

Quick Tips

Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups are structured small group interviews. They are “focused” in two ways. First, the persons being interviewed are similar in some way (e.g., limited resource family members as a group, family service providers as a group, local officials as a group). Second, the purpose of the interview is to gather information about a particular topic guided by a set of focused questions. Participants hear and interact with each other and the leader, which yields different information than if people were interviewed individually.

The purpose of focus groups is to develop a broad and deep understanding rather than a quantitative summary. Focus groups are a highly effective method for “listening” to clientele and non-users of Extension programs. The emphasis is on insights, responses and opinions. Usually, there are eight to 12 participants. Multiple groups are recommended since each discussion is highly influenced by who is involved and the comments that surface. Focus groups typically run one to two hours.

Focus groups are used:

- To solicit perceptions, views and a range of opinions, not consensus
- When you wish to probe an issue or theme in depth

Preparation

- A skillful facilitator (leader) is important. You may want to use an agent from another county because participants may feel more free with their comments when they do not know the facilitator.
- Craft the set of questions and their order to flow as a natural conversation might.
- Limit the number of questions (six or less); sequence the questions from very broad or general to narrow or specific.
- Consider tape recording the interview. For formal studies, tapes are transcribed.
- For informal studies, tapes serve as an audit trail, but only the most pertinent quotations are captured verbatim.
- Prepare an assistant moderator to take notes. The assistant moderator describes the sense of what each person says, provides an identifier of who said what (e.g., single mother comment) and identifies how the comments were made (e.g., specific phrases, nonverbal cues, etc.).

Procedure

The interview itself has three parts: the opening, the interview questions and the wrap-up.

The opening

- Welcome, make introductions and thank participants.
- Review the purpose of the focus group interview.
- Review the ground rules: everyone’s ideas are important and everyone has an opportunity to speak. There are no right or wrong answers; even negative comments are useful in gaining insight about the topic under discussion. All comments are confidential and only summarized information will be communicated.



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The interview

Guide participants into the questioning, beginning with a general question first. As participants begin to share ideas, cycle through the group, ensuring that each participant has a chance to be heard. When comments related to one question are finished, summarize them, making sure there is agreement with the summary. Capitalize on unanticipated comments and useful directions the discussion may take. Probe and move flexibly into unplanned aspects of the topic but be careful about unnecessary or irrelevant divergences.

The wrap-up

You may wish to include a “cooling down” exercise. For example, ask group members to say “one thing that you heard here that was really important.” Thank participants and remind them how the information will be used. Participants often like to receive a follow-up (perhaps abbreviated) summary of the discussion.

Focus group summary

Various techniques are possible for analyzing the data. An abbreviated process may be sufficient. At the end of the focus group, the facilitator and assistant moderator debrief, review notes and write down the themes and main points that emerged and were discussed under each question and in general. Within the next few days, the facilitator and assistant moderator review their own notes independently and then reconcile any differences in their interpretations.

References

- Krueger, R. (1994). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
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- Stewart, D. (1990). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.