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HEALTHY WORKPLACE PARTICIPATORY PROGRAM

Focus Group Guide for Workplace Safety, Health and Well-being

An assessment tool of the Healthy Workplace Participatory Program Toolkit
www.uml.edu/cphnewtoolkit

Focus Group Guide for Workplace Safety, Health and Well-being

Purpose: To gather a list of health and safety issues and concerns that will inform the Design Team about a range of health issues shared by workers. The findings will be used to help the Design Team begin to make plans for interventions.

Supplies needed: Flipchart paper with easel, markers, recorder, paper, and pens for participants; pens and paper for the note taker

Introduction (5-10 min)

Facilitator says:

"Our first activity focuses on health and safety in the workplace. This activity is part of an employee health and safety improvement initiative, which is being spear-headed by _____ [name the appropriate individuals, departments, union representatives, etc.] This initiative will seek to uncover the important health or safety concerns of employees, and address them as comprehensively as possible. For some issues, this may require making some changes in how things are done at [company name] or possibly changing some physical aspects of the workplace. Programs to help people achieve a healthier lifestyle may also be offered to help employees achieve better health.

For the success of the program, we need your help since you are the experts of this workplace. Today's activity will help me and others involved in the program learn about your work environment and hear your opinions on what specific things about your job might be affecting your health in both good or bad ways. It is also important to know how your work may affect the quality of your life outside of work.

This activity will last between 1.5 to 2 hours, and we have a prepared a set of questions. Sometimes, I will ask you to expand or provide more detail to your answers to help me fully understand what you have to say. Please keep in mind that we have a limited amount of time together and that, as facilitator of this activity, I may need to redirect our focus at times. My assistant will be taking detailed notes to ensure we gather accurate information. If you have any additional comments or concerns, please note that this activity is only one of several steps to

help get this health and safety improvement project going. In the next few months, there will be paper surveys where you will be given an opportunity to raise health and safety concerns of a more personal or private nature.

Your participation today is voluntary; you may withdraw at any time. You may also choose not to participate in specific parts of the discussion if it makes you feel uncomfortable. I will do my best to keep what you say confidential, but we also need your cooperation. Please respect each other's privacy and do not share anything discussed today with others.

Are there any questions before we begin? Thank you all. Let's begin."

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Turn on the tape recorder.

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Focus group questions

Use the probes below as needed to get more conversation going. The probes can prompt participants to think of the topic more deeply or in different ways. You don't have to use all of them. Use your judgment based on the flow of discussion.

Facilitator says:

"I would like to start off by focusing on the workplace environment and specific aspects of how the organization works and how change is handled. Later on, I will ask you what you think an ideal workplace at [company name] would be like."

I. Culture and Communication

Facilitator says:

"Let's begin by discussing a few general aspects of culture and communications related to workplace health and safety in your organization.

1. *How do employees participate in decision-making in your agency/organization?*

2. *How do employees know about decisions that get made?*

3. *If any one of you suggested a change in the workplace at [company name], what would happen next?"*

Probes used to stimulate discussion, if needed:

- *How does a worker go about making a suggestion?*
- *How are employees encouraged to make suggestions for workplace change?*
- *What happens after someone makes a suggestion? Does anyone in the organization respond to your suggestions?*
- *How long does it usually take to see a change being made in response to your suggestions?*

II. Work and Health

Facilitator says:

"We've talked for a while about how change happens in this organization. Now we will talk more specifically about the workplace and health. In this portion of the discussion we'll discuss how you think your job affects your health, (in both positive and negative directions) and about any general health concerns you might share in common with your fellow workers.

1. **First, what aspects of work at [company name] seem to HELP you or your co-workers engage in healthy activities, or just staying healthy, while you are at work?"**

   Probes used to stimulate discussion, if needed:

   - *Current wellness or safety programs that are helpful?*
   - *Other helpful aspects about the physical environment or company policies that promote health?*
   - *Qualities of the job that make you feel good? Keep you fit?*
   - *How do the relationships at work contribute to health, if at all?*

2. **"Now I would like to hear your thoughts about which aspects of your work or workplace environment get in the way of being healthy. Are there things about your work tasks or the way work is organized that you feel make it difficult for you to take care of your health or to stay healthy?"**

   Probes used to stimulate discussion, if needed:

   - *Are exposures to temperature, noise, heavy lifting, chemicals or other hazards a concern?*
   - *Is job stress a concern? What contributes to that? How does this affect your ability to take care of your health?*
   - *What aspects of work seem to prevent you from engaging in healthy activities outside of the workplace?*
   - *How concerned are you about your health after retirement?*
   - *How concerned do you think [company name] is about job safety and ergonomics? About worker health?*
   - *How is [company name] as far as ...*
       - i. *work scheduling flexibility, such as balance between home and work*
       - ii. *any communication about health or safety*

3. *"How concerned do you think [company name] is about job safety and ergonomics? About worker health?"*

   Probes used to stimulate discussion, if needed:
   - *Policies that convey concern or lack of concern?*
   - *Programs and training opportunities (or lack of them?)*
   - *What ways, if any, do company communications show concern?*

Wrap-up and Preparation for Part III

Facilitator says:

"Thank you very much for your time and thoughtful input to our discussion today. Is there anything else you would like to say that relates to health and/or safety on the job that has not yet been discussed?"

[Pause to allow time to think and respond.]

If there are no other new topics to cover, I would like to take a few moments to summarize some of the main points we've discussed today. Please feel free to clarify your thoughts if I say something that is not quite right.

[Use the flip chart to review the main points.]

Now that we have explored various aspects of how the workplace influences health on and off the job, we will be reflecting on our discussion to think creatively about 'the ideal workplace.'"

III. The Ideal Workplace* (30-45 mins) *Optional, if time is available. See below.*

Facilitator says:

1. *"Next, we will talk about what you envision as the 'ideal' workplace. This will (hopefully) be a fun activity in which we will begin to imagine what our workplaces could look like and feel like if it was a place that made it easy to be and feel healthy. Imagine everything was ideal here as far as your workplace being safe and your job helping you stay healthy.*
   What would the workplace be like?
   How would it be different from now?

2. *Thinking back to what you said at our first focus group about how things work at this organization, and about what changes would make this an "ideal" healthy workplace, what steps are needed to get to that point?"*

Closing (5 min)

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Turn off the tape recorder.

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- Review the next steps of the program: role of Design Team, next Design Team meeting and Steering Committee role.

- Give participants an opportunity to ask questions.

- Facilitator formally declares end of focus group and thanks those present for their participation.

NOTE: Part III could be facilitated during a follow up Design Team session on the same or on a different day. It will require about 30-45 minutes for the discussion. This is optimal for allowing participants to think more about their own work situation and reflect on the discussion as they do the homework assignment. Alternatively, facilitators can structure a longer meeting (2-3 hours including a break) to complete Parts I and II in the morning, and Part III after the break. If a longer, all-inclusive meeting or retreat is desired, it will be important to include a time to allow participants to work independently on the "homework" before opening up a discussion on the ideal workplace. The discussion should end by describing what will happen in the next meetings to advance the design process.

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 it 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.

  o **Participation in the focus group is voluntary.**
  o **It's all right to abstain from discussing specific topics if you are not comfortable.**
  o **All responses are valid—there are no right or wrong answers.**
  o **Please respect the opinions of others even if you don't agree.**
  o **Try to stay on topic; we may need to interrupt so that we can cover all the material.**
  o **Speak as openly as you feel comfortable.**
  o **Avoid revealing very detailed information about your personal health.**
  o **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.