



Why conduct a focus group?

Focus groups are structured small group discussions with a set of questions that guide the group through a conversation about your program. They are an excellent way to get rich stories and descriptions of how your program is working from a group of people.

Focus groups are most appropriate to use for group process and brainstorming because people can build off of each other's comments. Because of this, focus groups are often used to test messages, get ideas for program improvement, etc. Good focus groups also leave space for people to share individual points of view, but they are not an appropriate way to discuss topics that are sensitive, controversial, or personal.

Focus groups can help you explore:

- In-depth information about a particular issue or topic
- The range of perceptions, views and opinions about a particular issue or topic (not just what people agree about)
- Factors that influence opinions or behaviors

Typically, when they are used for evaluation, multiple focus groups are conducted. You could conduct focus groups with several groups of people that all share similar characteristics. You could also conduct multiple focus groups with diverse participants, as long as each focus group itself has similar characteristics or contexts. Then you can compare responses of different groups.

Planning and developing focus groups

Focus groups can help you collect information from multiple people in a short period of time. However, they can be time consuming and difficult to arrange because they require coordinating the logistics of bringing together a group of people in-person and finding a strong facilitator. Be sure to allot time for planning and organizing.

Focus group tool overview

Planning

- Decide when
- Figure out logistics
- Identify the sample
- Recruit participants
- Identify & train a facilitator
- Develop a discussion guide
- Pilot test

Collecting data

- Use the data collection tips
- Track & document data
- Key follow up steps



Did you decide when to collect focus group data based on your evaluation plan?

The timing of your focus groups depends on what you want to learn about. To answer some of your evaluation questions, you may only need to do focus groups once. To answer other questions, it may be useful to do them at strategic points during your program.

Before the program starts

- Assess community needs

During the program

- Assess progress
- Learn about what is working and not working to improve the program

After the program finishes

- Assess if the program achieved the outcomes
- Understand who the program worked for

Did you identify your focus group sample – who you will invite to your focus group?

The key to a good focus group is finding participants that have similar enough demographics or characteristics OR a similar relationship to the program so they regard each other as equals. This can help you to avoid power dynamics that may limit conversation. Some organizations or community groups may already have groups that meet regularly that could conveniently be used for a focus group at the same time. If you are interested in the perspectives of different groups of people, you will need to plan multiple focus groups. For example, if conducting focus groups within an organization, you may hold 1-2 focus groups with managers and 1-2 focus groups with staff.

There are a variety of methods you can use to identify the group of people that you will be inviting to your focus group. If there are a limited number of people that participate in your program, it may be possible to invite everyone to participate.

Other options include:

- Randomly drawing names from a hat
- Choosing systematically from a list (for example, inviting every 5th person on your list)
- Dividing the group into subgroups based on characteristics (e.g., gender, age, geography, participant, eligible but not participating) and randomly selecting representatives from each subgroup. This method is used when you have specific subgroups that you want to compare data across different subgroups.
- Recruiting people who are easy to reach (convenience sample). For example, you could approach individuals who are shopping at a farmers' market. Although this method can make it easy to recruit, the ideas expressed may not be representative of the people you're trying to get opinions from.
- Snowball sampling. You might also use a method where you start inviting a core group of people and ask them for suggestions of other knowledgeable people whom you might invite to participate. If you are working with a hard-to-reach population or have only a limited list to start with, using this method can expand your sample relatively easily. But it also may be subject to the same biases as a convenience sample.



Did you figure out the logistics – the where, when and incentives?

- Focus groups are generally scheduled for 1-2 hours.
- No-shows are common for focus groups, so you should select a date, time, and location that are convenient for participants.
- It can take time to set up a room for a group meeting, so plan ahead and reserve your space before and after your actual meeting time.
- Also consider whether other assistance or support may be required for participation, e.g., transportation or child care.
- Decide whether or not it is possible to provide incentives to participants. Incentives can increase the likelihood that people will participate. Incentives could range from providing food or beverages to offering cash or gift cards. If incentives will be offered, that should be communicated in the invitation and followed up on at the end of the focus group. You should also decide whether and when you will share what you learn with the participants.

Did you recruit participants?

