

## Focus Groups

A focus group involves a group of individuals (usually 6-10) selected and assembled by the researcher(s) to discuss and comment on a topic, *from personal experience*.

Successful focus group interviewing is useful for obtaining several perspectives on a topic, and is dependant upon the *interaction* between participants.

- The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way that would not be feasible using other methods. Thoughts are more likely to be revealed in a social setting through interaction.
- The facilitator of a focus group plays an important role in obtaining usable information during a session. Facilitators provide clear explanations to the group, help people feel at ease, and facilitate interactions between participants. Facilitators may need to probe for details or challenge group members to draw out differences of opinion or to illustrate different perspectives. It may be challenging to keep the group on topic. Facilitators must have strong interpersonal skills, must be good listeners, be non judgmental, and be adaptable.
- Facilitators and recorders must consider and guard against selective perception, or preconceptions about what participants are going to say or about what they mean by what they are saying. It is essential to seek detail and clarification of conversations by participants without assumptions about what the individuals are saying. This guarding can be very challenging and is essential if data collected are to reflect the perspectives of the participants with minimal influence by the perspectives of the facilitator or the recorder. Recorders are encouraged to record what was said, verbatim when possible and not what they think they heard.
- Researchers and facilitators must keep in mind various ethical issues. Confidentiality is important, as is honesty with the participants. Individuals must be informed of their rights and responsibilities within the group.
- Researchers recognize interactivensess; the behaviour of the participants will be influenced by the fact that they are participating in a research project.

### *Advantages*

- Quickly and reliably get common impressions, such as why an issue is important to
- people and what is important about it.
- Can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time.
- Can convey key information about topics.

### *Challenges*

- Lack of control the researcher has over the types of data gathered, making it hard to analyze responses.
- Need good facilitator for safety and closure.
- Difficult to schedule 6-10 people together and obtain a representative sample of a large population.

## ***Helpful Hints for Conducting Focus Groups***

### **Preparing the Focus Group**

- Identify the major objectives of the meeting.
- Develop questions.
- Plan session.
- Invite participants.
- Remind participants.

### **Developing Questions**

- The session should last 1 to 1 ½ hours, so plan for 5-6 questions at most.
- Ask yourself what problem or need will be addressed by the information and consider how the information will be used.

### **Planning the Focus Group**

- Plan for 1 to 1 ½ hours.
- Hold sessions in a comfortable room. Arrange chairs so participants can see one another.
- Provide refreshments.
- Consider ground rules for facilitators to: a) keep group focused, b) maintain momentum and c) get closure on questions.
- Set up an agenda.
- Plan to record the session, e.g. audio recorder, note taker (do not rely on memory).

### **Facilitating the Focus Group**

- The major goal is to obtain useful information to meet the set goals of the research.
- Introduce yourself and other facilitator/recorders.
- Do the housekeeping including sharing ground rules. (location of washrooms, smoking policy, cell phone policy, timeline and plan for refreshments, goal that all have equal opportunity to speak and be heard, other)
- Explain ethical considerations regarding consent, confidentiality and use of and reporting of information gleaned.
- Explain how you are recording the information. Ensure during session that any recording devices are working.
- Carefully word each question. Restate if necessary using similar wording but offering more clarity regarding the question if people seem unsure of what is being asked.
- After each question is answered, summarize what has been said overall by the group.
- Ensure each group member participates and facilitate equitable opportunity for each member to be heard. Discourage over contribution by any member.
- Close the session and thank participants.
- Tell members how the findings or results will be shared.
- During the session have the recorder write down any observations.

**Immediately After the Focus Group**

- If recording is using flip chart paper, number pages and indicate session on each page.
- After the session a discussion between the facilitator and the recorder should be used to clarify any notes made during the session.