Conducting Focus Groups and Large-Group Discussions

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are small-group discussions led by a trained facilitator. They are structured to surface opinions and perspectives that are representative of a particular demographic group. 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 focus group and transcribe the notes afterward
- Have a small team of individuals, not all of whom were present at the group, to analyze notes, identify themes, and develop conclusions

Finally, before you decide on conducting a focus group, ask yourself what you want to find out that can't 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

Special considerations:

- **Select participants carefully.** Choose a narrow group of stakeholders and within that group, invite people 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 socioeconomic subgroups, you may need up to half a dozen or more focus groups to cover the entire range of stakeholder opinion.

- **Decide about incentives.** Focus groups can be inexpensive to run, particularly if you already have access to a skilled facilitator. But 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 they may simply be happy to share 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 works 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. Ensure accessibility. For example, will you need a translator? Will you need to offer child care? How about transportation?

- **Prepare your questions.** Focus group questions are usually opened-ended and intended to stimulate thought and conversation. The following suggestions come from the Center for Community Health and Development's Community Tool Box:
  - "What are some of your thoughts about what's going on now?"
  - "What are you satisfied about?" "Why is that?" (Or, "What's going well?")
  - "Are there things you would like to see changed?" (Or, "What's not going well?") "What are they?" "Why is that?" "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?" (Or, "How do you feel about that?")
  - "Are there other recommendations that you have, or suggestions you would like to make?"
  - "What haven't we covered?" (Or, "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 that 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

To keep the discussion moving:

- Summarize what you think you 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 group, study your findings. 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? What conclusions can your team agree on?

LARGE-GROUP FACILITATION

Large-group discussions typically include 25-40 people, and can be a highly effective way to get group consensus or make decisions with broad buy-in.

For very large groups, breakout activities are especially important. Facilitators must be adept at managing very quiet and very outspoken members of the group so everyone benefits from the experience and a range of opinions are surfaced. 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.

Consider a large-group process when you:

- Need to gather input for a broad constituency
- Have a large-enough venue and the logistical capacity to arrange a large group
- Want to discuss topics that are not highly complicated or inherently emotional
- Have information to present that is well-organized
- 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 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, you have a portable microphone, coffee, and snacks. Fidget toys help, too.

Conducting the Group

The facilitator:

- Presents 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 created more optimal subgroups.
- Presents the information or data that the group has been convened to discuss
- Poses a series of questions that have been prepared ahead of time
    - Questions are tailored to the issue and group, of course, 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?

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 someone to act as facilitator to lead you through the questions, someone to take notes, and someone to 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 recommendation. The facilitator should write the recommendations on a flip chart or overhead projector. After the report-out, 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. Find resources about the approach on the organization's website.

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