

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Extension to Communities

Focus Group Approach To Needs Assessment


A focus group interview is a structured group process used to obtain detailed information about a particular topic. It is particularly useful for exploring attitudes and feelings and to draw out precise issues that may be unknown to the researcher.

A focus group is composed of six to nine participants who are brought together to discuss a clearly defined topic. Typically, focus groups are composed of homogeneous people, all representing a particular segment of the population. A focus group session should last about 1-1/2 hours with two hours being the absolute maximum time. A group facilitator keeps the discussion on track by asking a series of open-ended questions meant to stimulate discussion.

Advantages

1. relatively easy to undertake
2. results can be obtained in a short period of time
3. social interaction in the group produces freer and more complex responses
4. the researcher can probe for clarification and solicit greater detail
5. responses have high face validity due to the clarity of the context and detail of the discussion

Disadvantages

1. requires highly skilled moderator
 2. groups are often difficult to assemble
 3. individual responses are not independent of one another
 4. because the group is hand-selected, the results may not be representative of the general population
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Steps in the Focus Group Process

1. Clearly Define Purpose

The first step is to identify what issues you would like to understand better, then formulate some objectives relating to the issues. Your objectives should be as specific as possible. Fuzzy thinking at this step could make obtaining useful focus group results difficult.

2. Prepare Interview Questions

Develop a set of questions to provide an overall direction for the discussion. The questions should flow from general to specific. Questions should be open-ended, simple, unbiased, and focused to the issue at hand. The purpose of the questions is to stimulate discussion. The questions are merely a guide for the discussion. Undoubtedly the discussion will illicit more questions and bring up issues that the facilitator will want to follow-up on.

3. Identify and Recruit Participants

Identify the types of people who may be able to provide you with the answers you need. Think about the key population groups that may have an interest in the issues being researched. You want to form several different, separate groups that represent different viewpoints. The groups can be formed based on several different characteristics: age, income, gender, race, place of work, place of residency, unemployed, single mothers, students, retired, education, etc.

Although the groups should have a common background, you should avoid getting people who know each other in the same group. You also want people who will participate in the discussion and freely share their opinions.

Participants can be sent a letter inviting them to participate in the focus group. The letter should state the purpose of the focus group session, who is sponsoring and conducting the session, and what the results will be used for. It should be made clear that individual comments made during the focus group are strictly confidential. They can return a postcard indicating if they will or won't participate in the focus group. A telephone call reminding them of the time and place of the meeting is helpful.

4. Pre-Meeting Preparation

The meeting room should be quiet, comfortable, and free from outside distractions. Participants should all sit around a table so they can see each other. The chairs should be comfortable. Light refreshments can be served if they do not distract from the discussion.

5. Conducting the Focus Group Interview

The facilitator is the key to the focus group discussion. The facilitator must direct the discussion without being a part of it. She/he must have excellent communication skills. The facilitator must be able to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere where people feel free to express their opinions. The facilitator should never express his or her own opinions or make judgments on the opinions of the participants.

The facilitator should ask a series of open-ended questions from general to specific. The questions should not get in the way of the participants expressing their opinions, experiences, and suggestions. The facilitator should allow the discussion to lead in new directions as long as the topics pertain to the subject of the focus group interview.

All members of the group should be encouraged to participate. One person should not be allowed to dominate the discussion. Some focus groups have participants write their ideas down without consulting others before discussion starts. This eliminates bias and brings out many different viewpoints.

The session should be tape recorded and transcribed after the meeting. Some focus group interviews are conducted with someone taking notes during the meeting. This sometimes inhibits the discussion. The facilitator may make some brief notes as long as they do not protrude into the discussion.

6. Analyzing the Data

The focus group will generate a lot of information. The task is to code and summarize the data for analysis and discovery.

The tape recording should be transcribed, omitting the names of the speakers. Type the discussion using a computer word processing program. After the discussion has been carefully typed, read

the transcript looking for key words and concepts that reoccur. You'll want to count each instance of a key word or concept. Most word processing programs have a "search and find" feature that will find and count specific words and phrases.

The next step is to group the key words and phrases into several categories. Each category should have from three to ten key words or phrases. All comments should fit into at least one category. Some comments may have several key words that fit into different categories. Key words and phrases should be coded for (1) central theme and (2) general sentiment (positive, negative, neutral, suggestion).

After the key words and phrases have been grouped into categories, the interpretation step begins. Central themes and issues will emerge. The relative weight of each theme should be accurately reported.

7. Reporting Findings

It is usually desirable in community development work to make a public presentation of the findings. Background information should be included in a written report of the findings.

Both quantitative and qualitative results should be reported. Quantitative results are statistical or numerical in nature - - the number of people who mentioned X and the percent of people who think Y. Qualitative results are representative comments from focus group participants. Qualitative results create a vivid picture of the participants' feelings and mood. Comments can usually be directly quoted, making sure that the speaker is not identified. Comments should accurately reflect the views of the focus group with care taken not to bias the findings with unrelated comments.

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last updated Friday, 16-Feb-2001 15:46:54 CST