



FOCUS GROUPS 101

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- Eric and Dan

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Before getting started.

What is a Focus Group?

A Focus Group is a group of individuals gathered together for the specific purpose of gaining their opinion on a subject, idea, product, service, or thought. Marketing, public relations and pooling companies commonly use them.

Why have a Focus Group?

The focus group can serve many purposes. Many serve the purpose of gaining input on new products or services for the marketplace and how to market them; others help organizations determine causes and solutions to problems and to better understand public issues.

Size, Set up of a Focus Group

The size of a Focus Group should be no greater than 12 people. This allows everyone to participate and also provides enough people to facilitate a discussion around issues from a diverse group. If there is less than eight participants, then there will need to be lots of energy from the two facilitators as to compensate for the lack of bodies.

The average focus group can last up to two hours but usually not longer. They should have refreshments (i.e. Coffee, tea, doughnuts etc.), although sometimes have a full dinner. The chairs ought to be set up in a circle, so that everyone feels a part of and that everyone can hear each other. A circle also allows for better eye contact between the facilitators and the participants. The co-facilitators should sit separately so that they feel more a part of the group and so that they can both get a better feel for the group.

They should include at least one break but if necessary, there can be more. It is up to the facilitator to read the participants. Breaks do not always have to be a typical “smoke break” where the focus is lost, it can be another icebreaker, or perhaps just a change in pace. Let the participants discuss in smaller groups etc.

Facilitators.

Keys of effective facilitation

1. Be clear

Being focused and straightforward are the keys to effective communication. Be clear and direct with the group in terms of what you will do. Speak in simple terms without jargon and technical terms. Address questions and comments directly. Try to focus discussion on one topic at a time, while still respecting the flow of ideas coming from group members.

2. Facilitate -- don't teach!!!

The youth participating in the focus group are the experts and your role is to create a safe place for them to share with each other what they think about youth engagement and how they feel based on their own experiences. Try to make discussion as informal and relaxed as possible

3. Be organized and flexible

It is important to be prepared for the focus group, but be aware of the needs and interests of your group by listening to their comments and remain flexible; adapt your plan to suit their needs.

4. Be Positive and Non-Judgmental

Treat all responses as valuable, affirming the participation of group members.

5. Be understanding and encouraging

Understand and accept each person's own experience and the challenges they face in trying to cope with these issues. Ask open-ended questions to encourage each person to explain what they are thinking/feeling. Be aware of quiet participants and try to make them feel more comfortable. Draw them out without singling them out or pressuring them.

6. Listen Carefully and Actively

Give your energy to each group member as they are speaking and confirm what has been said by reflecting it back to the person.

7. Be informed

Know what resources are available for youth in your community so you are prepared to answer questions and draw their attention to the supports available (i.e. know your local resource guide for youth!).

8. Be confident and be yourself

Youth will respect your experience and support regardless of your background, as long as you are open, honest, interested, clear and respectful of them.

What to Avoid

- Being too quiet
- Being out of touch with issues
- Being judgmental
- Getting too analytical
- Being too controlling
- Being too over eager
- Digging for problems
- Getting too personal Giving off negative vibes e.g. looking at your watch!
- Cutting people off

Tips for facilitators

Smile and be friendly (but be real!)

Keep track of the time.

Listen with your ears and your eyes.

Introduce everyone. Introductions value people.

Warm-up participants. (small talk, go-around with non-threatening question)

Reflect back in language given. (i.e. in youth-speak)

There are no right or wrong answers.

Try to achieve equal participation. (manoeuvre enthusiasts and silent types)

No judgements.

Seek clarification...

“What I’m hearing is...”

“Sarah, what is your understanding of what Ed said?”

Have fun but be attentive to the tone of the group and serious issues!

Active Listening & Reflecting Back

Active listening and reflecting back are two communication skills that become important tools as a facilitator (and in your own daily life!). There is a lot you can do just by how you listen and respond to the comments of group members. Your manner will go a long way to either encouraging or discouraging participants to share their thoughts and ideas.

One of the most common problems in communication is failing to listen carefully to one another or to take the time to check what has been heard.

