

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSION

Focus groups are structured discussions led by a facilitator. The purpose is to stimulate discussion around a specific topic.

It is like a 'group interview' with the facilitator posing questions and participants responding with their thoughts and opinions.

The size of the Focus groups:

8-10 participants

1 Facilitator

1 Note-taker

The Facilitator & Note-taker are to work as a team.

The Facilitator

- guides discussion to stay on objectives
- listens and responds without judgment
- encourage participation
- ask probing questions
- ask clarifying questions
- enforce ground rules

The Note-taker

- to record participants' discussion accurately and completely
- use exact words whenever possible.
- If paraphrasing, to check with participants if they are comfortable with the wording

Preparation for the Focus Group

- Identifying the purpose of the discussion
- Identifying the participants
- Develop the questions
Questions should be: open-ended, specific, one at a time, allowing good pacing of thoughts, does not assume the answer.
- Select the location & controlling setting
- Inviting the participants
- Facilitator preparation
 - gather the materials needed (e.g. name tags, charts, etc)
 - get the list of participants
 - clarify role and purpose
 - identify housekeeping issues
 - set time for the sequence and flow of discussion
 - re-familiarize with the objectives, topic and target audience.

Running the Focus Group

1) Opening the Discussion

- Welcome the participants
- Introducing the team (facilitator & note-taker)
- Reminder of the purpose of the focus group, clarifying how the information that is gathered will be used and letting them know what information, if any, they will receive after the discussion.
- Explain how the focus group process will work and what is expected of them. If appropriate, share the discussion guidelines. (Ground rules)
- Emphasize the confidentiality of responses and asking all participants to honour that.
- Relaxing the group with warm up activity.

2) **Managing the Discussion**

- If questions were distributed ahead of time, encourage participants to use their notes.
- Ask questions one at a time, allowing time for thought. Re-phrase questions only if participants seem puzzled or unresponsive.
- Encourage responses. Direct questions to entire group and not certain individual.
- Acknowledge responses with simple nod or 'thank you' and by recording comments on the flipchart. Be careful not to respond with any judgement, either verbal or non-verbal.
- Put aside unrelated ideas.
- Probe for more information by asking follow-up questions. Be careful to manage the group's time so that all priority questions are addressed.

3) **Closing the Focus Group**

- Let participants know that time for discussion has ended
- If they brought notes and can leave behind, collect the notes
- Give them a contact person for follow up after the focus group
- Remind them all information will be used and what information, if any, will be sent to them.
- Thank them for their contributions

4) **Follow up after the Focus Group**

- timely reporting of data is crucial
- format of reporting should be decided upon at the outset
- may include the following:
 - themes from participants comments
 - anecdotal information
 - objective conclusions, based on participants' comments
 - recommendations for further action.