Focus groups

A how-to guide

About focus groups

After an organization has conducted an employee engagement survey, further dialogue may be needed to confirm and clarify results, unearth the root causes of issues, and provide deeper insights that feed into and aid action planning.
Employee focus groups probe identified problems and causes, and surface suggested solutions. The process allows participants to contribute without much preparation or effort, and promotes a healthy sense among employees that they are genuinely being "heard." In addition to these benefits, focus groups serve other constructive purposes.

Advantages:

- Determine the relative importance of issues by asking post survey follow-up questions that aren't conducive to a survey format.
- Confirm whether certain issues are localized in certain employee segments or widespread across the organization.
- Understand the current negative impact of specific workplace issues and the benefits of addressing them.
- Identify underlying causes driving low engagement.
- Develop a basis for the most impactful improvement recommendations for future action. In other words, gathering qualitative data before beginning action planning helps executives make decisions about where and how to prioritize their efforts.

How-to guide overview

Focus group research is effective and perceptive when planned and facilitated properly. This TalentMap Focus Group How- To Guide outlines approaches to help your organization dig deeper and bring to light employee feelings, observations, and preferences. Presented in three stages: Planning, Facilitating and Reporting, this useful resource details how and what to do to get the most out of your focus group efforts to enhance engagement and influence organizational change.

Stage I: Planning

- Clarify Why
- Write a Statement of Purpose
- Identify a Strong Facilitator
- Appoint an Objective Reporter
- Develop Questions
- Choose Time and Location
- Develop Agenda
- Select and Invite Participants

Stage II: Facilitating

- Set-up and Participant Arrival
- Build Rapport
- Establish Ground Rules
- Ensure Everyone Participates
- Listen & Watch Carefully
- Use Probing Techniques
- Keep Track of Time
- Reflect Back
- End on a High Note

Stage III: Reporting

- Immediately Post-Session
- Individual Focus Group Analysis
- Comparative Focus Group Analysis
- Prepare Report

Stage I: Planning

Anything done well usually involves solid planning. Focus group research is no exception. From the moment the idea surfaces in discussions through to the closing words spoken at the last session, all factors should be given due consideration. Use the following checklist to keep on track and target.

CLARIFY WHY

Question your reasons before deciding whether to use employee focus group interviews as a source of information.

- ☐ What goals do you hope to meet using a focus group?
  i.e. Why did employees score XYZ dimension low? What examples have been observed? How important is each dimension to employees? What could/should be done to improve this area?
- ☐ What purpose will the data serve?
  i.e. To provide input to the action planning process and help Executives make decisions about where and how to prioritize their efforts.
- ☐ From whom do you want to collect information? (Be specific)
  i.e. Managers and non-managers from across all functional groups of the organization.

WRITE A BRIEF, EASILY UNDERSTOOD STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Use the answers to the guiding questions noted above. No more than three sentences are needed.

For example:

1. The purpose of the focus group process is to gather employee and manager input on Professional Growth, Innovation, and Teamwork, and how these areas can be improved.
2. Employees and managers will be asked to comment on their experiences, observations, and the level of importance they place on each issue as well as how they would suggest improvement.
3. Employee and manager participation at this stage in our planning is intended to provide executives with concrete ideas and priorities of how to turn survey results into action.

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IDENTIFY A STRONG FACILITATOR

Finding an experienced facilitator is the most important thing you can do to ensure good results from your focus groups. The facilitator guides conversation by asking questions, probing to clarify answers, keeping the group on topic, and making sure everyone is heard. These skills take practice.

The facilitator should have substantive knowledge of the topic under discussion. Ideally your facilitator has run focus groups in the past. If, however, the discussions are to be conducted by an individual or team of moderators without previous experience in focus group techniques, training is suggested. Training can take the form of role playing, formalized instruction on topic sequencing, and probing for generating and managing group discussions.

The following skills and characteristics are beneficial:

Energetic – Keeps the discussion lively, interesting, and productive.