By listening actively, you give these important messages:

- I am listening, you have my full attention
- I hear what you are saying
- I value what you are saying
- I want to understand what you are saying

Active listening means:

- Listening with your eyes and your ears
- Making eye contact
- Using your own body language to encourage the group member (e.g. nodding)
- Paying attention to several kinds of behaviours (not just what was said, but what was not, silence, laughter and body language)

Reflecting back is a way to clarify what has been said for yourself and for the group. It's a way to ensure good listening by checking what you think was said or what you think you hear, with other group members. It's important that you use the same language as the person who has spoken. **Stick to youth-speak when reflecting back.**

E.g. Youth: "I feel like shit when she fucks with my head, talks on the phone all night, treats me like a piece of shit."

Facilitator: "If I get what you're saying, you feel shitty when you're girlfriend doesn't call you back and talks to other people all night on the phone instead".

Use of Probing Statements

To move the discussion forward, you can use some simple probing statements to encourage the same person to continue speaking or to open up the discussion for others to speak.

“What I heard you say was...”

“Does anyone see it differently?”

“Are there any other points of view?”

“Would you explain further?”

“Can you give me an example of what you mean?”

“Is there anything else?”

“I don’t understand.”

Basically, all this means, BE YOURSELF...

- ⊕ **Be respectful...**
- ⊕ **Be honest...**
- ⊕ **And non-judgemental!**

Environment.

Guidelines

Explain to the group that setting ground rules can be useful in getting the most out of the discussion.

Ask the group what ground rules they want to set up for the discussion.

Suggest some ground rules that have worked well before with other groups:

- respect the ideas of every group member
- keep what comes up in the group confidential (don't go blabbing people's personal stories in the hallway!)
- take turns talking one-at-a-time
- listen to the person talking

Confidentiality

Explain that you, as a facilitator, will not be sharing anything that takes place in the group with someone who is not in the room.

Ask participants to agree to respect this rule also (see ground rules).

Explain that the only situation where you might have to break confidentiality is when someone is in need of protection i.e. where someone shares that:

- They are thinking of hurting themselves (suicide)
- They are thinking of hurting someone else (homicide)
- They are being hurt by someone (abuse)

Warm ups and go arounds

Warm ups and go arounds are very helpful to begin and to continue throughout the focus group. Warm ups or icebreakers help the group relax a bit. If they do not know each other, it will help meld the group a bit and help get everyone comfortable with each other. Icebreakers are good for a break as well. If the group is getting very excited, and won't seem to calm down, then an active activity will help the group let off some steam.

Go arounds are important at the beginning so that everyone has a chance to say their name, what they do, etc. It serves as a good introduction to the focus group because then the group begins to feel like a group.

At any given time:

*You are.....facilitating.
Your partner is...tuned into the vibes.*

....Or vice versa

TIPS: Creating a Safe, Open Environment

- Be yourself, relax and bring your energy to the group
- Explain why you're there and that this is their time to talk
- Set ground rules for discussion with group (golden rule - don't interrupt)
- Explain about confidentiality - the purpose is to help people feel safe sharing their experiences and ideas
- Do a go-around at the beginning (e.g. non-threatening question, with names) or make small talk with the group
- Work from a place of mutual respect
- Be fair and treat everyone as equal
- Help everyone feel part of the group
- Let the group guide the discussion - don't push topics or stick to a strict structure

Explain that there are no right or wrong answers.

Stress the importance of their ideas and opinions. This time is for them to talk about what they want to talk about.

A Note on Teamwork

You will develop a way of working with your partner that will help move the discussion forward, or refocus when necessary. If you were facilitating the group by yourself, you might find that you get stuck or bogged down and aren't sure how to get out of it. When you work with someone else, you can trust that they will find a new angle or a creative way to change the flow of discussion.

Two facilitator's cannot talk at the same time. You will develop a rhythm with your partner as to who facilitates at different points of the discussion. Whoever is not doing the actual facilitating still has a very important role...tuning into the vibes of the group.

Tuning into the vibes of the group means being aware of the energy of the group and being sensitive to when it's time to shift the focus or dive in deeper to a particular issue.

Sometimes when one person is caught up in the facilitating, they get bogged because they are not aware of the energy of the group or of something happening outside of the immediate discussion they are engaged in. That's where the other facilitator can pick up and be responsive to the group, possibly by opening up discussion in a different area or addressing an issue from a different angle.

It is important that facilitators get in the habit of talking before and after a group to evaluate how they worked together, what felt right, what could have been better. Although you will not always work with the same partner, you may develop a style that works better with some partners than others.

Know yourself and what works for you!

Share this with the co-ordinator so you can be matched with the right partner in the right focus group setting for you, if possible.

Participants.

