

Tips on Facilitating Focus Groups

Facilitation is a useful skill for anyone to learn. It allows us to get the most out of a group of people in a structured environment.

FOCUS GROUP

a group of people brought together to focus on a particular issue, so that a cross-section of ideas are presented. Members of a focus group may include staff, management and customers with a stake in the topic.

The objective of a focus group is to get people's thoughts and ideas on paper and in a legible state.

This document explores the following facets of focus groups.

- Roles
- Reason for Ground Rules
- Ground Rules
- How to Facilitate a Focus Group
- Problems

ROLES

Facilitator

The job of the facilitator is to ensure members stick to the topic, to ensure the session is productive and enjoyable for all.

The facilitator :

- must not contribute to the discussion
- brings the group back to the objective of the meeting
- deals with dysfunctional behaviour so that everyone contributes to the discussion
- should summarise at the end of the meeting and tell the participants what will happen with the information

Scribe

The scribe:

- writes down exactly what is said – don't get hung up on spelling, grammar or perfect writing
- be the timekeeper so that all questions are answered.

REASON FOR GROUND RULES

Have you ever been involved in a discussion or a meeting where you felt it was a waste of time and nothing was achieved?

To prevent this occurring, ground rules should be established at the beginning of a focus group or even a regular staff meeting, as a code of conduct for participants and to assist in overcoming dysfunctional behaviour. Below is a standard list of ground rules which you may like to use or adapt for any facilitated groups.

Ground Rules

- Everybody's ideas have merit
- No judgement or discussion of other's ideas
- Encourage everyone to participate
- One person to speak at a time
- Leave mental baggage behind
- It is everyone's responsibility, not just the facilitator's, to ensure every participant abides by the ground rules.
- Ideas (contributions) are anonymous.

HOW TO FACILITATE A FOCUS GROUP

Preparation

1. Write the objectives for the session onto butcher's paper/whiteboard so that all participants know what to expect.
2. Prepare the questions ahead of time and print them neatly onto butcher's paper – one question per page. Place them onto a flip chart so that the responses only have to be written once and then typed if they are required for reporting purposes.
3. Write the standard ground rules onto butcher's paper so they can be read or modified in the focus group. Work out how the ground rules will be displayed, e.g. do you need blu tac/sticky tape.
4. Set up room without tables between you and the participants – a semi-circle works best.

Facilitating the Focus Group

1. Introduce yourself, thank everyone for attending and tell them how long the session will take.
2. Tell them the purpose of the focus groups and how the data will be used.
3. Ask the group to read the ground rules and ask if they are happy to conduct participate under these guidelines for the duration of the focus group. If you are facilitating the same group over a number of weeks, then the group should develop their own ground rules as part of the team-building process.
4. Display the ground rules where they can be seen by everyone for the entire session.
5. During the focus group use active listening techniques, e.g. friendly body language, open questioning.
6. Use non-discriminatory and simple, jargon-free language.
7. After the focus group thank the participants – you might like to write to them indicating what has happened with the data produced (refer to point 2)

Problems

The biggest problems you are likely to encounter in a focus group generally relate to dysfunctional behaviour, which may mean that the questions are not answered and some people, including the facilitator, may find the session tiring and difficult.

Keep in mind that some participants can be dysfunctional if they don't know the answer to a question, as they may be worried that they will not appear knowledgeable to their colleagues.

To help you out, we've identified some typical forms of dysfunctional behaviour and suggested approaches for dealing with them.

Dysfunctional Participants

Ms Cynical (about the organisation, about anything!)

"What are we doing this for anyway? It's a waste of time".

Response: "As part of our improvement activities we need to get input from you aboutThe information we get today will be used to plan improvements and act on the plans."

Mr Know-All

"Look, it's very simple. There's only one solution to this problem and it's a new computer system. End of story."

Response: "That's a really valid point, but we need to get everyone's good ideas."

Miss Non-Contributor

Approach: Ask for their name if you can't read their name badge and ask "What are your thoughts on this question?"

Mrs Over-Contributor

Said for the fourth time in five minutes "Well, what we do on our ward is."

Response: "I know you have some great experiences to share with us, but if we can just hear from some of the other people on this question first, then I'll come back to you."

Mr Off-the-Track

"I remember back when I first started here, we used to do it that way and then after a year we changed the procedure to follow the Americans and then...."

Response: "Thanks a lot, it's really important to know the history behind that. So what is your opinion on this question?"

Professor Knocker

"We've tried that before and it didn't work."

Response "You're fired!"

ONLY JOKING!!!

Response: "Yes, I'm sure you have tried this before, but we need to try it this time from a different angle."