Focus Groups

Focus groups are small, structured group discussions during which respondents reply to open-ended questions in their own words. Focus group subjects (or participants) are chosen to represent a larger group of people about whom you want information—your target audience. Discussion typically “focuses” on one or two specific topics, such as the following:

- Teenagers might be invited to describe the peer pressures exerted on them to use drugs or alcohol.
- Parents might discuss their difficulties in talking to their children about drugs and alcohol.
- Members of your target audience might be asked to respond to the wording of a proposed prevention slogan or a story to be used in a public service announcement.
- College students might discuss their binge drinking.

In the past, focus groups were typically used to inform product development or marketing strategies. For example, advertisers might assemble groups of women to discuss factors they consider important when selecting a dishwashing liquid. The advertisers would then use this information to shape a marketing campaign. Today, focus groups are used with increasing frequency to inform and evaluate prevention efforts.

Focus groups can yield extremely interesting and useful data. But this doesn’t just happen. The success of your focus group depends on the time you put in to recruiting the right participants, asking the right questions, and creating an environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing information with one another.

Reasons to Use Focus Groups

Focus groups explore people’s perceptions, opinions, and experiences in greater depth than surveys allow. For example, a survey can gauge teen drinking by asking about the number of drinks teens consumed in the past 30 days. But it is more difficult for a survey to reveal how the teens actually feel about this drinking, or whether this drinking follows any particular pattern. This can be critical information for programs seeking to prevent alcohol abuse among young people.

Focus groups have some distinct advantages, such as the following:

- They allow participants to add their perspectives to data collection, which can lead to unanticipated discoveries.
- They provide an opportunity to explore issues in depth.

- They allow the responses to be clarified through use of probes (that is, follow-up questions or verbal prompts).
- They are generally less expensive than surveys.
- They provide compelling narrative information and quotations that the public and policymakers can readily understand.

Focus groups can provide valuable information to help you design a prevention program, to help you monitor your program while it is in progress, and to help evaluate your program.

Focus groups can be used at many points in the history of a prevention program:

- **Before a program or activity begins,** to do the following:
    - o *Help design other data collection efforts*. For example, a focus group of prevention practitioners may identify the types of information critical to developing a new program or activity; policymakers could define the types of information they need to make funding decisions; and young people might help you decide which age groups or drugs to include in a survey on drug use. You can also use them to fine-tune data collection instruments, for example, to clarify language choices. If you want to question young people about their use of inhalants, you may learn that many do not use the term "inhalant," but refer to inhalant abuse as "huffing."
    - o ***<u>Assess needs or resources</u>*. Convening a focus group of prevention practitioners or law enforcement personnel might provide information about both community needs and community resources that would not be discovered in a survey simply because you failed to ask about it. And the reaction of the other participants can help you judge the importance of this information.**
    - o *Test new programs, products, or activities*. Focus groups can help you understand how well a program or activity will work before going to the time and expense of implementing it. For example, a focus group might reveal whether at-risk teens would attend an after-school recreation program (or which activities would get them to participate).

- **During a program or activity**. Focus groups can help you improve or refine a program or prevention activity in progress. For example, a focus group might help you understand why parents are not joining your community drug abuse coalition and what can be done to recruit them. You might find that your meetings need to be held at a different time or place, that child care is an issue, or that parents misunderstand the purpose of the coalition.

- **After a program or activity**. Focus groups can help you understand how to improve your program or activity so that it works better. You can use focus groups to do the following:

    - *Collect summative process improvement data.* Focus groups can help you understand the experiences of people in your program. For example, you can ask teachers about their problems in delivering a substance abuse curriculum and any solutions that should be incorporated into the program's teacher-training component.
    - *Explore evaluation data*. Evaluation tells you how well your program or activity worked. Focus groups can help explain why it worked (or didn't work) and what you can do to improve it. Suppose a posttest reveals that students were dissatisfied with the print materials used in a substance abuse prevention curriculum. A focus group might help clarify why they were dissatisfied and suggest improvements.

