



MANAGEMENT OF FOCUS GROUPS

Purpose

The purpose of conducting focus groups is to collect information from a small group (for instance, 5 to 12 participants) in a systematic and structured format (see box 3A.2). An effective focus group is designed around a clear and specific goal. Participants interact with a facilitator who presents the participants with questions designed to yield insight into current or desired results in relation to a specific topic or issue.

Needs Assessment Applications

Attaining the information required to complete a needs assessment will oftentimes require that you interview (or have a focused discussion with) a number of people at the same time. The focus group is an opportunity to gain valuable information related to both current results and desired results at each level of the program or project results chain.

Although focus groups can also be used to identify alternative activities to improve performance, during your needs assessment it is important to

Box 3A.2 Sample Uses of Focus Groups

- Collect information on current performance.
- Validate the results of a survey.
- Define the desired results.
- Identify potential solutions.
- Define strengths and weaknesses of potential solutions.

maintain attention (focus) on the collection of information that will help you identify (a) valid needs (or gaps between current and desired results), (b) evidence to support the validation of those needs, and (c) information that will allow you to prioritize needs before selecting a course of action for addressing the high-priority needs.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- Through a focus group format, multiple people can be interviewed at one time.
- Focus group discussions allow members of the focus group to build on each other's comments and reactions. This approach can yield a synergy of discussion around topics or themes.
- Focus groups can help people come to consensus and make challenging decisions (such as prioritizing needs).

Disadvantages

- Group members may not contribute equally to the discussion in a focus group format. More reserved members may not feel comfortable inserting their contributions in the discussion. Other participants may try to dominate discussions.
- Gaining information from the group can be challenging. There is a risk of “groupthink” that can emerge through this process, thus diverting the discussion and making it hard to refocus the group on different issues.
- Discussions may take too long to cover all of the relevant topics and to offer everyone a chance to participate.
- Because of the presence of others, participants may not feel comfortable sharing more sensitive information or views.
- Focus groups are often poorly done, particularly if the focus group facilitator is not experienced in managing focus groups. Focus groups can easily get “off task” if the facilitator does not maintain structure and control throughout the process. (For a helpful sample outline and a sample protocol, see pages 101–105.)

Process Overview

1. From the list of information required for the needs assessment, identify those elements that may best be attained through focus groups. For instance, identification of needs, validation of needs, root causes of needs, and alternative solutions identification, or a combination of these.
2. Prioritize the information requirements for each focus group, and use this ranking to create a facilitator's guide or protocol for each focus group.
3. Select a decision-making technique for each focus group. Although unstructured focus groups may be useful on limited occasions, more structured techniques are often valuable and can ensure that the focus group provides the information you require for making needs assessment decisions. Here are some sample decision-making techniques that you should consider for small groups:
 - a. **Critical Incident Technique:** In their responses to focus group questions, participants are asked to provide past events as examples. Each event should include a description of the conditions or context for the event, the people involved in the event, the place of the event, and the associated activities or behaviors of people in the event. The focus of the discussions is then on previous incidents related to the topic rather than on speculations and generalizations.
 - b. **Brainstorming:** This technique can be used to quickly generate new ideas or to identify and consider alternative solutions to a given problem. To initiate a productive brainstorming session, you should identify the specific topic that you would like group members to concentrate on. Introduce the topic, and encourage group members to brainstorm freely for a given amount of time. Encourage "on-the-spot" thoughts and ideas. Record all contributions from group members (it is helpful to record their thoughts in a format that is visible to all group members, such as a video-projected concept map or a word processing document). Categorize and combine ideas under overarching headings. Analyze and evaluate the ideas with the group, and prioritize the ideas in terms of their usability in the needs assessment.
 - c. **Straw Polls:** An informal voting method that can be used to quickly probe opinions of participants. Straw polls give all participants the chance to give their opinion through a response such as a "yes" or

“no” to a question. It is important to recognize that straw polls are not generally considered to be binding, official votes. Instead, they are used to get a sense of the pulse of a group in relation to a specific issue or theme, and they can orient the subsequent discussion. Straw polls can be used effectively in situations where there is a long list of ideas and where you want the group members to eliminate ideas that have little or no support. The straw poll approach lets each group member choose a given number of items from the list for inclusion or elimination.