The quiet participant

- Give the person a chance to speak
- Do a go-around so no one person is singled out
- Direct a non-threatening question at them
- “So, what are the teachers like here?” “What did you eat for breakfast?”
- “Is there anything you would like to add...” “What do you think...” “Do you agree with this?”
- Make eye contact
- Don’t push them to answer
- Respect the silence if they choose not to use the opportunity to speak

The outspoken participant (blah, blah, blah...)

- Watch for others looking for a chance to speak
- Facilitate this transition politely
- “Let’s let someone else speak”
- “Let’s do a go-around”
- “Hey guys, let’s let other people talk...”
- If this doesn’t work:
- Remind the person(s) about ground rules
- Give them a choice to remain and follow rules or to leave
- Turn discussion into a casual chat
- Forget structure and come back to it

Participant is disrespectful or abusive to facilitator or other participants

- E.g. throwing cans, threatening facilitators
- Be clear that this is not acceptable
- Review ground rules
- Give and take: respect goes both ways
- Ask person if they are willing to respect rules
- “To be fair to the group, I need to ask you to respect the rules or to leave - it’s your choice”
- Be prepared to leave if the actions continue
- Remember that it’s your right to leave if you don’t feel safe and able to manage the group
- Close follow-up with contact person

Tips for working in different settings.

Detention Centre

- Be prepared by talking with contact person about what to expect
- First couple of minutes are key
- Be primed, but don't be chirpy cheery
- Be aware of your environment, what's around you, but try to relax and be confident
- Give respect
- Know your limits
- Laugh at yourself if you make a mistake "screw-ups are okay"
- Make it clear that you are there for a reason
- Balance between serious/open, heavy/light
- Remind them of the routine part that has to be done so that you can get on with the real part of the group (they're used to filling out forms...)
- If it's hard to keep the group focused or if individuals are acting out, know that there are consequences in the facility and supports to back you up
- Try to find out who the group trusts (e.g. if the contact person is trusted), especially if there is need for follow-up
- Use your judgement about whether or not to talk with contact person about follow-up
- Try not to "dis" anyone in front of their peers - they live together 24 hours a day
- Focus on their strengths and how they survive - their personal resources
- Be aware - drugs, possible manipulation

Rural areas

- Prepare in advance with contact person
- Know what local resources are available
- Be prepared for follow-up and know that you may need to bring someone back from a long distance if immediate assistance is required and there's nothing available locally
- Be informed about where you are going (e.g. possible issues that will come up, ideas for making small talk, how to relate)
- Confidentiality can be a major issues because it's a small community and everyone knows each other (especially when there's a disclosure)
- Small size can be an advantage because youth may know each other really well, have a history together, be comfortable talking
- Some issues that have come up frequently in rural focus groups:
 - Boredom, nothing to do
 - Hard to get around because there's no transportation
 - Work-employment stress for community
 - Drinking, drugs, sex because there's nothing else to do

Street Youth/Drop-Ins

Be aware that you may have middle class assumptions, stereotypes
Know yourself and if you are okay in this setting
Talk with your co-ordinator about this - it's okay to ask to sit in on a group before actually facilitating one
As opposed to school setting, street youth are there completely by choice and probably to access the refreshments
The follow-up advocacy role will likely be important to them
Be aware that they know the system, are used to giving information and have lots to say about their experiences
Provide an unbiased ear, not sympathy
Be open-minded and flexible - don't judge
Be "loose" with group structure - they may want to get up and walk around, come and go...as long as it isn't too disruptive of the group
Let them know you want to hear about what their life's about
Acknowledge their stories
Ask them what message they want YN/RA to bring back to change the system
How to prevent youth from ending up on the street

Focus Groups procedure.

A Checklist



(gasp!) Booking a Focus Group

Contact made with local group / organization / school / youth; Centres work explained (direct them to web site, send 'one pager', etc), and time, location, & date are booked in advance
Find / tell your co-facilitator

The following are a series of checklists that outline the steps in carrying out a focus group:



Preparation - Getting Ready Before the Focus Group(s)

Confirm Focus Group Details

- The names of your co-facilitators
- Location (ask for directions, specific room(s) if known)
- Start time
- Length of time for focus group session
- Number of groups
- Number of participants per group
- Information about the group (age, background, culture, etc)
- Where to check-in with contact person

Co-ordinate with Your Partner

- Transportation to focus group(s)
- Organization of refreshments
- Assembly of materials (see below)
- Arrival time (plan to be there 15 minutes ahead)

Assemble Materials

(One of each of the following for every participant)

- Consent forms
- Questionnaires
- Centres one-pager
- Evaluation forms (so they can evaluate the focus group)
- Local resource list of youth-friendly services
- SC/TG material & background information sheets
- Sharpened pencils and paper



At the Focus Group

1. *Arrival*

- Check-in with the contact person/introductions
- Room set-up

TIP: ROOM SET-UP

Think about organizing chairs or desks in a circle so that everyone can: (1) see and hear each other; and (2) feel part of the group.