- Focus groups ideally consist of 6 to 8 people, but should not be less than 4 or more than 12. If you can, try to recruit extra people in the event there are cancellations or no-shows. If you are inviting people that are part of an existing organization or program, you may just invite one or two extra people. If your sample is broader, such as patients at a clinic, you may want to invite at least double the minimum number you need. For example, if your minimum attendance is 6, be sure to invite at least 12. You want to have a group large enough to get different opinions, but small enough to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to talk.
- Once you have identified who you want to include in the focus group, send an invitation or advertise to people you would like to participate. It is common to use email or a flyer for this initial contact, but be sure to consider the needs and resources of the group you'll be recruiting—in some cases a phone call invitation may be more appropriate.

- When you are inviting people, be sure to inform them of the purpose of the group, the amount of time it will take, the importance of being on time, and whether or not they can bring children or other family members who may wait at the site. You should also include any information about an incentive.

Did you identify and train a facilitator?

Focus groups require a skilled facilitator to manage group dynamics and keep things on track. It is best to use a facilitator with focus group experience, who understands what you are hoping to learn. Ideally, you want a facilitator who:

- Is neutral—someone unknown to the participants.
- Can relate to the participants—understands their background and life experiences enough to be respectful and ask probing questions appropriately.
- Can create a comfortable environment for participants. To the extent possible, avoid any power differentials in the focus group—both among participants and between the facilitator and the participants.
- Is skilled at facilitating group process—e.g., how to respectfully get back to the topic of discussion, how to engage everyone in the discussion without putting people on the spot, etc.
- Is familiar enough with the discussion topic to understand comments and probe appropriately.
- Can recap the key discussion points at the end to confirm what s/he has heard from participants.
- Can prevent “groupthink” where one or a small number of participants can influence the opinions of others.

The facilitator's job is to guide the discussion of the participants—not to provide information or their own opinions. Focus groups are not appropriate times to make presentations. If you would like someone on your staff to be trained as a focus group facilitator, the best way to learn is to shadow an experienced facilitator and to debrief after the session.



Did you determine ground rules?

Every focus group should begin with a discussion about the ground rules/norms for the group. There are a couple options for setting ground rules: Brainstorm ground rules/norms together (have some prompts ready) or suggest two or three standard ground rules and ask participants if they have others they would like to add additional ground rules. The first option might get participants more engaged in understanding these rules while the second option is more time efficient. Some basic ground rules include:

1. What is said in the room, stays in the room
2. Be respectful of other participants
3. There are no wrong answers
4. Cellphones turned off and put away

Did you develop your focus group questions and put them in a discussion guide?

A discussion guide helps the focus group be successful. Discussion guides include opening remarks, the questions, and important ideas for the facilitator to keep in mind.

Focus groups have three parts that should all be detailed in your discussion guide: the opening, the group discussion and the wrap-up. Your facilitator should be aware of and prepared to facilitate these three parts. The following table describes each of these parts and the elements that should be included.

Opening

- Welcome participants and make introductions
- Review the purpose of the focus group, what you'll generally talk about, and how the information will be used
- Review the ground rules: everyone's ideas are important; there are no right or wrong answers; all comments are confidential; and everyone is encouraged to respond to each question
- Use an easy introductory question to get the group talking

Discussion

- Guide participants through the questions and cycle through the group to be sure that all participants have a chance to speak
- When comments related to one question are finished, summarize the discussion, making sure that participants agree with the summary
- Take advantage of and explore unexpected comments or unanticipated directions the conversation may take if these may add to the discussion
- Use probes to explore ideas in more depth, but avoid irrelevant divergences

Wrap-up

- Provide an opportunity for participants to make any outstanding comments
- Provide a recap of the major discussion points
- Thank participants and remind them how the information will be used
- Generally incentives are



Tips for developing discussion guides

Developing questions. Your questions should be crafted to stimulate response and discussion. When developing questions focus only on information you need to know. You want to leave enough time for sufficient discussion of each question. During a two-hour focus group, you can typically get through 10-12 questions. Formulate questions that are:

- Conversational in tone
- Easy to say—the facilitator should be able to say them naturally
- Short, clear and easy to understand
- Culturally/context appropriate: use words that resonate with participants—avoid using jargon, acronyms, and overly technical words, unless that is appropriate for the group
- Open-ended: avoid asking questions that can be answered “yes” or “no”
- Focused on one thing at a time. For example, do not ask, “How has the program changed the way you eat and exercise?” Instead, ask about eating habits first and then ask about changes in physical activity.