- d. **Round Robin Reporting:** This technique can be implemented in at least two different ways, both of which are based on your having a specific question or suggestion. One approach is to share the question or suggestion with the group members and then to ask all group members to write down their ideas in relation to the question or issue. You next go around the group and have each person take turns to share one idea from his or her list. Continue this process by going around the room until nobody has any ideas left to share. Another approach is to share the question or suggestion with the group and then ask each person to give his or her reactions and ideas in relation to the question or suggestion you presented. In both formats, the round robin approach allows each group member to share equally in the group process, thereby ensuring that no one person dominates the discussion.
4. Create a facilitator’s guide or protocol to guide each focus group. Ensure that required information regarding both the current results and the desired results of the needs assessment are represented, along with the required information at each level of the program or project results chain.
5. Locate an experienced facilitator, if possible, as well as a note taker. Using an experienced focus group facilitator will generally lead to better results than if you facilitate the group yourself; however, you may want to be present as a backup note taker during the focus group to capture some of the data firsthand.
6. The facilitator can use the facilitator’s guide or protocol to generate a few specific questions that can be used to open the discussion in the focus group (or to come up with the questions, he or she can also consult the information about current and desired results that are based on the needs assessment).

7. Schedule a time for the focus group when the highest-priority participants are all available. Verify that you have both a focus group facilitator and a person to take notes during the meeting, that both are available at the scheduled time, and that both understand what is to be accomplished through the focus group. Arrange for an audio recorder so that the facilitator and note taker can verify information from the discussion when later preparing final notes or a report.
8. Implement the focus group session. The facilitator should remind participants to observe confidentiality of information shared. Allow the facilitator to manage the focus group process. If you serve as note taker for the focus group, avoid being tempted to interrupt the group. You are simply there to record data and to observe the focus group.
9. Immediately after the focus group has ended, the facilitator and note taker should verify that all of the essential information from the group has been captured in a written document.
10. If appropriate, run several focus groups. Doing so ensures that you gather enough information for the needs assessment.

Tips for Success

- Have a clear and specific goal for the focus group (in other words, have and maintain a clear focal point rather than an open conversation).
- Engage a facilitator who is experienced in managing focus groups. Focus groups are not as easy to facilitate as you might expect.
- Create a survey to be given out to participants so you can capture information that may not be discussed in the focus group because of time limitations.
- Carefully present each of your questions to the group, and allow the group members a couple of minutes to think about the question and to record their answers.
- Complete a test run of the focus group so you can identify potential problems, changes to questions, or additional materials that should be available to participants.
- After a question has been answered and before moving to the next question, verbally report back a summary of what you heard. This step confirms for the group members that they communicated what they in-

tended to, and it allows them to make any suggestions for adjustments in the event that their thoughts were not accurately represented.

- Don't be afraid to ask participants to leave if they are not willing to let others in the focus group participate. After all, the goal of the focus group is to gain multiple perspectives on the issues.
- If you are going to record (by video or audio) the focus group, then be sure to get the consent of all participants. Communicate to the group members what will be done with the video or audio recording of the session (for example, who will listen to it, how it will be stored, how long it will be stored, and so on). Such issues have consequences for how open the group members will feel about sharing their true opinions rather than those that they think you (or the organization) will want to hear.
- Write down any observations that you made during the focus group. For example, note if the audio or video equipment failed, if something unexpected took place, and so on. Such notes may help elucidate comments when you analyze the data that you gathered through the focus group.
- Plan for the focus group to take between 40 minutes and 3 hours.

References and Resources

- McClelland, Samuel B. 1994b. "Training Needs Assessment Data-Gathering Methods: Part 3—Focus Groups." *Journal of European Industrial Training* 18(3): 29–32.
- Witkin, Belle Ruth, and James W. Altschuld. 1995. *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Websites

- "Brainstorming Process" is available at <http://www.businessballs.com/brainstorming.htm>.
- "The Focus Group Interview and Other Kinds of Group Activities" is available at http://ppa.aces.uiuc.edu/pdf_files/Focus.pdf.
- "Focus Groups—A Needs Assessment Tool" is available at <http://www.joe.org/joe/1992spring/tt2.html>.
- "Small Group Techniques" is available at <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/smlgroup.htm>.
- A USAID guide for conducting focus groups is available at http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNABY233.pdf.

Sample: Focus Group Facilitator Outline and Protocol to Identify Factors Leading to Capacity Gaps in Primary Education

This outline will help lead the facilitator through the four key stages of a focus group, as well as serve as a sample protocol for the focus group. The sample protocol has been developed for a series of focus groups with village, provincial, and national administrators involved with the primary education in a developing country that has a mostly rural population. Such focus groups are part of a larger needs assessment study, and they supplement other data collection approaches that have already been completed.

The focus group facilitator should review this facilitator outline with other organizers of the needs assessment. It will be important to determine if all steps and arrangements for running the focus group have been planned and agreed. Modify this outline as necessary.

