

Focus Groups Guide

Focus groups are small discussion groups, usually guided by a trained leader, which can produce in-depth and nuanced input from participants.

Generally broader and more open-ended than surveys, focus groups are designed to yield “qualitative” information. Surveys, by contrast, tend to ask narrower questions that yield specific, quantitative results. For example, a focus group may tell you that traffic lights change too quickly or that a street is too dangerous to cross, while a survey is more likely to reveal that “73% of seniors identify traffic as the top problem in the community.”

While they should be loose enough to give residents an opportunity to offer their thoughts, suggestions, and opinions in an unscripted environment, focus groups are not free-wheeling discussions. They are structured conversations about specific topics and need to be facilitated by an experienced leader who can keep participants on track so that the conversation produces the desired information.

Before you organize a focus group, be sure that you are clear about why you are doing it. Ask yourself:

- ✓ Why do we want to conduct this focus group?
- ✓ What do we hope to learn?
- ✓ Is this the best method to get the information we want?
- ✓ How will this information add to what we already know?
- ✓ How will we use this information?
- ✓ How many focus groups do we need?

Focus groups are best used:

- ✓ Before you create a survey, as a way to identify survey topics.
- ✓ After you conduct a survey, as a way to dig deeper into an issue.
- ✓ When you want information that cannot easily be asked on a survey.
- ✓ When you are considering a new program or service.
- ✓ When you want in-depth reflections about an existing service or program.
- ✓ When you have access to a cross-section of willing participants and an experienced focus group leader.

If you decide to conduct one or more focus groups, here are some basic steps to get started:

- ✓ Determine your budget. Decide whether you will pay the focus group leader or offer honoraria to participants. You should also plan for refreshments, recording and transcription fees, and any meeting room costs.

- ✓ Recruit an experienced focus group leader. Look for someone who is knowledgeable about NORC programs and will work with you to identify the information you need.
- ✓ Decide who should be invited to participate. Try to get a representative sample of the group whose opinions you want. You'll need a manageable number of people at the table -- too many and it becomes unwieldy, too few and it can be hard to spark a lively conversation.
- ✓ Organize the meeting. Schedule the time and place of your focus groups, and decide how long each one will last. Give participants all of the details well in advance so that they understand what will be expected of them.
- ✓ Formulate your questions. Develop a list of topics and questions for the focus group, with input from your advisors, partners, and the focus group leader. While this is an essential guide for the focus group leader, this list should be open-ended enough to keep the conversation going and focused enough to keep you on track.
- ✓ Share basic information. Make sure that your focus group participants understand the boundaries of the neighborhood you are discussing, and know why they have been asked to participate. Send around an attendance sheet so that you have contact information for everyone.
- ✓ Decide how you will create a record of the conversation. You can have an experienced notetaker in the room or use audiotape or videotape. If taping is involved, you will need to get permission from the participants. Transcribing the discussion afterwards is costly, but it ensures that nothing gets lost.

After the focus group, review your notes or transcripts with your advisers, partners, and senior residents and look for patterns and common themes. Chances are that a variety of insights will emerge, adding richness to your interpretation of the focus group discussion. (See *Using Data to Inform Action* for more details.)

To learn more, consult the ultimate focus group guide: *The Focus Group Kit*, by David L. Morgan and Richard Krueger (Sage Publications, 1997).