<u>Focus groups are often used in conjunction with other research methods (particularly surveys). The combination of quantifiable survey data and qualitative focus group data can be extremely valuable in designing a program—and in convincing decision-makers that the program is worth supporting</u>.

How to Do It:

Whom to Include in a Focus Group

It's been said that the answer you get depends on whom you ask. Data collection involves asking the appropriate people for the appropriate information. Suppose you want to learn about parents' attitudes and practices concerning teen alcohol use, and drinking and driving? You obviously want to ask parents. But you also might want to consider the following:

- Should parents have children of a certain age in order to participate? (e.g., no younger than 15?)
- Do you want to include both mothers and fathers?
- Does the ethnicity of the parents make a difference?
- Should you include parents who drink and non-drinking parents?
- How difficult will it be to find parents meeting these criteria?

Try to define your participants as precisely as possible. It usually makes sense to consider gender, age, occupation, geographic location, ethnicity, and language.

Individual focus groups should include 8 to 12 subjects. It can be difficult to sustain a lively discussion in a smaller group. A larger group limits the opportunity for each participant to speak, which can lead to disruptive side conversations.

The number of focus groups you convene depends largely on the topic at hand. For example, if you want to explore high school students' views on drug use, you must conduct several groups that include students of both sexes and from several age cohorts, since gender and age are correlated with drug use. If your community includes large numbers of students with particular demographic characteristics that are related to levels of drug use (like recent immigrants or children from families with very low incomes), you may want to hold focus groups representing these populations. If, however, you are simply looking for feedback on the design of a new brochure, one or two groups might be enough.

Recruiting Participants

Finding and recruiting participants for focus groups can be challenging, as can getting them to actually show up and participate.

Finding Participants. There are three ways to reach potential focus group participants. One way is to go where they are. For example, if you want to recruit at-risk or low-income youth, try youth development organizations or job corps programs. To recruit Russian immigrants, contact a neighborhood association in a community in which many such immigrants live. To recruit teachers or law enforcement officers, work with their unions. You might also want to use announcements in local newspapers and on public access cable stations or post notices in public places like libraries, supermarkets, or public health clinics.

Once you find potential participants, simple screening questions can help you decide whom to include. For example, if you are recruiting parents of teenagers at a local mall, the first question you should ask is "Do you have teenaged children?"

A second way is by using something called "snowball" recruitment. This method relies on networking to tap into a specific group of people who share a relatively rare behavior. Let's say, for example, that you want to study cigar smoking among high school students. Rather than surveying an entire high school and coming up with relatively few candidates, you would start by finding one cigar smoker, than ask him or her to refer you to another, and so on.

A third way to reach potential participants is to use an information source that can identify the type of people you want represented in your groups.

One good source is the voter registration census, which includes information on whether individuals have children (and, if so, the children's ages), their occupation, gender, and address. Make sure the information source does not systematically exclude groups that are important to your effort. For example, the voter registration census will not include immigrants who have not become citizens.

Working from a list like a voter registration census also allows you to compare the characteristics of those who agree to participate with all the people on the list. This can tell you whether certain types of people (perhaps people working in blue-collar occupations or those who live in a particular neighborhood) are not agreeing to participate. If this group is important to your data collection effort, you will have to come up with ways of recruiting these people.

Convincing People to Participate. There are a number of ways you can promote participation in your focus groups:

- **Make an upbeat pitch**. People may be more likely to participate if they feel that the project will benefit their community by preventing the abuse of drugs and alcohol. Remind them that participating in the group gives them a chance to offer their opinions and experience to the project.

- **Make it easy**. Schedule groups at a convenient time (one that will not interfere with the participant's jobs, for example) and in a convenient place that is easy to reach by public transportation and has adequate parking. Help them think through how they will get there. Offer them cab fare or a ride home, if necessary.

- **Provide incentives**. Incentives are a critical element in recruiting subjects. Pay what you think it will take to get people to attend. If you are on a tight budget, consider entering participants in a lottery to receive prizes, instead of paying each participant separately. For young people, prizes may be more appropriate than cash. You may be able to get local businesses to contribute small gifts or coupons for free merchandise (such as food or movie tickets) since these also function as advertising. Provide food and refreshments if possible.