Personable – Puts participants at ease early in the session so they can comfortably and actively take part in discussions.

Agile Thinker – Handles quick changes in the session.

Organized – Develops an effective written agenda and produces results within a designated time frame.

Active Listener – Attends to each participant, clarifying meanings by using probing techniques such as paraphrasing.

Remembers – Connects a participant's current statement to a previous statement, developing a better understanding of the participant's feelings and stimulating more discussion.

Knowledgeable – Possesses background knowledge on the topic and organization. Experienced.

Experienced

APPOINT AN OBJECTIVE REPORTER

The reporter/assistant facilitator plays a vital role in focus group discussions too. This scribe must capture as much accurate detail from the discussion as possible and note participant comments, group dynamics, and interesting shifts in conversation.

While it's best to make an audio recording of your focus groups to ensure there's a complete record of what was discussed, it's still important to have a note taker present as an observer, reporter, and back up facilitator.

DEVELOP CAREFULLY WORDED QUESTIONS

Yes-or-no questions are one dimensional and don't stimulate discussion. "Why" questions can put people on the defensive and may lead to "politically correct" responses on controversial issues. Open-ended questions are the most useful because they allow participants to tell their story in their own words and add details that can result in unanticipated insights.

- [ ] What do you think about...?
- [ ] How do you feel about...?
- [ ] What do you like best (or least) about...?

CHOSE TIME AND LOCATION

- [ ] Scheduling - Plan meetings to be one to two hours long. Lunchtime scheduling makes it easier for employees to attend.
- [ ] Location – Hold sessions in a conference room or other setting with adequate air flow and lighting. Some other factors to consider when choosing a location:
    1. What message does the setting send? (Is it corporate, upscale, informal, sterile, or inviting?)
    2. Does the setting encourage conversation?
    3. How will the setting affect the information gathered? Will the setting bias the information offered?
    4. Can it comfortably accommodate the number of participants, where all can view each other?
    5. Is it easily accessible? (consider access for people with disabilities, safety, transportation, parking, proximity, and convenience).
- [ ] Supplies - Identify material needed such as notepads and pens for participants, recording equipment, white boards or flip charts, and markers.
- [ ] Refreshments – Employees are giving their time to share insights. Light refreshments are a gesture of appreciation. Plan something more substantial for participants attending sessions held over lunch.

DEVELOP AN AGENDA

Outline the flow of questions and topics to be covered. Build time into your "discussion" guide to pursue interesting topics raised by participants that reveal ideas or sentiments that weren't predicted. A typical employee focus group agenda includes:

- [ ] Welcome
- [ ] Review of agenda
- [ ] Review of meeting objectives
- [ ] Confidentiality commitment to participants and from participants to each other
- [ ] Review of ground rules
- [ ] Introductions
- [ ] Discussions of three to four focus group topics - for example: impact, root causes, expectations for improvement, possible solutions
- [ ] Summary and wrap up

SELECT AND INVITE PARTICIPANTS

Develop a list of attributes to guide the selection of participants. Typically, you'll want participants who cover a cross section of attributes, such as:

- [ ] Functional group/business unit
- [ ] Length of service at organization
- [ ] Gender
- [ ] Employee Status (employee, management, etc.)
- [ ] Geographic location

As a general guideline, you can also follow the outline below:

Organization <250 employees = 3 focus groups
Organization <1,000 employees = 3 to 5 focus groups
Organization 1,000+ employees = 6+ focus groups

- [ ] To ensure open and honest input, keep manager sessions separate from non-manager focus groups.
- [ ] One-on-one interviews are recommended for executives if they're going to be part of the process.
- [ ] Each focus group should comprise 6 to 10 people to allow for smooth conversation flow. The common practice is to invite one and one-half as many people as you want to come (for a 66% response rate). For a focus group of 6 to 10 this means inviting between 9 and 15 participants for each session.
- [ ] Invite participants two weeks prior to focus group sessions.
- [ ] About three days before the session, call participants to remind them to attend.

