Conducting Focus Groups and Large-Group Discussions

Focus Groups

Focus groups are small-group discussions led by a trained facilitator. They are structured to encourage opinions and perspectives that are representative of a particular group or demographic. Focus groups have a number of benefits; but like all information-gathering techniques, they have their downside as well. For instance, while focus groups can be quick to set up and conduct, the information they yield will be skewed if you don't carefully select group participants.

Focus groups are most useful when you:

- Are assessing needs in your community
- Are considering introducing a new service
- Want to evaluate various aspects of a current service or group of services
- Feel that face-to-face engagement with stakeholders will add richness and credibility to your overall data-gathering effort
- Have access to a skilled, neutral facilitator
- Know how to recruit a group of participants that reflects the diverse opinions of the intended demographic
- Need to gather information quickly and inexpensively
- Have a staff member or volunteer who can take extensive notes during the focus group, or record the meeting and transcribe the notes afterward
- Have a small team of individuals, not all of whom were present at the focus group, to analyze notes, identify themes, and develop conclusions

Finally, before you decide to conduct a focus group, ask yourself if what you want to find out can be discovered some other way. What nuances in perspective and opinion make a focus group desirable? Going in with a very clear idea of what you want to achieve will improve your chances of success.

Planning a Focus Group

Review the following special considerations when planning a focus group.

- **Select participants carefully.** Choose and invite a narrow group of stakeholders likely to have a variety of opinions. Not everyone should love your services, and not everyone should be a critic. You want a genuine mix of people. This is especially true if you are conducting only one or two focus groups. Ideally, focus groups include no more than 10 participants each. If your stakeholders comprise many different racial, ethnic, language, or socio-economic subgroups, you may need up to half a dozen or more focus groups to cover the entire range of stakeholder opinion.
- **Discuss incentives.** Focus groups can be inexpensive to run, particularly if you already have access to a skilled facilitator. You do need to consider how, or if, you will compensate participants for attending. You may give participants a small cash stipend or gift certificate, or offer snacks or a meal. Either way, make sure they know in advance what's being offered.

- **Settle on the details.** What day, time, and place work best to ensure the people you want to attend are able to participate? Consider the length of the focus group; 90 minutes is ideal for most groups. It's also important to ensure accessibility. For example, will you need a translator? Will you need to offer child care or transportation?
- **Prepare your questions.** Focus group questions are usually opened-ended and intended to stimulate thought and conversation. Review sample questions, adapted from the Community Tool Box[1]:
  - What are some of your thoughts about what's going on now?
  - What's going well? What are you satisfied about? Why is that?
  - What's not going well? Are there things you would like to see changed? What are they and why? How should they change?
  - What kinds of things would you like to see happen?
  - How about this particular aspect (of the topic)? What do you think about that?
  - Some people have said that one way to improve X is to do Y. Do you agree with this?
  - Are there other recommendations that you have or suggestions you would like to make?
  - What haven't we covered? What else is important for you to say before we wind up?
- **Recruit participants.** Personal outreach works best. Ask colleagues, friends, and friends of friends for help in reaching out to stakeholders who don't normally attend meetings and make their opinions known. This is where some of your richest and most interesting information will come from.

Conducting the Group

The facilitator:

- Reviews the purpose of the group and the goals of the meeting
- Introduces the agenda, suggests ground rules, and encourages open participation
- Asks key questions
  - The first question might be very broad, such as, "What are your general thoughts about the needs of families in this community?" Questions may get narrower over time, eventually turning to, "How do you feel that service X is working for families? What's going right and wrong with it, from your perspective?”
- Makes sure everyone gets a chance to be heard
  - You can accomplish this by going around the circle to solicit responses one at a time, or by asking people to raise their hands or nod in agreement when they share an opinion voiced by another member.

[1] Center for Community Health and Development, Chapter 3, Section 6: Conducting Focus Groups (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas: 2017), retrieved from The Community Toolbox https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus-groups/main

To keep the discussion moving, the facilitator can:

- Summarize what they think they have heard and ask if the group agrees
- Phrase the same question a different way
- Ask follow-up questions
- Look around the room and make brief eye contact, especially with those who may not be speaking much

After the Focus Group

Study your findings and consider the following:

- What common themes or patterns emerged?
- Where did you see differences, and why do think you saw them?
- Do have new questions as a result of your findings?
- On what conclusions can your team agree?

Large-group Facilitation

Large-group discussions can be a highly effective way to get group consensus or make decisions with broad buy-in. They typically include 25–40 people. Facilitators must be adept at managing both very quiet and very outspoken members of the group so everyone benefits from the experience and a range of opinions are presented.

Consider conducting a large-group process when you:

- Need to gather input for a broad constituency
- Have a big enough venue and the logistical capacity to manage a large group
- Want to discuss topics that are not highly complicated or inherently emotional
- Have well-organized information to present
- Know precisely what you hope to achieve
- Have an expert facilitator and two or three additional staff to assist

Special Considerations

Large-group processes allow people who don't usually exchange viewpoints to come together in one place to share and build on one another's ideas. It's important to invite a wide variety of individuals from across sectors. Be sure to reach out to people who have not been included in past information-gathering processes.

Large group meetings usually last at least half a day. Know your head count in advance, and set up the space so that participants can be seated comfortably in small groups, ideally at round tables. Make sure everyone is able to see the front of the room. Distribute materials to tables before the meeting begins. It's easy to lose people's attention in a large-group setting, so make sure your technology is ready to go and you have a portable microphone, coffee, and snacks. Fidget toys help, too.

For very large groups, breakout activities are especially important. With groups larger than 40 people, facilitators usually require use of microphones and projector screens in order to introduce and collect data during the meeting.

Conducting the Group

The facilitator:

- Introduces the purpose of the meeting and agenda to the group as a whole, regardless of size
- Makes sure that breakout groups of no more than six people each are arranged to create maximum diversity of opinion and perspective
  - Participants may need to be re-seated to create more optimal sub-groups
- Presents the information or data that the group has been convened to discuss and a series of questions that have been prepared ahead of time
  - Questions are tailored to the issue and group, but a typical framework might be:
    - What are you seeing in this information?
    - What is exciting or interesting to you?
    - What is concerning to you?
    - What do you recommend as a next step?

Breakout Groups

Each breakout group should be given a handout of the questions and the following instructions:

- Your group will have 20 minutes to discuss the questions.
- Choose members of the group to act as facilitator to lead you through the questions, take notes, and keep track of time.
- Agree on one action recommendation as a group.

After 20 minutes, bring everyone back together and have breakout groups report their key recommendations. The facilitator should write the recommendations on a flip chart or overhead projector. After each group has reported, invite two to three brief questions or comments, signaling to everyone that you want to keep discussion moving.

Depending on the agenda, a second round of small-group discussions on other issues could take place. If there is enough time, have people form new breakout groups so they can work with different partners. There is more than one way to process breakout group responses. The World Café approach is one of the most popular.

Source: Youth Catalytics (2019). www.youthcatalytics.org