- **Protect confidentiality**. Providing assurances that focus groups will be confidential is important. People may be reluctant to talk about drug or alcohol abuse in a group. Professionals, such as teachers and law enforcement officers, may not want to criticize their agencies if there is even a remote chance their opinion could get back to their superiors.

The more people who refuse to participate in your focus groups, the more likely it is that those who agree to participate are somehow different from the people you want them to represent. There isn't a clear rule about acceptable refusal rates but <u>a refusal rate of 50 percent will call your results into question</u>.

Getting People to Show Up. A persistent problem is getting people who agree to participate in a focus group to actually appear at the designated time and place. Strategies for increasing the likelihood that people will attend include the following:

- Offer incentives that are contingent upon actually participating.
- Send a reminder letter or postcard just before the meeting, and telephone each participant on the day before the group meets.
- Recruit more participants than you need. If you want 12 participants, recruit at least 15.

Developing a Protocol

A focus group needs a plan. Give some thought to what you want to learn from the group and the questions that will best elicit this information. Develop a written protocol that includes primary questions, potential follow-up questions (or probes), the order in which these questions should be asked, and introductory and closing statements. The information about developing questions discussed in Module 3 also applies to focus group questions. However, there are some special considerations to keep in mind when developing a focus group protocol:

- Rely on a small number of core questions. Your protocol should include between 10 and 12 questions. When developing a protocol, imagine that each participant will respond to every question. Focus groups should not last more than 90 minutes.

- Use broad, open-ended questions. Don't ask questions that call for a "yes" or "no" response. They tend to end discussion and make it harder to learn why people believe what they do.

One Exception to the Yes/No Question Rule

Toward the end of a discussion, it is sometimes helpful to ask the group to raise their hands to show where they stand on the issue. For example, you might say "We have heard that some people think the penalties for drinking and driving should be increased. Others think the penalties are fine as is. I want to be sure I understand how people stand on this issue. I'd like all the people who feel that penalties for drunk driving should be increased to raise their hands. Thank you. Now I'd like all the people who feel that the penalties should not be increased to raise their hands."

- Ask participants to speak from their own experience. In general, it is more useful to have participants speak from their own experience than to ask them what other people do or think—or to predict what they might do or think in the future.

- Start easy. Start with a question everyone should be able to answer and that doesn't require much disclosure. This will help get everyone to talk and provide you with an indication of people's styles so you can better manage the group.

- End by asking if participants have anything to add to the discussion. This may result in some incredibly useful information that you did not anticipate.

Whenever possible, pilot-test the protocol with a small group of people similar to the people you plan to include in your groups. Or, use the first "real" focus group as the pilot test. If all goes well during the pilot test, you can use the data collected during this group. Using the first "real" focus group as a pilot test is safest when you know the research topic well, have experience designing focus group protocols, and aren't worried about your ability to recruit participants for additional groups.

Before the Group Begins

Prior to actually holding the discussion, you will need to do the following:

- Check people in as they arrive.
- Distribute and collect informed consent forms (if required).
- Administer written questionnaires to collect background data and/or other information (if this is part of your procedure).
- Distribute name tags. Use first names only to preserve confidentiality.

Leading a Focus Group

Leading a focus group requires the perseverance necessary to stay on track, the flexibility to follow important turns in the discussion, and the ability to negotiate sensitive issues and not let the discussion turn into an argument. It is important to remember (and remind the participants) that focus groups are places to express opinions and report experiences, not to debate issues or come to consensus.

Managing the group discussion itself can be easier if you follow these tips:

- **Use two focus group leaders**. While it is possible for one person to run a focus group, it is better to have two leaders. One, the primary leader, should be responsible for managing the discussion. This person should have some experience in managing focus groups. The assistant leader should take detailed notes and comments on note paper, and oversee "housekeeping" details.

- **Establish a "safe environment."** Begin by introducing the leaders, describing the purpose of the group and its benefit to the community, and setting some ground rules for the discussion (especially those concerning confidentiality).

