also want to record the focus group and listen to it later to flesh out your notes. If you decide to record, make sure you have all participants' explicit consent.
- **End on time.** Again, this is a sign of respect. It also communicates your competence and reassures participants that they've shared their opinions and experiences with a trustworthy individual or organization.
- **Thank the participants again.** Acknowledge their valuable contributions to the project. Compensate them for their time.
- **Discuss reports, summaries or publications.** If a summary of the data collected will be shared with participants from the focus groups, explain when and how this will be done. If findings from the focus groups or the project as a whole will be reported, let participants know how they can find out about the reports (such as checking a website, signing up on an e-mail list, etc.).

Conduct Your Focus Group: Addressing challenging participants

It's not unusual to face a variety of challenging situations when facilitating focus groups. These can range from mildly inconvenient to potentially harmful to your data or to participants themselves. Here are some suggestions for what to do if a participant's behaviors interfere with the smooth functioning of the group.

Discourteous person (won't follow rules, puts others down)

- Refer to group agreements. These usually include provisions such as one speaker at a time, no side conversations and the importance of hearing from everyone.
- Explicitly say that you want to hear from others first. ("Andre, let's hear from Ana now, since she hasn't had a chance to comment yet.")
- Announce a short break and talk to the person privately. Ask him or her to control the difficult behavior.
- As a last resort, announce a break and ask the person to leave.

Shy, quiet person

- Make eye contact. If possible, seat this person across from the facilitator to increase eye contact.
- Encourage with smiles, nodding or other welcoming body language.
- Create gaps in the conversation to allow room for the quiet participant to speak.
- Read and comment on body language cues. ("I notice you're nodding, Lee.")
- Explicitly invite the person to participate. ("Gloria, we haven't had a chance to hear from you. Do you have another example?")

Dominating person

- Avoid eye contact. If possible, seat this person beside the facilitator to minimize eye contact.
- Hold up your hand ("stop" signal).
- Refer to group agreements about hearing from everyone and limiting side conversations.
- Shift attention to other topics or speakers, and explain why. ("Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet.")
- Shuffle seats after a break. This is especially useful for breaking up side conversations.
- Use flattery. Call a break and privately ask the person to hold back on comments until others have spoken because his/her expertise appears to be intimidating others.
- As a last resort, announce a break and ask the person to leave.

Rambling person

- Discontinue eye contact. Turn away.
- Wait for an intake of breath (it will have to come sooner or later!), then interrupt by saying, "Let's move on—we have a lot to cover today," or "That's really interesting. Now let's hear from others."
- Repeat the question and call on a different person.

(10) Analyze focus group results

Now is the time to make sense of all the comments and ideas you gathered during your focus groups. Analyzing data can be complicated. The guidelines below give a general description of how to compile your data, but are not meant to be your only resource. For reliable results, work with someone who has experience in analyzing qualitative data.

Focus Group Results: Find an experienced researcher or group to analyze the data

While focus group data are limited in several ways, they offer an extremely valuable way to shed light on themes and sub-themes within and across groups.

There are many techniques for analyzing qualitative data. A variety of computer programs can help. Involve a colleague or consultant trained in qualitative data collection and analysis to support this process.

If it's not possible to involve someone with this experience, form a team of three or four staff and/or community members who will work together to analyze the data, using the guidelines below. Be sure to delete participant names and any other identifiers before the data analysis begins.

Focus Group Results: Remember the limitations

As mentioned earlier, focus groups generally reach fewer people than surveys, and participants are not selected at random. Therefore, findings are not statistically representative, and conclusions based on the data can only refer to the individual participants.

Focus Group Results: Follow basic steps

While focus group data are limited in several ways, they offer an extremely valuable way to shed light on themes and sub-themes within and across groups. You'll increase your success in interpreting the data systematically and correctly if you can work with someone trained in qualitative data analysis.

There are three steps to follow when analyzing the information from focus group transcripts and notes:

1. Combine the answers from all participants in all groups.
2. Categorize similar answers to identify common themes and sub-themes.
3. Review answers and categories to identify trends, patterns and outliers (values or opinions that are different from the majority), as well as differences between subpopulations.

Because focus groups are designed to identify themes raised by participants and not to capture the exact level of agreement among participants, it's not appropriate to use counts and percentages to refer to what group participants said or implied.

Focus Group Results: Combine these findings with other data

Findings from focus groups should be combined with findings from other data-collection activities. All of the data combined will help you make informed decisions about how to adapt your program, materials, curriculum or other offerings to best meet the needs of the population you serve, without compromising core components.

Summing Up

There are many components to an effective focus group. Less-experienced individuals and organizations can use the guidelines in this report to develop, implement and analyze simply designed focus groups that address basic questions. This is a good way for an organization to begin exploring the focus group form and building experience in the process.

For more complex research questions, consider talking with an evaluation professional. You should be able to determine fairly quickly how elaborate and complex a process will be required for your needs. Then you can decide whether your organization needs additional assistance and, if so, what type.

Gathering good focus group data can inform your organization's ability to measure and improve success. If you choose to put the effort into focus groups, be sure it's effort well spent to design and deliver an effective focus group process.

To discuss our evaluation partnerships, contact Dr. Pamela Drake at:
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Reference

Krueger, R.A., Casey, M.A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

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