



## Tips for Facilitating Focus Groups

Your role as a focus group facilitator is very important. Your ability to make everyone comfortable, encourage everyone to speak up, enforce a respectful tone, and manage the pace will determine the quality of the discussion and therefore, the information you gather. It is a good idea to enlist the help of a note taker and a recorder. This will allow you to focus your attention on the discussion while also ensuring accurate notes. The tips below can help you make focus groups as effective as possible.

### Preparing the room

- Arrive an hour early with your assistant to set up the room. This allows time to deal with unexpected room scheduling, and to set up materials and refreshments.
- Post plenty of signs so participants can find their way to the space. This helps participants feel welcome when they arrive.
- Test your recording equipment or other electronic equipment to be sure it works.

### Opening the session

- Introduce yourself, your assistant, and the purpose of the focus group. Explain to participants that they have been invited to share their opinions and that you will guide the discussion by asking the group to reflect on specific questions. Tell them what time the session will conclude.
- If the focus group is part of a research study, provide a written *informed consent* form that explains what the participants are being asked to do, what their rights are, and how privacy and confidentiality will be secured. Be sure to provide contact information so that researchers can be reached in the future to answer questions.
- Explain the **ground rules** for the focus group discussion. These will set the tone and expectations for behavior so that everyone will feel safe and willing to participate.
  - Participation in the focus group is voluntary.
  - It's all right to abstain from discussing specific topics if you are not comfortable.
  - All responses are valid—there are no right or wrong answers.
  - Please respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree.
  - Try to stay on topic; we may need to interrupt so that we can cover all the material.
  - Speak as openly as you feel comfortable.
  - Avoid revealing very detailed information about your personal health.
  - Help protect others' privacy by not discussing details outside the group.
- Allow time for questions, and then ask participants to introduce themselves.

## **Facilitating the focus group**

### **DO**

- Open the session with a fun, non-threatening, open-ended question; this will enable everyone to develop a comfort level with speaking in front of the group and sharing their ideas.
- Pay attention to non-verbal signals—someone might be sending a cue that she/he is uncomfortable or might have something to say.
- Ask open-ended questions, one at a time. Probe when a response is unclear. Ask, “Can you say more about...” instead of “Why do you think...” The latter may make participants feel they need to defend their point of view.
- Balance participation by asking, “Who else has something to say?” or “I would like to hear more from...”
- Redirect the discussion when it strays too far off topic. Say something like, “These are important and interesting points. However, we need to bring the discussion back to our main focus on...”
- Record the participants’ actual words as much as possible. Avoid the temptation to paraphrase. This will show each participant that his/her ideas are unique and important.
- Check with participants that you understand what they are saying.

### **DON’T**

- Read the script questions verbatim; this may come across too stiff and formal.
- Finish people’s sentences or make assumptions about what is being said by someone.
- Allow one or two people to dominate or to use the focus group for their own agenda.
- Permit side discussion; this can distract others from the main discussion.
- Take sides or challenge what is being said; remain impartial.
- Share your own opinions (verbally or non-verbally).
- Favor one participant over the others.
- Use jargon or technical terms.

## **Closing the session**

- End the discussion by summarizing the main points. If there is time, invite participants to reflect on the main ideas, and ask if they have any additional thoughts to share.
- Thank the group for participating; let them know how the discussion results will be used.
- Collect and save all notes and recordings.
- If a report will be produced, let them know when it might be available and how they can obtain a copy.

## **Analyzing and using the results**

- Review the answers to the main questions asked during the focus group and look for common ideas or themes. Note which ideas seem to be most important to the group.
- Make sure to remove information that could identify the participants or their work units. Maintaining confidentiality in reporting is important for respecting and protecting participants.
- Use caution when using the information gathered to make decisions about programs or policies. The perspectives shared are valid only for the participants and may not reflect the perspectives of other people. Conducting multiple focus groups may be effective for gathering feedback that is more representative of the organization’s total workforce.