Pay attention to the flow of the questions. Your discussion guide should start with something that is easy to answer—maybe even an icebreaker—to get the conversation started and make participants feel at ease. The questions should then flow to keep the conversation going, avoiding abrupt changes in topics. Typically, questions will start more general and then get more specific as the focus group discussion progresses.

Prepare opening and wrap-up remarks. These are really important for building rapport and leaving the focus groups on a positive note. It is also useful for providing information and directions related to logistics and follow up, such as: location of the bathrooms, how/where to get their incentive, what you’ll do with the information they provide, and whether/how you’ll be in touch for follow up.

Did you pilot test your discussion guide?

It is a good idea to pilot test or try out your discussion guide before using it in a focus group. Ideally, you would organize a pilot focus group with participants that share characteristics with those who will participate in the other focus groups, and ask for feedback. This gives you a chance to see if the questions make sense, if the flow of questions keeps the discussion moving, and if the number of questions is appropriate for the time you have.

It may not always be feasible to hold a pilot focus group with people similar to your targeted group of participants; if this is the case, you may consider pulling together a mock focus group consisting of colleagues and/or friends to at least go through and get reaction to the discussion guide. Any data that you collect during the pilot should not be used as part of your evaluation data, unless the group is representative of your sample and you make no changes to the discussion guide as a result of the testing.



Collecting focus group data

Did you pay attention to these key tips when facilitating your focus group?

The facilitator sets the tone of the focus group, affecting whether participants feel comfortable voicing their opinions. During the focus group, a good facilitator:

- Is not biased or judgmental. It is important to be neutral when hearing participants' responses.
- Let's participants know that "they're the experts," reinforcing that the purpose of the focus group is to learn from participants.
- Is comfortable with some silence. Some participants may contribute more if they have time to consider the question before they speak.
- Uses probes—questions designed to stimulate ideas or encourage further sharing—to gather additional information, like:
 - *"What do others think about...?"*
 - *"I'd like to hear a little more about..."*
 - *"Does anyone else have anything to add to what has already been said?"*
 - *"Would you give me an example of what you mean when you say...?"*
 - *"Has anyone had a different experience?"*
- Avoids allowing one or two people to dominate the conversation. Using probes to engage other participants is a good way to redirect the discussion.
- Uses an appropriate pace to ensure that all of the important questions are asked.

Did you keep track and document your completed focus group discussions?

Plan ahead for how you will keep track of the focus group conversation. Will you use video or audio recording, or will there be a note taker or court recorder?

- **Video/audio:** If video or audio recording is involved, you will need to get permission from participants beforehand. Be sure to test any equipment before the session begins and make sure there is no background noise so you will have a clear recording. If you don't have a note taker present, you will also need to plan for the recordings to be transcribed later.
- **Note taking:** If note taking is your method of choice, arrange for a skilled note taker to be present. Even with a note taker present, consider recording the conversation as a backup to the written notes and to retrieve verbatim responses as needed. Sometimes people doing focus groups hire a court recorder to take notes who later sends back a transcript of the conversation. These services can be expensive, so be sure to plan for this in your budget.

To keep an eye of what you are learning as you go, ask the facilitator to set aside 15-30 minutes after the focus group to write down impressions, like themes and important points, while the information is still fresh. If you have both a facilitator and note taker present, they should debrief immediately after the focus group to review the notes and write down themes and important points that emerged or ideas for making the next group run more smoothly.



Did you complete these follow up steps after your focus group was complete?

- **Thank participants.** At a minimum, it is important to thank the people that participated in the focus group and inform them of any next steps. If other people helped to make the focus group possible (e.g., provided space, helped contact potential participants, etc.), you may also want to thank them for their help.
- **Plan for data analysis.** To analyze the data you need to (1) organize the data that you recorded; (2) conduct the appropriate level of analysis; (3) interpret your findings (i.e., what do the data tell you?); and (4) identify limitations of your data collection efforts. For details on how to do these steps with qualitative data, see the tool [How to Analyze and Interpret Data](#).
- **Report back to participants and program planners.** When people participate in an evaluation, they often like to see the result. You should consider appropriate ways to report back to participants, and determine how the information will be used to help with decision making and program improvement. For details, see the tool [How to Use and Share Results](#).

Sources:

- Krueger, R.A. & Casey, M.A. (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research (3rd edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- University of Wisconsin–Extension: Program Development and Evaluation
<http://fyi.uwex.edu/programdevelopment/>

For more information about planning and conducting focus groups, please see the toolkit [Resources](#) page.