Can You Call It a Focus Group?

"Let's get a group of people together and do a focus group."

Have you recently heard this comment? Perhaps more now than in the past? Not only are focus groups being used more frequently, their applications are expanding. Focus groups can be used for many purposes including program development and evaluation, planning, and needs assessment (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

But is every gathering of people to discuss an issue a focus group? Clearly not, yet how many of us are able to distinguish the differences among focus groups and other forms of group discussion such as town meetings, brainstorming sessions, and study circles? We may not even comprehend why is it important to understand the differences between various forms of group discussion.

When appropriately used, the focus group method can result in high quality data that lead to high quality decision-making. Reliable, valid information collected in a manner that takes the values and needs of stakeholders into consideration has the potential to reduce conflicts when providing leadership to decision-makers in organizations and communities (House and Howe, 1999).

Focus group definition and uses

The focus group has been defined as a "carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger and Casey, 2000, p. 5). The focus group was designed originally as a marketing research tool and has been adapted for research in many fields, such as medicine and the social sciences, and in applied settings such as program

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> (House and Howe, 1999)
>
> *A focus group is a series of discussions intended to collect participants' perceptions, set in a "permissive, nonthreatening environment."*
> (Krueger, 2000)

development and evaluation, and community development.

Focus groups share features with other forms of group discussion. The features that set focus groups apart are:

■ A clear plan for a controlled process and environment in which interactions among participants take place;

■ Use of a structured process to collect and interpret data; and

■ Participants selected based on characteristics they share, as opposed to differences among them.

Communities and organizations sometimes use focus groups in inappropriate ways. For example, they may assume that results of a single focus group can be used to generalize about a total population in a county or region. Or they might decide to do a focus group immediately after a training session to assess the level of knowledge acquired on an individual basis by attendees. How can you, an educator or a member of an organization, determine whether a focus group is the best tool in such instances?

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The focus group method is a valuable tool that can be used to tease out real meanings at any phase of the program planning cycle (Caffarella, 2002). It can assist in identifying problems and clarifying the way that people experience programs—what is happening in their world that facilitators may not see from their own world view (Morgan, 1998). Properly structured focus groups can provide unique perspectives and can produce ideas that lead to innovative programs as well as program improvement.

Inappropriate purposes of focus groups

Is any group discussion that yields information a focus group? No. Focus groups are not a tool for building consensus, educating, or for evaluating the impact of an educational event. These purposes are better served by other methods.

The focus group process relies on an open, trusting environment that does not attempt to persuade or coerce people's opinions. Any attempt to build consensus has the potential to discourage divergent thinking: the process that yields a diversity of ideas and is crucial to high-quality focus group results. Tools such as the Search Conference and the Delphi technique are more appropriate methods when consensus building is the purpose.

Focus groups also are limited in their value as educational events. It is true that learning may occur as participants share their experiences and

Table 1. Comparing and contrasting focus groups and other types of discussion groups

	Focus Groups	Other Small Discussion Groups[1]	Large Discussion Groups[2]
Application			
Identify problems	Recommended	Recommended	Limited use
Design programs	Limited use	Limited use	Not recommended
Evaluate programs	Limited use	Not recommended	Not recommended
Educate or inform participants	Not recommended	Recommended	Recommended
Build consensus	Not recommended	Recommended	Recommended
Purpose	Designed to encourage divergent thinking and disclosure of personal perceptions and behaviors	Designed to study and/or generate ideas and solutions	Designed to build consensus, educate, or persuade
Participant selection	Participants are selectively invited, based on similar characteristics	Participants invited or required to participate because of their organizational affiliation. Similarity between participants is not a qualifier and may be a limitation in some situations.	Open to everyone in an organization or community
Group size	Group size from 6 to 12 individuals	Group size from 6 to 20 individuals	Group size from 6 to 100 or more individuals, depending on the issue
Event environment	Open, trusting environment	Open, trusting environment	Open, trusting environment

1 For example, Study circle, Delphi Technique, Search Conference

2 For example, town meeting

opinions, but the overall intent of a focus group is not to move participants in a certain direction through information or persuasion. When the purpose is to encourage expression of opinions by members of a large audience, town meetings conducted with a parliamentary procedure or another democratic form of facilitation may be more suitable.

Focus groups are sometimes used to measure the extent to which individuals have learned technical information. This is not a good use. The interaction of members in a focus group leads to an incomplete or distorted picture of an individual's competence. If you need to measure gains that result from training, skip the focus group in favor of other methods where group interactions have less influences on the setting; for example, face-to-face interviews, cognitive mapping, or paper and pencil pre/post-questionnaires (Caffarella, 2002).

A Tool to Determine Appropriate Focus Group Use

Two questions can be used to determine whether a focus group is the appropriate method. The process of answering either question provides an opportunity to review the variety of methods available for collecting information.

■ *For what purpose is the information being collected or how will the information be used?*

In applied program planning situations,

- Focus groups can be used to gain clarity on the way people experience a program (Hebbeler and Gerlach-Downie, 2002),

thereby allowing program planners to design programs or change programs that reach identified outcomes.

- Focus groups create information on participants' attitudes and values (Lutenbacher, Cooper, and Faccia, 2002), that can be used to identify solutions for old and new problems. Group interaction can stimulate participant ideas that might not have been available on an individual basis.

- Focus groups provide information on the language used by potential survey respondents (Larson and Hegland, 2003; Mitra 1994), that enhances the reliability and validity of questionnaire responses. When an evaluator is unfamiliar with the nuances of a program or policy, focus groups with program managers or participants can assist the evaluator in designing questions that get the important information in a usable form.

- Focus groups also can add detail to the information generated by a quantitative survey (Hebbeler and Gerlach-Downie, 2002, and Naylor et al., 2002). By their nature, paper and pencil surveys often leave questions about why respondents answer in a certain manner. Using focus groups after a survey is completed can assist in understanding answers to these questions.

■ *What resources and skills are available for the information-gathering process?*

Unlike the study circle or open space technique, a moderator leads focus group discussions in a direct way. Moderators manage results by

preparing questions with appropriate wording and presenting them in the appropriate order. They prepare the environment for effective conversation and manage the conversation so that the delicate balance between outcome and genuine dialogue is maintained.

The choice of moderator can have a significant impact on focus group results. A skilled moderator can provide expertise in selecting participants and motivating them to attend and in interpreting and analyzing the focus group results.

Conclusion

The focus group is a remarkable tool in the world of information gathering and is recognized and embraced by researchers, educators, and organization and community leaders. Appropriate use of focus groups can lead to high quality information for high quality decision-making. Basic considerations addressed here provide a framework for understanding and assessing the appropriate uses of focus groups.

Recommended Readings

Morgan, D. L. (editor) 1993. *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art.* Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.

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