Facilitating Focus Groups

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Program Manager II
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Objectives

• Understand the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups
• Learn how to develop focus groups for grant program evaluation or community health needs assessments
• Develop an understanding of focused conversation methods
• Participate in an activity developing focused conversation questions for use in a focus group

What is a Focus Groups

• A group of people, usually 6-8, selected for their relevance to an evaluation or program/project that is engaged by a trained facilitator in a series of discussions designed for sharing insights, ideas, and observations on a topic of concern for the purpose of gathering information.
Overview of Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Purpose</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To explore a topic in depth through group discussion (e.g., about reactions to</td>
<td>Quickly and reliably get common impressions</td>
<td>Can be hard to analyze responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.)</td>
<td>Can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short</td>
<td>Need good facilitator for safety and closure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Useful in evaluation, community health needs assessments and marketing</td>
<td>time</td>
<td>Difficult to schedule 6-8 people together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can convey key information about programs</td>
<td>Results not generalizable</td>
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Purpose of Focus Groups

- Used to explore a topic in depth through group discussion
  - Includes reactions to an experience or suggestion, understanding common complaints, etc.
- Gather different information than what could go out in a survey with narrow or close-ended questions

Purpose of Focus Groups

- Seek input on community or group needs and opinions
- Responses are spoken, open-ended, broad and qualitative
  - Includes depth, variety, insights and feelings
- Great for use in program evaluation (Flex, SORH) and community health needs assessments (CHNA)
Advantages of Focus Groups

- Quickly and reliably obtain common impressions
- Can be an efficient way to get a wide range and depth of information in short amount of time
- Can convey key information about programs

Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Can be hard to analyze responses
- Need a good facilitator for group discussion safety and closure of issues
- Can be difficult to schedule 6-8 people together
- Results are not generalizable

Potential Participants for State Flex Program Evaluation

- Community and public health leaders
- Hospital administrators and board members
- Health care providers
- Flex program planning committee members
- State and local EMS staff

Potential Participants for Grant Program Evaluation

- Non-health care individuals with concern regarding health status, (e.g., faith, business, education)
- Quality Improvement Organization (QIO)
- Networks and health care partners (e.g., nursing home, home health care, clinic staff)
Potential Participants for State Flex Program Evaluation

- Representative group of the community served by the health facility
- Seniors
- Young facilities
- Sectors of industry (agriculture, factory, etc.)
- Ethnic groups
- Human services agencies
- Non-health care individuals with concern regarding health status, (e.g., faith, business, education, non-profits)
- Consumers at large
- Public health
- Networks and health care partners (e.g., nursing home, home health care, clinic staff)
- Non-health care individuals with concern regarding health status, (e.g., faith, business, education, non-profits)
- Consumers at large
- Public health
- Networks and health care partners (e.g., nursing home, home health care, clinic staff)

Focus Group Helpful Hints

- Seek participants who are actively involved
- Think carefully about who is being invited and how that might play out when people are sharing their opinions
  - Physicians, hospital administrator, certain community leaders, or those with dominant personalities may affect focus group participation
- Keep the group to a manageable number so that there is ample time for everyone to participate
  - 6-8 people ideal
- Be respectful of time. Start and end as scheduled
Focus Group Preparation

- Determine the focus, purpose and mood of the session
  - Rational Aim
  - Experiential Aim
- Develop questions that clearly relate to the purpose and goal of the session

Focus Group Preparation

- Budget 1-1½ hours for the session
- Send focus group invitation and questions to attendees 2-4 weeks in advance
- After the meeting, summarize the discussion and distribute appropriately

Create a Welcoming Environment

- Sit around 1 table or U-shaped table layout
- Facilitator to sit as well
- Remove extra chairs and clutter
- Offer food
- Reinforce that there are no wrong answers
- Allow each participant to speak at the beginning of the session
- Keep the discussion on track and in context
How to be a Facilitative Leader

- To ensure focus group success, you need an unbiased and trained leader
- Leadership is moving away from hierarchical approach toward dynamic, empowering style of the leader as facilitator
- This means accessing the power of a group’s diverse perspectives facing situations, problems or issues while maintaining respect and integrity within the group

Source: Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation Methods, Effective Methods for Participation, Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A.

