Conducting Focus Groups to Collect Data Beyond Numbers

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Purpose: Focus Groups are structured discussions, with a handful of participants, and one to two facilitators, to collect feedback or opinions. They are helpful for collecting data from clients and/or staff. Focus groups help you assess community needs through discussion and listening. As a form of qualitative data, focus groups allow you to collect data with depth, nuance, and variety. They allow you to observe nonverbal communication and group interactions when helpful. This emPower Tool covers the foundations of conducting focus groups. *Once your data is collected, see the **Analyzing Qualitative Data – Tips and Tools** emPower Tool.*

WHAT is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a small-group discussion guided by a trained facilitator. It is used to learn about opinions on a designated topic, and to guide future action.

WHY Use a Focus Group?

Focus Groups help you delve more deeply into a topic and get more meaningful data from respondents. It also signals to staff and/or clients that you care about their voices.

WHEN Should We Use a Focus Group?

When you are considering introducing a new program or service. To get feedback on an existing program or service. When you want to ask questions that can't be easily answered in a survey.

Steps for Conducting a Focus Group *See page 2 for more details*

☑ **Choose an Able Moderator** Your facilitator should be able to guide a conversation and tease out informative responses from a diverse group *(not someone the group wants to impress).*	☑ **Develop the Interview Guide** Choose a specific, focused discussion topic. Plan questions to ask, and a schedule for how long to spend on each question. Start with general questions and move to more specific questions.	☑ **Determine Incentives** Your participants are giving their time to provide data. Determine fair compensation considering the length of the meeting and whether or not there is travel involved.	☑ **Define Ideal Participants** Based on what info you are trying to gather, consider who is best positioned to provide insights. Think about voices and experiences that aren't usually heard.	☑ **Plan the Meeting** Determine the meeting particulars. Find a time and location (or virtual) that makes it easiest for people to participate, and pre-plan supplies (e.g., consent forms, name tags) and snacks.
☑ **Recruit Participants** Consider where ideal participants are most likely to see your recruitment. Use your networks and ask people to share the info in their networks as well. ☑ **Moderate, not Participate** Be sure the moderator probes well but does not bias the data by contributing thoughts or encouraging a particular answer.	☑ **Schedule the Key Players** Schedule your participants, your facilitator(s) and a note-taker for the assigned date and time. Be sure to send a reminder email to participants in advance. ☑ **Ask Open-Ended Questions** Use open-ended questions to get people talking and bouncing off of each other's ideas. Probe to get deeper responses and/or people talking more.	☑ **Set a Relaxed Tone** Create an environment where people can be comfortable to speak openly. Establish ground rules and encourage quiet people to participate. ☑ **Seek Clarity** Summarize and repeat back answers. Probe to ensure you are getting the most accurate, complete responses.	☑ **Use an Ice Breaker** Use a quick, fun icebreaker to help people to get to know each other. This helps build trust and gets people talking. ☑ **Record When Possible** To make analysis easier, record the sessions and transcribe afterward. If confidentiality is needed, respondents can use fake names.	☑ **Limit Size and Questions** Have between 3 and 7 respondents, if possible. To allow for sufficient time for discussion, plan for a maximum of 3 to 4 questions per hour. ☑ **Debrief With Your Team** Have the facilitator(s) and note-taker debrief the session soon after the session ends, while memories are fresh. Discuss key themes, points, and concerns.

Do we Really Need to Record?

- Recording allows you to collect **quotes** accurately.
- Recording allows you to check the **notes** for accuracy.
- Be sure you have **consent** from the participants before you record.

Designing Focus Group Guides

- Create an **"introduction" script** to help you remember and cover key points (point of project, confidentiality, recording, etc.)
- When writing questions, **avoid**:
  - Leading participants
  - Asking yes/no questions
  - Asking multiple questions at the same time
- Include **prompts** in case people need help to start talking or elaborate
- Remember this is a **guide**; it is okay to go off script!

After the Focus Group

- Have the notetaker and facilitator **debrief** with a brain dump of key themes, points, and concerns that came up during the focus group discussion.
- Note anything **out of the ordinary** that may have impacted the data
- Remember to send **thank you notes/emails** to the participants, and incentives if applicable.
- **Share the findings** with participants when completed.
- **Analyze** the data for major themes. Check out the ***Analyzing Qualitative Data – Tips and Tools*** *emPower Tool* for details.

Community Cafés

Like Focus Groups, Community Cafés are group conversation. They are different in their goals and their approach. Community Cafés have two goals: to build relationships, and to build relationships, in order to strengthen communities. Hosts use an approach called *Appreciative Inquiry* to gather the collective knowledge and transform that knowledge into action. Community Cafes are usually two hours, with participants sitting at tables of 3-4, plus a table host at each table. If there are more than 12 people, consider a World Café (theworldcafe.org).

Step 1: Define the purpose for this Café and form a hosting team. Be sure to involve community (e.g., current and/or former clients) in all steps of planning. Draft 2-3 questions that promote deep discussion about the café purpose.

Step 2: Plan the setting. Center accessibility, and use food, music, poetry, art, language or other community customs and norms to make the Café comfortable.

Step 3: Design a compelling invitation. Think of your audience and make it personal while communicating purpose. Include food, childcare and transportation if possible.

Step 4: Develop a general idea for the time together. Cafes usually run about two hours, not including clean up. The schedule is usually a great start, eating together, two rounds of conversation with people moving to new groups for each, then a harvest and a powerful ending.

Step 5: Design your Café schedule. Write out the time, activity, and leader for activities.

Step 6: Host the Café. Conversations and ideas are written or drawn on paper. Invite participants to listen for patterns, share insights, and connect ideas. After the small group conversations, discuss discoveries as a larger group. This is the *harvest*.

Step 7: Follow up. Debrief with the hosting team what went well, what was learned and how to improve for next time. Share learnings with the community and partners.

Appreciative Inquiry

Dream: What is your vision for strengthening community/families?
Design: What change(s) would you like to see happen in your community?
Discovery: What do you need to learn, need to know?
Delivery: Host a café conversation and commit to action.

Facilitation Tips and Tricks

- **It's okay to go out of order;** keep track of where you are in the script so you do not forget to ask a question.
- **Sometimes questions get answered before you ask them**, so if you feel confident about that, move on.
- **It's okay to ask your own questions** (unless you've been told otherwise) in the form of follow-ups, prompts, re-wording; just stay within the guidelines.
- **Keep track of time**. It's okay to stray somewhat, but it's not okay to take up more time than you've asked participants to give.
- **Repeat back** what you hear to the group for affirmation or clarification.
- If you aren't getting the info you are looking for, rephrase the question.
- **Write down and ask follow up questions** as you go.
- **Make eye contact with/directly address** quiet participants.
- **Elicit discussion** using scenarios, audio/video clips, news headlines, data, etc.
- Go ahead and **interrupt people who go on too long**.
- **Silence is okay!** Create space for silence so that people can process.
- **Learn to toggle your brain back and forth** between listening and tracking what you are doing, keeping in mind you've got a recording and notetaker.

Team Member Roles

Notetaker

- **Record** the focus group (with permission) and **take notes**
- Assist facilitator in **tracking questions/monitoring chat**
- Pay attention to **key phrases and word-for-word quotes**
- Note body language and **non-verbal communication**

Facilitator

- Familiarizes themselves with the **project and community**.
- Plans in advance for **culturally responsive engagement**.
- Reviews questions in advance to **determine timing** & flow.
- Prepares **welcome materials** (slides, handouts, notes, etc.)