Stage II: Facilitating

Think of focus groups as multiple group interviews where a facilitator guides people in a discussion of issues to clarify survey results and ask for views, ideas, and other information. Sessions typically last one to two hours. Here's a checklist to guide the rollout, flow and productivity of focus groups.

SET-UP AND PARTICIPANT ARRIVAL

- ☐ Position seating so all participants can see one another.
- ☐ Distribute notepads and pens.
- ☐ Set up a refreshment station.
- ☐ Place whiteboard or flip chart and markers in a position visible to all.
- ☐ Locate electrical outlook for recording equipment/laptop; station reporter to take notes from this location or nearby.
- ☐ Check recording equipment to ensure proper operation.
- ☐ As participants arrive, draw a diagram of seating arrangements so you can refer to first names throughout the session.

BUILD RAPPORT AT THE OUTSET

Often participants don't know what to expect from focus group discussions. It's helpful for the facilitator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session to set the group at ease.

- ☐ Welcome participants
- ☐ Introduce the facilitator (yourself) and assistant moderator/reporter. Briefly explain the following:
- ☐ My role as facilitator is to guide the discussion...
- ☐ Our topic is...
- ☐ The results will be used for...
- ☐ You were selected because...

Rapport is important because it can dramatically influence the willingness and candor of participants to answer questions openly and honestly. Stress how the discussion is informal, everyone is encouraged to take part, and divergent views are welcome. Let participants know you're there as a researcher, to learn from them.

ESTABLISH GROUND RULES

At the beginning of a focus group it's helpful to let everyone know how the process can be smooth and respectful for all participants. The following are some recommended guidelines or "ground rules" to help establish a group norm:

- [ ] We're on a first name basis.
- [ ] You don't need to agree with others, but we ask you to listen respectfully as others express their views.
- [ ] We're recording: give the floor to one person at a time.
- [ ] Confidentiality is assured. "What's shared in the room stays in the room."
- [ ] It's important to hear everyone's ideas and opinions.
- [ ] There are no right or wrong answers – just differing points of view, ideas, experiences, and opinions, which are all valuable.
- [ ] It's important to hear both positive and negative sides of an issue.
- [ ] It's important for everyone's ideas to be equally represented and respected.
- [ ] We ask that you turn off your phones. If you can't and must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.

Once ground rules have been presented ask participants if they have anything to add to the list; this helps set an interactive, inclusionary tone.

ENSURE EVERYONE PARTICIPATES

When posing the first and subsequent questions, allow a few moments for each participant to gather their thoughts.

- [ ] If one or two people are dominating the meeting call on others.
- [ ] Consider using a round-table approach giving each person a minute or two to answer the question.
- [ ] If certain voices continue to dominate discussions, bring it to the attention of the group and ask for ideas about how everyone's participation can be increased.

LISTEN AND WATCH CAREFULLY

Active listening allows you to probe effectively and at appropriate points during the focus group.

It involves hearing what someone is saying, and noticing body language and facial gestures that might suggest ways to engage participants. For instance, if someone rolls their eyes in response to a comment, at the right moment say something along the lines of there likely being differing opinions at the table. Invite more comments; specifically ask the eye roller for their position on the subject.

While showing participants you're actively listening and interested in what they're sharing, stay as neutral or impartial as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about something. And avoid leading questions like "don't you think...?" Comments that infer your opinion and impose judgment will shut down discussion.

USE PROBING TECHNIQUES

If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, probe for fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques are:

- [ ] Repeat the question – repetition gives more time to think.
- [ ] Pause for the answer – a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
- [ ] Repeat the response – hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation.
- [ ] Ask questions to provoke more detail - use neutral comments:
    - How so?
    - Please tell me (more) about that...?
    - Could you explain what you mean by...?
    - Can you tell me something else about...?
    - Can you tell me more?
    - What specifically do you mean by that?
    - Can you share an example of what you've mentioned?
    - Is there anything else?

