

## Focus groups – the hallmarks of good practice

### Introduction

Various research methods can be used to support the planning and implementation of change. These methods include:

- Questionnaires.
- Observation of activities.
- Structured Interviews.
- Focus groups

These are the most commonly used research methods for gathering opinion-based information.

This paper sets out general recommendations on the use of focus groups.

### General Research Methods

Questionnaires are useful because they present an efficient way to collect the opinions of large numbers of people. They also have the advantage of increasing the honesty levels of participants, provided anonymity can be assured. However, they have limitations. Whilst opportunities can be provided for free-form comments, it is not possible to have a 'dialogue' with participants via the questionnaire.

Questionnaires are frequently used to gather quantitative data, test trends and to identify areas for attention.

Structured interviews and focus groups are often used to:

- Verify the conclusions drawn from analysis of questionnaires.
- Gather more in depth, qualitative information.
- Test out reactions to proposals.
- Seek suggestions for improvement.

## **What is a focus group?**

A focus group is a sample of participants selected to be representative of the population to be studied who are asked to give their views on a range of matters relevant to the chosen topic. A facilitator who guides the discussion using pre-agreed questions and prompts leads them. The substance of the discussion is usually recorded. Confidentiality is usually assured in that participants are told that their individual comments will not be made known.

They have the advantage over structured interviews in that they can enable the person conducting the research to test opinions of a number of participants at once (groups range in size but could be up to 15). Focus groups provide a useful tool for gathering accurate quality information, enabling organisations to make better quality decisions as well as providing employees with greater opportunities to make a more significant contribution to their companies.

They can also lead to richer data being gathered because the participants can build on the contributions of other participants. Structured interviews are most useful where individual views are required, for example if someone is in a specialised role or position and their individual views are critical. Duration varies but is usually one to two hours.

## **Preparing for a focus group**

Preparation on the part of both facilitator and participants is key to the effectiveness of focus groups. The following guidelines are key:

- Clarity as to the purpose of the focus group.
- Roles should be assigned to ensure objectivity, for example note-taker, facilitator.
- Participants should understand why they are there and should be selected because of their ability to provide a representative contribution.
- Focused open questions and prompts should be used.
- Results should be recorded accurately.

Each of these is expanded below.

### **Be clear as to the purpose**

It is important that objectives are clearly understood and shared by the focus group. By doing this it is possible to test:

- Whether the focus group is an appropriate method to gather the information you want.
- How to select participants.
- How participants should be briefed.
- How questions should be drafted.

### **Assign roles to achieve objectivity**

The following roles are necessary to run a focus group effectively:

- An administrator-to handle logistics, select participants, send out invitations etc.
- A facilitator to lead the discussion.
- A recorder.

Research has shown that participants are prepared to be more honest if the facilitator is independent and does not have a stake in the outcome of the topic being discussed. This is not to say that individuals who are closely involved with the issues under question cannot run successful focus groups. However, it is worth bearing in mind that participants may feel inhibited. Facilitators who are close to the issue under discussion also need to be aware of the need to be objective, setting aside agendas other than that of gathering objective information and avoiding defensiveness if the feedback is critical.

The main roles of the facilitator are to:

- Introduce and set up the session.
- Welcome and introduce the participants.
- Create a climate conducive to openness.
- Lead the discussion using prepared questions.
- Check for understanding.
- Ensure everyone contributes.
- Summarise the outcomes.
- Thank the participants.

The role of the recorder is to ensure that the substance and detail of the discussion is recorded. Focus groups are frequently audio-taped, this is a useful aid but should not be used without the express permission of the participants before the session commences. Taping can lead participants to be guarded in their comments so the benefits of its use needs to be balanced against this. Again, objectivity has been shown to increase if the recorder is independent of the issues under discussion.

### **Select and brief participants carefully**

Participants should be selected so that they are representative of the group to be studied. For example, a focus group to gather views of teachers on various topics would need to include men as well as women, the inexperienced and the experienced, different age groups etc. There are no hard and fast rules here. However, the more closely the characteristics of a focus group mirror the characteristics of the larger group to be studied, the more reliable the results will be.

Once the characteristics of the group have been determined (e.g. women and men, part-time and full time, geographic location, managers and administrators etc.) attendees should be selected at random from these sub-groups.

The number of sub-groups to be represented can often determine the number of attendees. Between eight and ten is the most manageable number unless there is more than one facilitator.

It is good practice to brief participants by sending them an invitation which sets out:

- The purpose of the focus group.
- Its objectives.
- Why they have been chosen.
- That confidentiality will be maintained.
- Why it is in their interest to come.
- The logistics.

It is not usual practice to include the questions to be discussed but you may want to include information as to how the participants will find out what happened as a result of the groups.

### **Use focused open questions and prompts**

Questions to be used by the facilitator should be prepared in advance and reviewed to ensure that they cover the full range of the topic areas set out in the objectives and to ensure that they:

- Are couched in language which will easily be understood by participants.
- Are focused on a specific topic which is made clear to the participants.
- Are open, i.e. they do not provoke yes or no answers.
- Include a limited number of closed questions to obtain points of clarification, for example “Is that the view of this group?”. “Have I understood this correctly?”.
- Are followed up by probing questions.
- Do not raise the defensiveness of the group.

### **Record the results accurately**

The recorder plays a vital role in ensuring that the information generated by the focus group discussion is accurately recorded. Recorders should seek to obtain as much verbatim comment as possible using the exact language of the participants wherever possible. The facilitator can assist the recorder by summarising the discussion and checking for understanding.

## Conducting a focus group

Focus groups should follow the structure shown below:

- Open.
- Focus.
- Close.

## Opening the session

The purpose of the opening is to:

- Welcome the participants and thank them for attending.
- Explain the purpose of the session, outline the format to be followed, explain the recording method and assure confidentiality.
- Facilitate introductions.
- Create rapport with the participants to create a climate conducive to openness.

## Focus on the discussion

80% to 90% of the focus group discussion takes place during this phase. The facilitator leads by introducing the topic, checking understanding and stimulating discussion using the prepared questions and prompts. He/she probes for detail, where appropriate, by following up on information provided by participants, for example “You mentioned x, can you say what you mean by that?”.

The facilitator should:

- Ensure that the group focuses on the topic and avoids sideline conversations.
- Allow only one person to talk at a time.
- Ensure that no one person dominates the discussions.
- Sensitively bring in those who are not contributing.
- Check in frequently with the group to ensure that they have understood the questions.
- Summarise the discussion and check in with the group that the summary is accurate.
- Encourage differences of opinion with questions such as “Does anyone have a different view?”. However, take care not to allow the group to become argumentative.
- Use probing questions to get to the appropriate level of detail.
- Avoid asking questions which are personalised or which raise the defensiveness of the group.
- Manage the time effectively to ensure that all questions are covered and that no one question is allowed to dominate the session.
- ‘Train’ the participants to give their honest opinions by giving them positive feedback when they do so, for example “That’s really helpful”.

## **Close**

Once the discussion of the questions is completed, the facilitator should close the session.

This includes:

- Briefly summarising the purpose of the session.
- Thanking the participants for their contributions.
- Reassuring them of confidentiality.
- Explaining the next steps. This may include how the results will be used and whether there will be feedback to the participants.

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