

NEW YORK STATE TEACHERS CENTERS

Focus Groups

Purpose

This tutorial addresses strategies for using focus groups as a method of collecting information for program evaluation.

Introduction

Focus groups are a method of group interviewing in which the interaction between the moderator and the group, as well as the interaction between group members, serves to elicit information and insights in response to carefully designed questions. The dynamic nature of the questions asked by the moderator and the group process, produces a level of insight that is rarely derived from 'unidirectional' information collection devices such as observation, surveys and less interactional interview techniques. Methods of recording and analyzing information gathered during focus groups, and strategies for collecting unbiased information have helped focus group research to gain credibility as an accurate and useful source of information collection. Focus group methods gained popularity in marketing research. In the 1980s social scientists recognized the value of focus groups for qualitative research and adapted the techniques accordingly. In the 1990s focus group strategies have become widely researched and used in social sciences and human service organizations.

When to Use Focus Groups

Focus groups, like any other program evaluation method, are more appropriate for some situations than others. Morgan & Krueger (1993) discuss instances when focus groups are beneficial:

- When the security provided by the group allows members who are lower in the 'power hierarchy' within an organization to express feelings and experiences that they would not otherwise share.
- When the target audience is so different from decision makers that different terminology and points of view can be illuminated and understood (this information can be useful when constructing questionnaires for those audiences).
- When desired information about behaviors and motivations is more complex than a questionnaire is likely to reveal. Through a series of well designed questions, focus groups can often get at more honest and in depth information.
- When one is interested in finding out the nature of consensus. While several respondents completing a questionnaire may indicate that they 'agree' with an item, focus groups may reveal fundamental differences among group members concerning the conditions of that agreement.

- When target audiences may not take questionnaires seriously or answer them honestly. Effective focus groups will communicate a desire to obtain meaningful, honest information. Superficial or patronizing responses as well as critical responses can be challenged and or put into an appropriate context.
- In situations where there is organizational conflict and or alienation, members of focus groups and their constituencies may feel 'listened to'. This may result in an honest and meaningful exchange of information.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

The decision of whether to use focus groups for a given evaluation project depends on the strengths and limitations of focus groups in contrast to other evaluation techniques. Here three ways of collecting information for program evaluation and how the process and results may differ from focus groups.

1) Naturalistic observation has some advantages over focus groups. Focus groups are conducted in an unnatural social setting. The presence and direction of the moderator may influence responses that might be different in a more natural setting. While naturalistic observation allows for observation of a broader range of information and potentially a more open discussion, focus groups set an agenda and use questioning strategies that influence the group process.

2) Individual interviews are more efficient than focus groups and interviewers are typically able to cover more ground interviewing one person versus a group. While focus groups may actually get at less information than a one hour individual interview, the dynamic interchange between the group members may result in more in depth and unbiased information concerning a particular topic. A potential weakness of focus groups may occur when members do not express their personal opinions and conform to a popular opinion or acquiesce to a particular group member. Strategies for increasing an open exchange of ideas will be discussed below. Focus groups can be used in tandem with individual interviews. Evaluators may use focus groups to initially explore issues and then seek expanded (perhaps private) information through individual interviews.

3) Questionnaires compared to focus groups are relatively easy and inexpensive to create, analyze and communicate the findings. Questionnaires may be administered to the masses while focus groups typically elicit information from only 8 to 24 people who hopefully represent the population being investigated. Questionnaires may include as many questions as the evaluator thinks the respondents will complete, while focus group moderators have to crack the whip in order to get responses to five or so key questions. So why use a focus group?? In some cases evaluators want to gain a deeper understanding of the issues. Focus groups are able to delve much deeper into issues than questionnaires. This is discussed further in the [When to Use Focus Groups](#) section.

Many evaluators use both focus groups and surveys. Surveys may indicate areas that require further probing through focus groups. Focus groups may also be used in the creation of surveys. By discussing the area in need of investigation, focus groups can illuminate key points about the topic so that the survey is comprehensive enough. Focus groups can also clarify terminology used to describe what is being investigated. Maximizing knowledge about key concerns and effective communication with the potential focus group participants helps developers of surveys create questions that are understood in the same way by all respondents.

