

# An Introduction to Conducting and Facilitating Focus Groups

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John Snow, Inc.

# Training Objectives

- Describe range of qualitative research methods and appropriate use of focus groups
- Describe effective focus group preparation, including recruitment strategies and guide
- Demonstrate and apply facilitation skills
- Analyze and present findings effectively

# Training Overview

- Overview of focus groups
- Use of and preparation of focus groups
- Conducting focus groups
- Data collection and analysis

# Introductions

- Name
- Organization and your role
- What do you want to get out of today's training on focus groups?



# Qualitative Methods Overview

Method	Description
Focus group	Guided, small group discussion
Key Informant Interview	Individual interviews with key stakeholders, phone or face to face, more in depth discussion
Surveys	Quantifiable, descriptive
Community forums, public hearings	Open, public meeting for data gathering purposes
Other	Site visits, case studies

# Why Conduct Focus Groups?

- Generate ideas
- Better understand a problem
- Listen to experiences, feelings, opinions, and knowledge of participants
- Understand results of other research
- Answer unexplained questions
- Test a message, idea, or program
- Determine the needs of a particular population

# Focus Group Definition

“...a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is relaxed, comfortable, and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion.”

-Kreuger, 1998



# Benefits and Drawbacks of Focus Groups

Benefits	Drawbacks
Participant driven	Lack of standardization
In depth perspective	Limited perspective/not representative
Low cost/low tech	Dependent on facilitator skills and group dynamics
Flexible/responsive	Limited number of questions
Minimal time needed	Results not generalizable
Hear minority and non mainstream voices	Can be costly/time consuming

# Preparing for Focus Groups

- Identify objectives and purpose of research
- Determine group composition
- Prepare questions and guide
- Recruit participants
- Create a comfortable environment
- Assess informed consent requirements
  - Prepare forms
  - Obtain consent from participants

# Clarify Objectives and Purpose

Work closely with key stakeholders to answer and refine:

Why are focus groups needed?

What do they hope to answer?

- What are the specific research questions of interest?

What are the limitations of the groups?

How will the findings be used?



# Recruiting Participants

- Determine recruitment criteria
  - Traits that you need your focus group participants to have based on the Objectives and Uses for Results
  - Prioritize criteria
  - Criteria ensure homogeneous groups
  - Consider logistical and resource constraints
- Create a screening tool

# Recruitment Criteria to Consider

- Age
- Gender/sexual orientation/gender identity
- Race/ethnicity/cultural background
- Language(s)
- Education
- Job role
- Geographic
- Particular experience(s)
- Knowledge of focus group topic
- Comfort level with sharing ideas in group



# Recruitment Strategies

Strategy	Ideas
Telephone	Cold calls to contacts obtained from community group
Posters/fliers	Post in community sites or mailed, tell people to call for more information
Internet	Post to site, tell people to call for more information
Face to face	Recruit from health center, laundromats, supermarkets, churches, community centers
Community gatekeepers	Use key community contacts
Captive audiences	“Piggy back” onto existing groups, meetings

# Tips for Recruitment Success

- Over-recruit by at least 25%
- Ask participants to arrive 15-30 mins before start
- Provide stipend and refreshments
- Offer transportation and childcare as needed
- Be aware of seasonal demands
- Contact participants 2 weeks before group
- Send written invitations one week before group
- Call participants day before group



# Creating a Comfortable Environment

- Chairs in a circle around a table
- Working AV equipment (e.g., tape recorder)
- Private, neutral, non-threatening and easily accessible space
- Informal, safe & relaxed atmosphere
- Greet participants– start and end on time
- Refreshments or meal



# Role of the Facilitator

During	After
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce the group and set the tone</li><li>• Ask questions and encourage participation</li><li>• Ensure questions are timely addressed</li><li>• Probe and follow-up on relevant issues</li><li>• Maintain safe environment feeling</li><li>• Politely and firmly redirect unproductive discussion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Record comments, observations</li><li>• Summarize key themes heard in group</li><li>• Analyze findings</li><li>• Work with note taker to write focus group summary</li></ul>

# Traits of a Strong Facilitator

- Understands group dynamics
- Subtly manages disruptive behaviors
- Reflects back participant comments to clarify and confirm that they understand what respondent is saying– never assumes
- Does not allow personal biases, opinions, experiences to enter into the discussion
- Culturally sensitive



