

Tips for Facilitating a Focus Group

Before Discussion Begins:

- The chairs in the room should be arranged in a circle or semi-circle so that all participants can see each other's faces.
- Display a ground rules poster with the following items:
 - Maintain confidentiality
 - Participate as much as possible
 - Respect other opinions
 - Listening is as important as talking
 - Differences of opinion are good
- Review ground rules at the beginning of the meeting and ask if there are any additional rules that should be added.
- Stress that there is no right or wrong answer, and that the point of the discussion is to explore a range of perspectives and experiences.
- Assure participants that they are the experts and that you are here to learn from them.
- It can be helpful to allow a few moments for individual reflection prior to group discussion so people have time to organize their thoughts.
- Include the following statement in your introduction: "From past experience in groups like this, we know that some people talk a lot, and some people don't say much. It is important that we hear from all of you because you've had different experiences. So if you are talking a lot, I may interrupt you, and if you aren't saying much, I may call on you. If I do, please don't feel bad about it. It is just my way of making sure we get through all the questions and that everyone has a chance to talk."

During the Discussion:

- Focus on facilitating the discussion, not on leading or directing it.
- The facilitator should always remain neutral and objective. Maintain a non-judgmental approach with all participants.
- Attempt to create a balance of participation. Be sensitive to power dynamics among the group.
- Be comfortable with silence. Give people time to reflect on a question silently for a moment before responding out loud.
- Ensure that more talkative people do not dominate the conversation.
- Watch for nonverbal behaviors.
- When trying to encourage discussion, try the following probes:
 - Would you explain further?
 - Would you give me an example of what you mean?
 - Would you say more?
 - Tell me more.
 - Is there anything else?

- Please describe what you mean.
 - I don't understand.
 - Does anyone see it differently?
 - Has anyone had a different experience?
- Participants tend to lose focus on the question after 2-3 other participants have responded to it, so repeat key phrases from the question to help keep people focused.
- Don't ask more than one question at a time, even if the questions go together. Participants usually cannot remember several questions at one time, and asking multiple questions makes it hard for them to know where to start.
- Be sure that you validate participants' responses. Be aware of when a participant's words may have been misinterpreted or when they may not have had the chance to complete their thoughts.
- It can help to rephrase a participant's statements to make sure you are interpreting their words correctly. This can also encourage them to expand on their ideas.
- Try to promote discussions among the participants, not between you and each participant.
- Keep the conversation on track, but give more reluctant speakers time to respond.
- Remember that the process is more important than the result. The point is not to reach consensus- it's to explore a topic through dialogue.

Creating a balance of participation:

- Try to build rapport with participants through small talk before the focus group begins.
- Establish the room as a safe space where everyone's input will be respected.
- Assure participants that the point is not to agree on everything or figure out the "right answer," but to explore different perspectives and experiences.
- Use an opening activity to generate participation and focus thoughts on the topic.
- For the first question, consider asking participants to write down their responses and then going around the circle to share their answer.
- Encourage people with different opinions to share. Ask a question like, "Has anyone had a different experience?" or "Does anyone see it differently?"
- Always remain neutral and express interest in every participant's contributions. Validate each person's responses.
- Be sure that your introductory question will avoid responses that highlight the varying levels of experience/education/ influence that participants have, so as not to elevate the opinions or perspectives of any one person in the minds of participants.
- Participants often defer to others who are perceived to have more experience or are better informed on a topic. It is important to stress that everyone is an expert and all participants have important ideas that need to be expressed.

If one or two speakers are dominating the conversation:

- Say something like, “I know you have some great experiences to share with us, but I want to make sure I hear from everyone in the group.”
- Make eye contact with another participant and say, “I’m really interested in hearing what other people are feeling/ thinking about this issue.”
- Remind the group that it is important to get a variety of perspectives on the topic.
- If you have a sense for who the dominant speaker will be before the discussion begins, try to sit next to them to exercise control by the use of body language.
- Avoid eye contact with the dominant speaker.

If a participant is quiet:

- Try to encourage input from less vocal members. Ask a question like “Is there anyone who hasn’t said anything yet who has something to contribute?”
- Watch for nonverbal cues that a person might have something to say.
- Direct a question to the quiet participant--ask if they have something to add.
- Engage in eye contact and other nonverbal cues to signal that you’re interested in hearing from them.
- Do not try to force participation- do not judge people who remain quiet.
- Give reluctant speakers time to process the question and gather their thoughts.

If someone is disrespectful:

- Refer back to ground rules. Remind participants that all opinions count and that there is no right or wrong answer.
- Remind the group that it is not important for people to agree, but that participants should be respectful of differing perspectives.
- If a controversial or offensive statement is made, address it.

If the conversation is getting off-track:

- Thank the participant for their contribution, but steer them back to the question. Say something like, “Thanks, that’s good background information. What’s your opinion on this question?”
- If a participant begins to ramble, discontinue eye contact within 20 to 30 seconds. When they pause, be ready to jump in with a segue to shift the conversation.
- Tell the group that you want to respect everyone’s time and you don’t want the discussion to extend beyond the scheduled time that participants have committed, so it is important to address the remaining questions in the time you have left.

If no one responds to a particular question:

- Be comfortable with some silence. People may need time to think through their response first.
- At the beginning of the discussion, participants might not feel comfortable speaking. Work to put people at ease. Back up and ask an easier question.
- Participants may not have understood the question. Try rephrasing your question, and try to minimize your use of jargon.
- You may have asked a sensitive question that people are afraid to respond to honestly. Remind participants that you want to explore all sides of an issue, and that the room is a safe space for expressing ideas. You can also rephrase the question. If this does not work, try moving on to a different question and revisiting the topic later if you sense that people may be open to it.

Wrapping up the discussion:

- Following the discussion, the facilitator may decide to review the notes and synthesize comments in an attempt to arrive at themes that have emerged throughout the dialogue.

After the focus group:

- Debrief with the note taker and make sure all important themes/insights have been adequately captured.

Sources:

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