Strategies for Organizing Focus Groups

Selecting participants. Focus groups are typically comprised of 6 to 10 participants who do not know one another and who have similar associations to the topic being investigated (i.e., Elementary teachers discussing a new reading curriculum). Selecting participants who are similar may help them to share ideas more freely (i.e., a group of women talking about dating) and may prevent results from being so mixed that no conclusions may be drawn. It is important that the group membership selection is described and results are not generalized to other groups. Focus groups often employ participants who are strangers to reduce sharing in ways that acquaintances might expect and to increase anonymity for the sake of honest responding.

Number of groups conducted. For many research oriented projects 3 to 5 focus groups are conducted. Using only one focus group to arrive at conclusions about a particular topic is risky since the opinions expressed may have had more to do with the group dynamics (i.e., persuasive skills of one or two members) than a true sampling of the opinions of the population that the group represents. Having two homogeneous groups that provide different results suggests that more information is necessary. The degree to which these rules of thumb are followed depends on their importance within the context of the project, the stakes of the evaluation project and available resources.

Organizing the meeting. Focus groups typically cover about five main questions (each with sub questions or probes) in the span of 90 minutes. It is often helpful to state that the group will run for two hours to prevent conflicts arising from late arrivers or topics warranting further exploration.

Setting considerations. The setting in which a focus group is conducted should be comfortable. Quality refreshments and comfortable chairs may go a long way in making participants who have volunteered their time to participate in a focus group feel appreciated. Tables and chairs should be arranged so that all participating can easily see one another. Name tags may help participants to better interact with one another. The location of the focus group should be in as close proximity to where participants work or live to reduce travel time. Finally, organizers should consider how certain settings may have a stifling effect on certain conversations (i.e., a discussion on human sexuality in a church).

Questioning Strategies

Focus groups typically involve about ten clearly worded open ended questions. Because of the group process, several hours could be spent discussing the key questions. The moderator must managed the process so that essential information can be obtained in a reasonable amount of time (typically 60 to 90 minutes). Questioning strategies can be used to both seek essential information and manage the process.

Krueger (1994) describes a sequential series of questions that get the group off to a good start, focus on key questions and provide closure:

1. The group is introduced and begins sharing information with an opening question (e.g., everyone responds to the grade and setting of their school).
2. Introductory questions start the group off by having them respond with their experience with the general topic of the focus group.
3. Transition questions help the group to see the topic on a broader scope and how opinions on various aspects may be diverse.
4. Key questions (usually five or six) are carefully crafted to get at the essence of the desired information.
5. Ending questions prompt the participants to summarize their positions, provide feedback concerning the moderator's interpretation of the group results and seek any information that may have been missed.

Structured vs. Unstructured Focus Groups

Moderators who want a structured group process often employ a guide to keep the group on track according to a pre-set agenda. Use of a guided agenda is also helpful to compare information from one group to another when more than one focus group is conducted on a given topic. A well-designed guide helps the conversation develop in line with the research questions. At times the group will 'get ahead of itself' and the moderator will need to bring them back to topic with a statement such as 'Hold that thought since we'll be discussing that later'. In other instances the moderator may let the conversation flow more naturally making sure that key questions are covered. In less structured groups, a question frequently used to elicit flexible responding is: "One of the things that we are especially interested in is _____. What can you tell us about that" (Morgan, 1997).

Morgan (1997) provides some questioning strategies are effective in getting at important types of information:

- Seeking information about consensus: "Several people have mentioned _____. I'm curious about what the rest of you have to say about that?"
- When the group does not uncover an anticipated issue: "I'm surprised that no one has mentioned _____. Is that important or not?"
- Clarifying contradictory statements: "I'm remembering when some of you said _____, How does that fit in?"
- Focus groups often investigate how a process could improve or be made easier: "What has made _____ easier for you and what kinds of things have made _____ harder?"