# Traits of a Strong Facilitator (cont.)

- Empathetic and non-judgmental
- Has adequate background knowledge of the topic
- Uses language that the group understands
- Does not read from the guide
- Is able to concentrate on what is being said while aware of the overall goals of the session

**Does not do most of the talking**



# Common Facilitator Pitfalls

- Uncomfortable with silence/pauses
- Asks too many questions
- Moves too quickly through guide (not allowing time for exploration)
- Leads the group with a pre-formed bias
- Focuses too much on one part of the guide (omitting other parts)
- Offers personal experiences during group discussion
- **Talks too much 😊**

# Role of the Note taker

During	After
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greets participants</li><li>• Oversees logistics of the group</li><li>• Operates tape recorder and/or videotape</li><li>• Maps the participants and conversation</li><li>• Takes comprehensive written notes</li><li>• Writes down any quotes that seem important</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Debriefs with facilitator immediately after focus group</li><li>• Assists with data analysis and report writing, if appropriate</li></ul>

**BREAK**  
**10 mins**



# Developing the Focus Group Guide

**\*Group sessions last no more than 90 minutes\***

## Introduction and Instructions (15 minutes)

- Facilitator/note taker introductions
- Purpose of group– what will be done with the findings
- Documentation and confidentiality
- Discussion ground rules
- Participant introductions and ice breaker

## Body of Interview (45-60 minutes)

- About 5-6 broad questions with several probes
- Questions focused on specific research objectives

## Closing (10 minutes)

- Summarize key themes heard
- Ask if participants have any other comments
- Thank participants again



# How to Use the Focus Group Guide

- Be familiar with it; don't read from it
- Keep time throughout the discussion;
- Try to cover every topic outlined;
- Be flexible and skip questions and probes that have already been covered.

# Types of Questions

Turn these close ended questions into an open-ended:

Are your clients satisfied with your services?  
(Elicits a Yes/No response)

or

Why are your clients satisfied with your services?  
(Implies that clients are satisfied)



**How would** you describe your client's satisfaction  
with your services?  
(Fosters a discussion)



# Asking Questions

Ask...	Strategies
Participants to clarify points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I understand that you are telling me this...is this right?</li></ul>
Clear questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use language of participant whenever possible</li><li>• Avoid labels or jargon</li><li>• Use examples to illustrate your questions</li></ul>
One question at a time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No more than one idea should be contained in each question</li></ul>
Neutral questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow participants to take their own direction and use their own words: Describe this...</li></ul>
Open ended questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid leading questions such as: your client's are satisfied with the services, right?</li></ul>
<b>Avoid expressing your favor, disfavor, shock, delight, anger, or embarrassment</b>	

# Probe Questions

Use them effectively	Strategies
<b>Probe with minimal leads</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• And...</li><li>• Tell me more...</li></ul>
<b>Use open ended probes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Say more about that...</li><li>• Can you give me an example of...?</li><li>• Could you explain what you mean by...?</li></ul>
<b>Use specific probes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What about other types of healthcare providers?</li><li>• Can you talk about them?</li></ul>
<b>Follow up on questions to explore responses in greater detail</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Could you describe that point a bit more?</li></ul>
<b>Only ask probes if participant does not offer the information</b>	

# Exercise - Developing Questions



# Conducting the Focus Group: Facilitation Skills

## Make Transitions

“We’ve been talking a lot about...now I would like to discuss.”

“This next question is really important, how do you think...”

## Summarize what you heard before moving on

“What I’m hearing is that...”

## Give support and feedback

“Your suggestions on...are helpful. I appreciate your willingness to share your feelings on that.”



# Facilitation Skills (cont.)

## Use “Holding On” to avoid getting side-tracked

“Marie, it sounds like you have a lot to say about... I want us to talk about that more later. Can you *hold onto* that idea and we’ll come back to it?”

## Loop back to return to a previous topic

“Earlier Jorge mentioned... and Marie talked about...What do other people think about that?”

## Manage time constraints to politely move along

“This is a lot of useful information. There is a lot more to say than we have time for today. Thank you for sharing so much of your experiences.”

“I know many of you feel strongly about this topic and have a lot to share. As I mentioned at the start, I am going to need to move us so that we are sure to cover all of the important topics in today’s discussion.”