REFLECT BACK

Stick as closely as possible to the agenda and associated time lines so that you can explore all questions planned.

KEEP TRACK OF TIME

After each question is answered, carefully reflect back a summary of what you heard. The reporter/ note taker may be in the best position do this.

- ☐ Sometimes the facilitator may not follow-up on an important point or ask for an example of a vague but critical point. The reporter may wish to follow-up with these questions towards the end of the focus group.
- ☐ Participants typically bring up several key points in response to each question; often these same points are expressed by other participants. Sometimes they're said only once but in a manner deserving of attention. Before the end of the focus group the reporter should raise these themes with participants for confirmation.

CLOSE THE SESSION ON A HIGH NOTE

- ☐ At the end of the session suggest if participants feel they didn't have time to make a point or suggestion to write it on the notepad provided and hand it in before leaving.
- ☐ Tell participants they'll receive a copy of the report generated from their answers.
- ☐ Reiterate the commitment to mutual confidentiality.
- ☐ Thank everyone for coming and adjourn the gathering.

STAGE III: Analysis & reporting

Interviews are just one part of the focus group equation. Documenting the qualitative data is the second part. Analyzing and reporting findings is third. This final checklist is designed to make it easier to document and report.

IMMEDIATELY POST-SESSION

- ☐ Verify recording equipment, if used, worked throughout the session.
- ☐ Make additional notes on your written notes to clarify illegible scribbling or notes that don't make sense, ensure pages are numbered.
- ☐ Write down any observations made during the session. For example, the nature of participation in the group, any surprises.
- ☐ Conduct facilitator and reporter debriefing.
- ☐ Note themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas.
- ☐ Compare and contrast this focus group to any preceding sessions.
- ☐ Label and file field notes, tapes, and other materials.
- ☐ Arrange for e-transcript of the recording.

INDIVIDUAL FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS: WITHIN ONE DAY OF SESSION

- ☐ Review session notes and transcript.
- ☐ Prepare individual focus group report in a question-by-question format; highlight notable quotes.
- ☐ Share report for verification with others (outside of participants) who were present at the focus group.

COMPARATIVE FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS: WITHIN DAYS OF THE FINAL SESSION

- ☐ Compare and contrast results between each focus group.
- ☐ Look for emerging themes generally, and by specific question.
- ☐ Compartmentalize and describe themes, note applicable quotes.

PREPARE THE REPORT

- [ ] Consider narrative style versus bulleted style.
- [ ] Sequence content by theme or question by question.
- [ ] Use quotes to illustrate salient points. Write a one-page executive summary.
- [ ] Share report for verification with other facilitators, reporters, and researchers involved in the process.
- [ ] Revise and finalize report.

Resource List:

- Performance Monitoring and Evaluation TIPS, USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation
- CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS, 1996, Number 10 http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnaby233.pdf
- Basics of Conducting Focus Groups, Carter MacNamara https://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm
- Chapter 3 Section 6 Conducting Focus Groups, Community Tool Box http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conduct-focus- groups/main
- Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews, Richard A. Krueger Professor and Evaluation Leader. University of Minnesota http://www.eiu.edu/ihec/Krueger-FocusGroupInterviews.pdf
- Effective Focus Group Questions by ProProfs, Grand Canyon University, Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching https://cirt.gcu.edu/research/developmentresources/research_ ready/focus_groups/effective_questions
- Focus Groups: Facilitator's Toolkit, TalentMap, 2012.
- Organizing and Conducting Focus Groups, The International Training and Education Center for Health (I-TECH) Technical Implementation Guide #1, 2008, University of Washington.
- Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups, Omni Institute http://www.omni.org/Media/Default/Documents/Information%20Gathering%20Toolkit.pdf
- http://www.orau.gov/cdcynergy/soc2web/content/activeinformation/resources/soc_focusgroup-indepthinterview_steps.pdf

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