- **Follow the protocol.** Ask the questions in the order specified in your protocol. Not following your plan can get confusing, both to you and the participants.

- **Invite and promote participation by all members**. At times it may be necessary to ask participants who have not spoken to contribute. Use prompts like "John, we haven't heard your opinion about this issue yet. What do you think?" But don't put people on the spot if they just don't have anything to say.

- **Wait for responses.** Give people time to think. Don't bias their answers by suggesting possible responses. For example, if you ask "What is the biggest challenge in running your program?" don't immediately follow this question with "Is it a lack of funding?"

- **Clarify responses using neutral probes.** Don't be judgmental. Use probes such as "Can you give us an example?" or "Can you say more about that?"

- **Elicit and protect minority opinion.** Focus groups should help you understand the perspectives and experiences present in your target population, not just the perspectives and beliefs of the majority of that population.

- **Don't state or show your opinion.** Avoid body language that reflects agreement—or disagreement—with one comment over another. However, consistent nodding and other signs of positive reinforcement to all participants can help build trust and openness.

- **Use straw polls.** To reiterate our exception to the "No Yes/No Questions" rule, you can take a straw poll (an anonymous vote) to clarify how many group members agree or disagree with a statement.

- **Maintain order.** It is the leader's job to cope with people who try to dominate the conversation, people who are reluctant to participate, discussion threads that stray from the topic at hand, and group members who break the "ground rules." It is better to intervene a bit early than to let things get out of hand and affect the quality of the conversation (and the quality of the data).

Preserving the Information

Record focus groups with a tape recorder, if possible, can be very helpful. A recording allows you to transcribe the conversation, review and analyze what people actually said (rather than your abbreviated notes on what they said), and include verbatim quotations in the research report. <u>You need to inform the group,</u>

and get their permission, to record. Also, assure them that no one else but the research team will ever listen to the recording.

Whether you record the session or not it is critical to take notes. One leader should be responsible for capturing the comments of the audience. It is very helpful if these notes and comments are taken down and visible to the group.

The notes should be typed up as soon as possible after the focus group is over. The longer you wait, the less likely you will be able to follow the threads of the discussion and identify the speakers. Seeing the discussion in print will help you identify key points, cross-reference and code statements, identify themes, discuss and come to a consensus about meaning, and retrieve quotations.

Analyzing the Data

Analyzing focus group data requires an ability to identify common themes in narrative material and not be misled by a statement that may be reasoned, articulate, or forceful, but does not represent the common experience or opinion. Here are some tips for analyzing focus group data:

- I**nvolve the right people in your data analysis.** The leaders of the focus group should be the primary analysts. They are the most familiar with the material. In addition, have at least one person who did not attend the focus groups involved in the analysis. This increases the number of people who can be said to have reached agreement about the meaning of the data.

- **Independently review focus group notes and transcripts, and identify opinions and themes for each question.** Each analyst should work independently. Then the analysts should compare their findings and conclusions. If you hold more than one group, concentrating on one question at a time—that is, reviewing the data from every group on that question—can identify themes and patterns that might be missed if you analyze the data from one group at a time.

- **Identify quotations that typify or illustrate the opinions or themes important to your analysis.** The results of focus group analysis are often easier for people to understand than the statistics used in survey research. If your analysis is accurate, you should be able to identify quotations that illustrate the common themes you found in your analysis. These quotations are a compelling way to present your data. If you cannot find a quotation to illustrate a particular point, it probably means your analysis is wrong.

- **Produce a focus group report.** The results of your focus group need more explanation than a series of charts and graphs. Focus group results should be explained in a narrative form. They can be very compelling. Make sure that you do not compromise your subjects' confidentiality by describing anyone in a way that would reveal his or her identity.

Surveys are useful for collecting information from a relatively large number of people. Focus groups are useful for collecting more qualitative information from smaller numbers of people. But sometimes, you may want to collect very specific information from individuals with specialized knowledge. One way of collecting this information is through a technique called key informant interviews.

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