Designing and Conducting Focus Groups

Definition
Focus groups are small group discussions used to learn more about the experiences and perceptions of a segment of a population.

Purpose
Focus groups are designed to promote self-disclosure and are most successful when participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged.

Common Topics
Customer satisfaction, organizational development, understanding employee/student concerns, planning and goal setting, needs assessments, quality improvement efforts, or policy making and testing.

Process

**DO:**
- Address a single topic in depth.
- Select participants who are similar to each other in a way that is important to the research.
- Ask participants to respond to a small set of oral questions in a discussion format.
- Include 6-12 participants per session.
- Conduct a minimum of 3 focus groups per topic.

**DON’T:**
- Expect the group to reach consensus on the topic.
- Ask yes or no questions.
- Allow the group size to become too small or too large.
- Express judgment when moderating a focus group.

**BEFORE:** Prepare 4-7 questions; recruit participants

**DURING:** Moderator guides conversation and notetaker records comments

**AFTER:** Moderator and notetaker review notes; summarize comments to share with stakeholders
Developing Focus Group Questions

1. Write questions as open-ended questions requiring more than a yes or no response to evoke conversation among the group members.
2. Construct simple, one-dimensional questions using words with which the participants are familiar.
3. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms participants may not understand.

Conducting a Focus Group

1. Establish a welcoming and open environment with some basic ground rules:
   a. Emphasize there are no right or wrong answers to the questions.
   b. Ask participants to listen respectfully to each response.
   c. Have all attendees turn off cellphones.
   d. Require that only one person speak at a time.

2. Role of Moderator:
   a. Facilitate the conversation.
   b. Present questions in a conversational style, one at a time, and allow processing time if needed.
   c. Probe deeper into responses by providing appropriate prompts.
   d. Manage the conversation to encourage equal time for all participants.

3. Role of Recorder:
   a. Record focus group basics such as date, time, topic, and number of participants.
   b. Briefly summarize responses including both positive and negative points of view.
   c. Capture interesting quotes and note non-verbal communication that may be useful.
   d. Assist the moderator in monitoring time.

Writing the Summary Report

1. Recap and review
   a. Spend 15-20 minutes after the session to debrief and review the notes.
   b. Take this opportunity to begin summarizing themes presented during the conversation.

2. Prepare report
   a. Finalize a summary of overall themes.
   b. Provide a summary of responses for each question.
   c. Add direct participant quotes from each session.
   d. Delete all focus group participant names.
   e. Proofread and edit the report to ensure accuracy and clarity.