

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

WHY MASTER THIS SKILL?

Focus groups are widely used in development research to elicit qualitative information from selected people in a facilitated discussion. These are often referred to as Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way which would not be feasible using other methods, such as observation, one-to-one interviewing or questionnaire surveys. Compared to individual interviews, focus groups are able to draw out the views of the whole group, thus letting the researcher gain more information in a shorter time.

Focus groups are good for answering the 'how', 'why' and 'who' questions. They are particularly useful when there are power differences between the participants and decision-makers, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when you want to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic.

Focus groups can be used to plan more rigorous data collection (for example to design a questionnaire), or to enrich, broaden or contextualize existing data. They cannot ordinarily be used to generate statistics, but can be used to complement and help explain quantitative research findings.

The method lends itself to examining sensitive or taboo subjects in more depth, as the facilitator can use certain techniques to discuss such issues without personalizing them.

Summary

- **Advantages:** Focus groups can be more time-saving than individual interviews. The methodology is flexible and has high face validity, meaning that it measures what it is intended to measure. There are also opportunities for discovering unexpected outcomes and new information that was not anticipated by the facilitator.
- **Challenges:** Unless there is an experienced facilitator, the discussion could become a question-and-answer session or be too generalized to be of any use. Unless it is properly facilitated, there can be disputes within the group or domination by one or two participants. Data generated can be difficult to analyse, and there is often a tendency to generalize the results of focus groups.

HOW TO ORGANIZE AND CONDUCT FOCUS GROUPS

1. Preparation

- Focus groups are generally considered to be most effective with about 10–12 participants.
- Participants can be matched according to age, sex, ethnic background or other characteristics that have a bearing on the kinds of information that are sought from the discussion.
- Discussions should not take more than an hour; otherwise participants may become restless. Longer sessions are particularly unfair on women with small children.
- A question guide should be developed, but should be around topics and open-ended questions rather than structured like a questionnaire.
- A venue where participants can feel secure and will not be overheard or interrupted is a necessity. If women are invited, it may be appropriate to provide child-minding facilities.
- The facilitator should be experienced, familiar with the context and language of the group, and ideally matched with the make-up of the group (for example, an older woman for an older women's group).
- A dedicated note-taker is required, even if the group discussion is being recorded electronically, as the technology may fail or not pick up all of the voices.
- Refreshments can be served after the event, especially if people have come a long way, but not during the discussion, as eating and drinking can prove disruptive.

2. During the focus group

The following are guidelines for the actual conduct of focus group discussions:

- The facilitator should introduce themselves and the topic, explain the procedure and set some ground rules (turn off mobile phones, listen to each other, please do not interrupt).
- Permission for note-taking and any other recording must be sought. If using a digital voice recorder make sure participants understand that they can have it turned off whenever they ask.
- Participants may introduce themselves if the facilitator would like to use names when addressing them, but this should be before recording commences so that all comments are anonymous.
- The facilitator should start with general questions, and then narrow down to specific issues – this is to put people at their ease and to get the group discussion going. Sensitive questions should come later as by that time, participants will probably feel more confident to discuss them.
- A good facilitator will also observe the participants' body language, which can sometimes be as useful as the actual discussion. Body language can show, for example, fear, anxiety, reluctance, and sometimes that people are not telling the whole truth.
- The facilitator also needs to ensure that everyone in the group has a chance to talk, as well as managing anyone who dominates the discussion.
- There are different views about the facilitator sharing information about themselves and offering advice. Any such inputs should be natural and not impede the discussion. Advice is probably best offered after the group has finished and refreshments are being served.
- At the end of the discussion, the facilitator should sum up the main points and make sure that there are no more comments to be added. The best information often comes when the facilitator is summing up, and the note-taker needs to be ready to capture this.

3. Useful techniques and tools

The following techniques and tools are appropriate to use in some contexts:

- **‘Story with a gap’:** This is a good way of getting suggestions as to how people cope with a particular problem. The facilitator recounts a situation familiar to the participants but stops the story before the problem is solved. Participants are then asked to complete it.
- **The ‘other person’ technique:** A good way to ask about sensitive issues is to allow participants to talk about what happened to ‘other people’ even if, in reality, it is themselves. For example: ‘I hear that there are many women who have experienced domestic violence, do you know anyone to whom that happened?’ Participants can then discuss what happened to the ‘other women’ without disclosing that it is a personal experience.
- **Using participatory tools,** such as timelines, seasonal calendars, ranking exercises and community maps can be a good way to start a discussion, but these should be followed up by more in-depth discussion around the issues raised.

4. Tips for facilitators

Here are some additional tips for focus group facilitators:

- Put the participants at ease by showing interest. The facilitator needs to look as if they are interested in the subject and want to learn more about it.
- Keep questions to a minimum number of topic areas. There must also be opportunities to explore unintended outcomes.
- Avoid vague or confusing wording, especially jargon.
- Avoid asking more than one question at a time.
- Be careful not to just listen to and make eye contact with the most dominant members of the group. These participants often sit opposite the facilitator on purpose and it is easy to fall into the trap of only speaking to them.
- During the discussion, be aware of the following among group members:
 - Non-verbal cues;
 - Conflicts;
 - Coalition building;
 - Scapegoating;
 - Participation levels.

5. Reporting

Here are some additional tips on reporting the results of focus group discussions:

- For reporting purposes there is a need to know roughly how many people agreed or disagreed with a statement. Qualitative expressions, such as ‘almost all’, ‘half of’ or ‘two-thirds’ should be used, rather than percentages, which are best used with quantitative data.
- The report should clearly state the number of participants in the group. Generalizations should be avoided, as these can result in the misleading assumption that everyone in a community had the same views.

- Use recorded quotes; these add life to a report, especially when they are well expressed or provide a good description relevant to the issue that was discussed.
- Remember that the qualitative information from focus groups can be used to explain quantitative data from other sources, making the latter more useful, interesting and easy to read.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Green, D. (2010) 'Top tips on interviewing people in groups', From Poverty to Power blog, 29 September 2010, <http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=3640> (last accessed September 2015).

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Krueger, R.A., and Casey, M. A. (2009) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (4th edition), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

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Morgan, D.L. (1997) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research* (2nd edition), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

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