Questioning strategies can also help to manage the group process. Focus group moderators have the difficult task of leading the group through a process that if unmanaged could take several hours (or be cut short by serious disagreement). Moderators must be empathic and not dominate the group, while at the time exert enough pressure to prompt the group along on its mission. Several questioning strategies allow moderators to subtly influence the group process without taking it over. The following strategies are discussed in Wheatley and Flexner (1988):

- Leading questions such as "Why ___?" or "What is it about ___ that makes you say that?" help the group delve deeper into a topic.
- Steering questions get groups back on track when they've strayed. 'When would (tangential example) apply to (key issue)?'
- Factual questions that are non threatening and unambiguous can defuse a group that is becoming emotionally charged. 'What are the ages of your students?'
- Anonymous questions (e.g., writing down responses on an index card) can be used to generate diverse responses that participants might otherwise be reluctant to share.
- Obtuse questions address the issue from the perspective of another person. Rather than have participants respond personally they can answer questions with less risk (i.e., 'Why might someone want to smoke marijuana?')
- Silence can be used very effectively to give participants time to contemplate and respond to more difficult ideas.
- Testing questions take comments made by the group and exaggerate them to investigate the degree to which participants will go with an idea (i.e., "So it appears that English Language Arts inservices have not provided you with useful classroom information. Is there nothing about the presentation that you found useful for instruction?")
- Feelings questions may expose the personal feelings of participants and therefore can be risky. Moderators must make sure that there is a group atmosphere that respects diversity of opinion.
- It is important to conclude the session with summary questions. Moderators may conclude by asking participants to provide a summary statement about the topics raised. Sometimes the informal conversation following the focus group reveals ideas/opinions not expressed during the group. Some moderators have found these conversations illuminating and provide opportunities for such discussion with the tape recorder still running.

Information-Recording Strategies

A vast amount of information is shared during a 90 minute focus group. The most common technique for collecting focus group information is a combination of note taking and an audio tape recorder. It is important that the process of recording the focus group does not interfere with the group process. Video tape may stifle some participants and is not favored by many focus group researchers. Moderators must also not let note taking interfere with the group process. It is important for those using focus groups to use information recording techniques that :

* Capture all of the essential information;

* Collect information in an unbiased manner (It is not unheard of for researchers to filter out what they don't want to hear);

* Put statements made during focus groups into the proper context (An idea expressed may only hold true in certain situations being discussed);

* Try to capture nonverbal behavior of group participants (Nonverbal reactions of other participants after a participant statement may indicate consensus or disagreement).

It is a challenge to capture all of the types of information that is generated by a focus group. For example, it is difficult using a tape recorder to know who in the group is making what statements. Tape recorders do not record nonverbal communication in the group that is important for knowing group consensus/disagreement on a particular point. The moderator or co-moderator may record very important information by taking careful notes of what the tape recorder will not pick up. It requires planning, skill and careful analysis of recorded information to get the most possible information out of focus groups.

Analyzing Information Resulting From Focus Groups.

Analysis of information generated by focus groups depends on the goals of the evaluation, resources available, and commitment of the evaluators. Analysis may range from gathering impressions from listening to the session and or tapes of the session along with reviewing notes taken during the session, to careful analysis of a full set of transcripts from tape recordings and careful documentation of the session. Intensive analysis of focus group data involves tape recording, transcribing and coding each session. According to Knodel (1993) a typical two hour focus group session yields about 40 to 50 pages of transcript. One coding scheme involves denoting categories that are germane to the primary questions being addressed, as well as topics that arise that may be of interest. Illustrative statements and more detailed codes for denoting specific in-depth information are also used. It is important that statements be understood in the context which they were made. Nonverbal communication observed during the group can also be very informative. Some focus groups employ two moderators, one of whom takes careful notes about events that are not captured on a tape recorder. In some cases researchers are interested in coding statements of individual groups participating in the focus groups to investigate similarities and differences (i.e., between full and part time workers participating in separate groups). Since the analysis process may become quite subjective, some researchers use more than one coder to collaborate on the results and reduce error. Krueger (1994) provides more in depth information about coding schemes for analyzing focus group results.