Some facilitators find it works well for partners to sit separately (i.e. in different parts of the circle): (1) to feel more like a part of the group (and less like “leaders” or teachers); (2) to better follow the process of the group.

1. *Introduction*

What the focus group is about

Confidentiality

Ground rules (theirs and ours - see suggestions in “Ground Rules” section)

Brief overview of process – explain that notes will be taken during the discussion but that no names will be used, that it will last about one hour, etc.

2. *Paperwork*

Hand out a consent form and a questionnaire to each participant

Explain how the information will be used

Allow 5 to 10 minutes for participants to complete forms

Collect completed form

3. *Warm-ups*

See Warm ups and Go-arounds section

4. *Facilitate Discussion (questions)*

What do you think being involved or engaged means? How would you describe someone who is really engaged? (Probe, if needed: Do you believe participating in this focus group, playing soccer, doing graffiti, or being in a school play are all forms of engagement?)

Do you know someone who is not doing much at all? Can you describe someone who is not engaged in anything?

Have you ever been involved in something for a long time? What made you start in the first place? What kept you interested and participating?

Think of all the times you passed up an opportunity, didn't get involved, or didn't act on something you cared about.... what stopped you? Have you ever gotten involved in something and then stopped? Why didn't you stay engaged?

If you wanted to get some other youth engaged in something, what would you do?
What should adults do to involve youth and keep them interested?

Most youth know one adult in their school or community that almost everyone likes and respects. How does an adult behave who is doing a good job involving youth?

Young people sometimes say that adults don't do a good job of involving us or listening to what we have to say but youth contribute lots when they get involved. Why should they involve youth?

If you could change a school, a meeting, an organization, or something else you are involved in to help it involve youth better, what would you change?

What do you feel passionate about?

What things are youth capable of changing?

Is there anything else you'd like to say about youth involvement or engagement?

TIPS: TEAMWORK AND FACILITATING/RECORDING

Think about one facilitator taking the lead with facilitating the discussion while the other facilitator takes notes on the recording form. The facilitator doing the recording can still assist with group process (prompting, clarifying, and refocusing discussion).

Facilitators have found that recording during the focus group is best. At this time, the issues and ideas that were raised are fresh, clear, and more accurate.

After the group, facilitators should consult together to make sure they agree on what has been recorded and to add to it.

Be sure to explain the purpose of the recorded info and that no names are included on this sheet.

5. Record Discussion

Use recording sheets (see Appendix)

6. Closure

Begin to wrap-up the group about 15 minutes before end of session

Let participants know that the group is coming to a close

Introduce resource material

Invite interested participants to volunteer using the volunteer sign-up sheet

Thank participants for sharing their experiences and amazing ideas!

Talk about appropriate follow-up activities (e.g. do they want another group?)

7. *Hand Out Resource Material*

Have resource material ready on a resource table (SC /TG stuff, other community resource material, etc.)

Hand out personally to each participant copies of your local resource list of youth services

8. *Wrap-up*

Return room to original set-up

Check-out with contact person: (1) to give feedback about focus group session; (2) to say thank you

9. *Follow-up (only if necessary)*

In the event that one of the focus group participants discloses that s/he is a) being hurt, b) hurting someone or c) thinking of hurting his/herself you must tell the contact person in order to assure that the participant in question get help

TIPS: GIVING FEEDBACK TO CONTACT PERSON

You can offer to give verbal feedback right after the group, to call back later or to send written feedback

It is very important to respect confidentiality...remember not to link any comments with the names of youth or to share any specifics where they'll get in trouble or be blamed for something

Be honest, but be constructive where criticisms have been raised

Highlight any ideas for follow-up activities that came up and check out what the next step might be to make them happen

Use and trust your judgement!



Report Back

Check that recording has been done, and other paperwork is complete (* see Appendix for examples of paper work)

Place paperwork in a file folder (label it with the focus group date and location)

Check in with Students Commission to give feedback about how it went etc.

Return completed forms in file folder and unused materials