

Human Services Board

Conducting Focus Groups

2.26.2019

Definition

Per the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a focus group is, “a small group of people whose opinions about something (such as a politician or a product) are studied to learn the opinions that can be expected from the larger group.”

Preparation Before Conducting Focus Group(s)

Purpose

Clearly define the purpose of conducting the focus group. Questions to ask:

- What do you want to learn?
- Who has this information?
- Will everyone have the same knowledge level?
- If not, what information needs to be shared to “level the playing field?”
- What will be done with the information received from the focus groups? Who will it be shared with, when, and how?
- What information will be shared with the focus group – when and how?

Focus Group(s)

- Should be naturally occurring.
- Ideally meet in a location where members of the group would feel most comfortable.
- Meet at a time of day which works best for members of the group.
- All persons should speak the same language.
- Persons should be at the same hierarchical level, i.e., all clients or all staff.
- Need to have a mechanism for persons to provide information who may not feel comfortable sharing in the group setting.

Size

Typically, a focus group of 5-7 persons works best. If the group is larger, then may want participants to break out into smaller facilitated groups.

Items to Consider

- How will focus group members be informed of the opportunity to participate?
- Does space need to be reserved?
- If meeting over a normal meal-time, can food and drinks be provided? If so, how?.
- Is childcare needed?
- Is transportation needed?
- Will there be incentives to participate?
- Will materials need to be provided in alternate formats for persons who are deaf/hard of hearing, visually impaired, speak different languages, not able to read/write, etc.?
- Are name tags needed/desired?

Moderator/Facilitator

- Should have one person for each group.
- Knowledgeable about the subject matter or topic to be covered.
- Speak the same language as the focus group members.
- Be able to actively **listen** and **hear**.
- Ask follow-up questions as needed for better understanding.
- Be able to distinguish opinions from facts.
- Able to set aside own perceptions.
- Able to keep group focused.
- Able to balance participation among:
 - Overbearing participants – who may have more in-depth technical knowledge or have a higher positions in the organization
 - Dominating participants – don't give others a chance to participate
 - Reluctant participants – who may be less confident in voicing their opinions

Note Taker

- Should have one person for each group.
- What will the HSB members who are not present want to know?
- Will a thank you be sent to participants?
- Will it be important to record the names and addresses of persons present?

Length

Never meet longer than people can sit comfortably, which is typically 1 to 1.5 hours.

Agenda

Should have an agenda that covers:

- Introductions
- Roles of Moderator/Facilitator and Note Taker
- Purpose
- How information will be shared and with whom
- If needed, background information “to level the playing field”
- Discussion
- Summary
- Next Steps
- Thank you

Questions

- Should be open-ended.
- Should use language and terms with which the focus groups members are familiar.
- Should have a friendly, conversational tone.
- Questions should not be stacked, but rather ask about one thing only.
- Most important questions should be presented first.
- Least important questions should be toward the end – due to time limitations.
- Questions should be candid and straightforward.
- Can start with an introductory question, i.e.,

- We are here to talk about _____, what are your thoughts about that?
- Ideas for other questions:

What mental health services for children should we offer?
What services have been helpful for your family?
What made them work for your family?
Are you able to access services when you need them?
If not, why not?
Out of the following services, (*list*) what is your top priority?
Are there any services we should stop funding?
If yes, which ones?
Why?

- Other options besides questions

- For each agency/service, ask the group to rate each as a low, medium, or high priority. Could also rate them based on accessibility, helpfulness, continue to fund, etc.
- Give the group an overall “budget” with costs identified for select services and ask them to identify how they would spend the funds.
- Ask the group to identify their “ideal” system – what does it look like?

Other

Advantages of focus groups

Doesn't discriminate against persons who cannot read or write

Disadvantages of focus groups

Findings cannot be projected
Only as good as the moderator/facilitator