Communicating Results

Any evaluation is significantly strengthened by clear communication of the findings. Evaluators need to consider the audience when communicating findings and make the presentation relevant to their needs and interests. Please see [Effective Communication of Program Evaluation Results](#) for more points on effective communication of program evaluation results.

Myths About Focus Groups (Morgan, 1993)

There are many myths that are commonly accepted about focus groups (e.g., that they do not require much preparation, are quick and easy to organize and conduct, etc.). Six common misconceptions about focus groups appear below:

- **Focus groups are not a 'cheap and quick' way of collecting high grade information.** Organizing and conducting focus groups, and then analyzing and communicating their findings is a labor intensive process. The quality of focus group results may suffer significantly if proper resources are not allocated.
- **Moderators must go through extensive training in order to lead a focus group.** While good skills at facilitating groups are important, it is also important that the moderator have some knowledge about the people in the group and the program being discussed.
- **Members of focus groups should not know one another.** While a degree of anonymity can help members to state their true opinions and feelings, recruiting groups of strangers may not be possible in many instances (i.e., when the topic is a program within a smaller organization).
- **Focus groups are not effective in getting people to talk about sensitive topics.** Focus groups in fact can create a safe environment for self disclosure. In fact moderators must be careful to not let the group get carried away with certain topics since the presence of taping devices may present ethical dilemmas. Furthermore, focus groups are intended to gather information about topics relevant to the main questions.
- **Focus group results are necessarily biased due to conformity produced within the group.** Effective moderators create a safe environment for disparate opinions and clearly communicate that the objective of the group is to gather different points of view as well as areas of consensus about the topic being discussed.
- **Focus groups should not be a sole method of making decisions and must be validated with other methods.** In many cases focus groups are an excellent means of collecting in depth qualitative information about a program. On the other hand, use of interview techniques such as focus groups in combination with quantitative methods such as surveys may be important to answering the prioritized evaluation questions. The number of evaluation techniques and the resources that are allocated to their analysis is largely dependent on the context of the evaluation and the resources devoted. Evaluators learn quickly to choose evaluation tools sparingly.

Focus Groups and Teacher Center Evaluation

Teacher Centers engage in a wide variety of staff development, as well as evaluation activities. Centers vary widely in the resources that they have available for program evaluation and the attention paid to program evaluation results by key audiences (including the Centers themselves). Given the limited time and resources available to Centers, are focus groups a viable option for program evaluation data collection?? The answer is- of course - "It depends." Focus groups are not a cheap and easy way of collecting information from a group of people who will accurately represent all that Teacher Center's consumers. The amount of planning, expertise and resources devoted to conducting focus groups and analyzing the resulting information has a significant impact on their value. Inadequate data collection procedures of any

kind may result in faulty conclusions. Misinformation can lead a Center astray and work against the continued improvements that they seek to accomplish through evaluation.

Centers who have limited resources may want to proceed with caution and consider using some of the following strategies:

1. Minimize the number of questions asked during the focus group. This will cut down on the potentially arduous task of analyzing a mountain of information.
2. Use other evaluation tools (i.e., questionnaires) to back up information generated from focus groups. When two instruments measuring the same thing agree, one can have more confidence that the results are accurate.
3. Use two moderators so that comprehensive notes can be taken. This may eliminate the need to transcribe an audiotape and analyze 50 pages of information.
4. Use focus groups as a way of brainstorming ideas that may be useful to Center planning. Many times the dynamic process of the focus group results in ideas that are unlikely to emerge from one individual.
5. Keep focus group results in the proper context. If minimal resources are allocated to the planning conducting and or analyzing focus group information, recognize these weaknesses when using the information.
6. Be very careful when generalizing the results of one focus group to others that the group may or may not represent.
7. Collaborate with other Centers whenever possible and appropriate to collect information on a given topic or staff development initiative.

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