# Facilitation Skills (cont.)

## Manage Group Dynamics

- Observe dynamics; pay attention to everyone
- Use non-verbal signals such as eye contact/body position
- Play off of other participants
- Try using polling or brainstorming to pull everyone in
- Direct questions to an individual in the group
- Ask for participation from others: “Let’s hear from others.”  
“What about the rest of you? What do you think about...?”
- Expect and accept disagreement
- Be aware of nonverbal reactions of the group

# Listening Skills

Type	Strategies
<b>Mirror or Paraphrase</b>	Repeat what is said or convey same meaning
<b>Reflect Back</b>	Acknowledge the emotional meaning and intensity
<b>Elaborate or Clarify</b>	Ask for further information of what was said
<b>Summarize</b>	Combine what was said and/or felt Summarize remarks Use summaries to mark a transition to a new topic

Develop rapport with participants

Demonstrate understanding without judgment

Practice active listening: Use open and attentive body language

Pause: use silence to elicit further response

Avoid pondering the next question



# Managing Participants

Type	Strategies
<b>“The Expert” – knows it all/can intimidate group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask other participants for their opinions</li></ul>
<b>“The Monopolizer” - talks all the time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thanks participant for comments and reminds he/she that other participants may have comments</li><li>• Ask others if they share his opinion</li><li>• Encourage a discussion for after the session, but given the short time, you need to move on</li></ul>
<b>“The Wanderer” - goes off on tangents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge that the point is interesting, but you need to focus on the topics for the discussion</li></ul>
<b>“The Shy One” -quiet and soft-spoken</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pay attention to body language- “Mona, you looked like you were nodding, what do you think?”</li><li>• After a point is made, ask the group what they think and then ask the shy person what she thinks</li><li>• Be encouraging/gentle; don’t force participation</li></ul>

# Exercise – Mock Focus Group

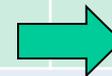
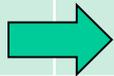


BREAK  
10 mins



# Data Collection and Analysis

Collect data	Debrief	Transcribe	Review	Identify Themes
<p>Tape recorder</p> <p>Notes</p>	<p>Talk about group dynamics with co facilitator, observers.</p> <p>Ask for impressions of answers.</p> <p>Summarize comments and key points.</p>	<p>Listen and type up audio.</p> <p><b>or</b></p> <p>Listen and write down key ideas.</p>	<p>Review focus group purpose and objectives.</p> <p>Read through transcript/notes.</p> <p>Every time you read a new idea, place a number in the margin, <b>or</b> use a different color highlighter, <b>or</b> cut/paste into another document.</p>	<p><b>Organize the ideas into 3-5 major themes:</b> comments brought up repeatedly by many different people and/or may be mentioned once but agreed upon by many participants</p> <p><b>Organize minor themes:</b> comments brought up and agreed upon by a subset of people</p> <p>*Identify strongly held individual opinions</p>



# Data Collection and Analysis (cont.)

## Other considerations: Keep everything in context.

- Body cues that are not recorded on a tape
- Quotes in context
- An opinion repeated over and over again by the same person but not agreed upon by others as a theme
- Sarcasm
- Refer to original transcripts to put comments in context

# Using Your Focus Group Data

## Summarize Your Findings into a Report

Goal 1: Answer questions stated by your objectives

Goal 2: Draw conclusions and make recommendations

Section	Content
Background	Purpose, Research Question/Objectives
Methodology	Screening procedures, Group Location and Number, Group Composition (Participant age, gender, etc.), Data collection and analysis process
Findings	List and describe themes with select quotes Interpret findings
Appendix	Focus group guide, recruitment fliers, screening tool, consent forms, etc.



# Report Writing and Dissemination

Consider how the results are to be used.

Consider who your audience.

- Are you disseminating data to the general public, funder, to the press, social media?

Be sure conclusions and recommendations will be useful to audience.



# Research contributes to sustainability

## Documentation of need

- Informs program planning and development
- Can be used for future fund-raising activities

## Quality improvement

- Provides feedback on program from participants, key stakeholders

## Community engagement

- Builds support
- Enhances visibility and awareness of program



*"At the heart of all that civilization has meant and developed is 'community' – the mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of man to assume a semblance of responsibility for his brother."*

*-Martin Luther King Jr.*



# Thank you!

Shannon Spurlock

Steve Meersman

JSI Research and Training Institute, Inc.

1-401-824-2116