Focused Conversation Method

- Follows a natural, human process
- Used to:
  - Provide for meaningful dialogue
  - Broaden a group’s perspectives
  - Elicit clear ideas and conclusions
  - Allow the entire group to participate

Source: Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation Methods, Effective Methods for Participation, Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A.
Focused Conversation Uses

- Collect data and ideas
- Discuss tough issues
- Reflect on important issues or events
- Work as a group on presentations or reports
- Reflect on accomplishments or failures, with opportunity for learning
- Focus multiple interests on a particular topic or issue
- Increase understanding of "givens" in a situation
- Explore levels of consensus that may already exist
- Avoid heated arguments by provoking thoughtful dialogue
- Move any discussion to a productive end

Focused Conversation Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rational Aim</th>
<th>Experiential Aim</th>
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<tr>
<td>Opening: Welcome, Context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>OBJECTIVE Getting the Facts, Sensory Impressions, Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>REFLECTIVE Personal Reactions, Associations, Emotions, Images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTERPRETIVE Meaning, Values, Significance, Purpose, Implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>DECISIONAL Resolution, Action, Direction, Next Steps</td>
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Closing: Comments, Reflection

Rational & Experiential Aims

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<tr>
<td>Intent or practical goal of the conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guides collective thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determines conversation direction</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you want the group to know, learn, discover, explore, or decide?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inner impact of the conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affects mood and sets the tone of communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do you want the group to experience the conversation?</td>
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1. Objective Level Questions

- Focus: data, facts, the "WHAT" about the topic
- Ensures that the group deals with the same facts
- Questions relate to: senses, what is seen, heard
- If Omitted: no shared observation of what the group is discussing, comments may seem unrelated

Example - Improving steering committee meetings:
What activities have been done in our meetings over the past year? What topics and concerns were addressed?

Source: Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation Methods, Effective Methods for Participation, Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A.

2. Reflective Level Questions

- Focus: internal relationship to the data, the "GUT" about the topic
- Ensures that individual responses are validated
- Questions relate to: memories, feelings, moods
- If Omitted: no shared experience; intuition, memory, experience is ignored

Example: What has been working well with our meetings? What has been frustrating for you during our meetings?

Source: Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation Methods, Effective Methods for Participation, Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A.

3. Interpretive Level Questions

- Focus: the meaning of the topic, the "SO WHAT" about the topic
- Draws out the significance from the data; focuses on learning, values, patterns
- Questions relate to: emerging needs, trends, insights
- If Omitted: no higher-level thinking for decision making

Example: What has been the impact of these meetings in our program/hospital? How have these meetings impacted our State Health Plan/Hospital Strategic Plan?

Source: Technology of Participation (ToP) Facilitation Methods, Effective Methods for Participation, Institute of Cultural Affairs in the U.S.A.
4. Decisional Level Questions

- Focus: the resolution, application of the topic, the "NOW WHAT" about the topic
- Makes the conversation relevant for the future
- Questions relate to consensus, action, summarizing, application of knowledge, future directions
- If Omitted: responses are not applied or tested, no action will occur as a result of the conversation

Example: What changes are needed in our meetings?
Who will be responsible making these changes?

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Personal Reactions, Associations, Emotions, Images

I | INTERPRETIVE
Meaning, Values, Significance, Purpose, Implications

D | DECISIONAL
Resolution, Action, Direction, Next Steps

Closing: Comments, Reflection

Sample Questions

Topic: Implementing Recommendations for Change

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<tr>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>QIO</td>
<td>Opening: Review the report indicating changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State EMS Leaders</td>
<td>1. (O) What are the specific recommendations in this report? What points require clarification?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislators</td>
<td>2. (R) What is your first reaction to this report?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMS Representatives</td>
<td>3. (I) What differences will these recommendations make if implemented? Which activities have the greatest/least impact?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks, etc.</td>
<td>4. (D) What do we need to do with these recommendations?</td>
</tr>
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<td>Closing: Summarize what has just been discussed</td>
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Exercises
- Recognizing Where Participants Are in Their Own Process
- Developing a Focused Conversation Group Exercise

Choose One Topic
- Identifying health care trends in the community
- Understanding a policy guide
- Reflecting on a quarterly reporting
- Planning SORH program curriculum
- Then develop your focused conversation!

For more information
- Flex Program Evaluation Toolkit
- Community Tool Box: Conducting Focus Groups
- NOAA Introduction to Conducting Focus Groups
- OMNI Focus Group Toolkit
- New York State Teacher Center Focus Group Tutorial
- Wallace Foundation: Focus Group Workbook
- Technology of Participation: ToP Facilitation Methods
- The Art of Focused Conversation book
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