Sample of Facilitator Outline for Stages of the Focus Group

1. Opening Remarks

- Explain the purpose of the focus group, how it differs from other types of discussions, and how the information will be used.
- Encourage disagreement and debate over the issues.
- Clarify that the group does not necessarily need to reach consensus or make decisions.
- Describe the facilitator's neutral role, discuss issues about confidentiality of information (where appropriate), and solicit participant questions about the process to reduce anxiety.
- Provide guidance about how the group will operate (for example, having a time frame, talking one at a time, respecting divergent opinions, no one person speaking for the whole group, having cell phones off, not smoking).

2. Introductions

- Invite members to introduce themselves and to describe their role or relationship to the focus group topic.
- To stimulate group interaction, have each person speak at least once.

- Establish the group as a safe, comfortable, nonthreatening context for discussion.
- Stimulate members to begin thinking concretely about the issues at hand.

3. **Leading the Focus Group**

- Use the focus group protocol, but diverge where there are emergent data or paths to follow.
- Build on initial questions with follow-up questions. Encourage increasingly deep responses to key questions.
- Connect emergent data from separate questions into a complex, integrated analysis.
- Ensure that all participants who want to comment on a question have the opportunity to contribute and to broaden the information collected.

4. **Closing**

- Signal that the group discussion will end soon.
- Identify and reiterate key themes that emerged from the discussion. Give participants an opportunity to refine the themes.
- Summarize and test with the group the relative weight of certain categories of response.
- Identify differences of perspective, contrasting opinions, and areas of agreement.
- Allow a round of final comments and insights. Thank participants and describe any next steps.

The focus group facilitator should review this facilitator protocol with other organizers of the needs assessment. It will be important to determine if the protocol questions are appropriate for the potential respondents and if they address the main issues of the needs assessment. Beyond working with the needs assessment organizers and focus group, the facilitator may wish to ask for a review by others who know about the topic of the focus group. Modify this protocol as necessary.

Sample of Focus Group Protocol	
<p>Welcome (Where appropriate, modify the script and questions.)</p>	<p>Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group today. We have interviewed a number of stakeholders of the education system in our country to identify capacity gaps of the primary education system, and now we want to learn more about the <i>factors</i> that are leading to those gaps.</p> <p>We are not here to debate or solve the capacity gaps, though if you have suggestions for how to improve capacity, please note them on a sheet of paper. We will collect those ideas at the end of the session.</p> <p>Here are nine common categories of factors that influence capacity and that we will use to guide our discussion. However, you are welcome to suggest others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance capability. Do we have the right people in the right jobs to achieve desired results? • Knowledge and skills. Do people know what to do, and are they able to do it? • Motivation and self-confidence. Do people have the motivation and confidence to achieve desired results? • Expectations and feedback. Do we have formal and informal mechanisms to help people know how they are performing? • Environment, tools, and processes. Do we have what is necessary to achieve desired results (for example, policies, guidelines, data systems, computers)? • Incentives, rewards, and recognition. Do we encourage good performance and recognize the achievement of desired results? • Resources. Do we have the resources to achieve the desired results (for example, budget, time, personnel, buildings, books)? • Goals, strategy, and organizational culture. Does everyone know what we are trying to achieve and how we will achieve it? Do we have shared norms, habits, and beliefs? • Coordination within and among ministries and government agencies. Are the government agencies coordinating appropriately? • Other. Indicate other possible factors.
<p>Do you have any questions regarding our goals of the focus group?</p>	<p>Notes:</p>

Questions	
<p>Q1: One of the identified capacity gaps is the high variation in teacher commitment to the jobs (from those highly committed and engaged as teachers, to those frequently absent from work).</p> <p>Of the nine common factors leading to capacity gaps on your handout, which do you find are most responsible for the current gap?</p>	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
<p>Q2: A second of the identified capacity gaps is the uneven and late delivery of textbooks for schools and pupils.</p> <p>Of the nine common factors leading to capacity gaps on your handout, which do you find are most responsible for the current gap?</p>	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:

<p>Q3: A third identified capacity gap is the increasing absenteeism among third grade girls in our most rural populations.</p> <p>Of the nine common factors leading to capacity gaps on your handout, which do you find are most responsible for the current gap?</p>	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
<p>Q4: The fourth identified capacity gap is the <i>insert gap</i>.</p> <p>Of the nine common factors leading to capacity gaps on your handout, which do you find are most responsible for the current gap?</p>	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:
	Response:
	Follow-up question and response:

Note: If you have time remaining, you can cover more remaining capacity gaps. If, however, you are short on time, then start the next focus group with the capacity gaps you were not able to include in this discussion.

Conclusions

Script: Summarize the major factors identified during the conversation, and then ask the focus group members to verify that you accurately interpreted their responses.