



First Work

215 Spadina Ave, Suite 350
Toronto, ON, M5T 2C7
416 323 9557

GUIDE TO CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

April 2011

EVIDENCE
YOUR COMMUNITY'S RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

EVIDENCE

Evidence is a unit of First Work. First Work supports and advocates for a sustainable youth employment delivery network in Ontario.

Since 1988, First Work and our network of over 70 youth employment agencies have been committed to delivering accessible, high quality, outcomes-based employment services to young people to assist them in reaching their employment and life goals.

Through supporting the work of local youth employment centres across Ontario, First Work aims to help youth find and maintain meaningful employment that will help improve the quality of their lives.

Prepared by:

Lavinia Lamenza

Research Manager

Evidence Research and Evaluation: A Unit of First Work

215 Spadina Avenue, Suite 350

Toronto, ON M5T 2C7

Tel: (416) 323-9557 x229

Fax: (416) 323-9927

E-mail: info@evidenceconsulting.org

April, 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Knowing What a Focus Group Is	1
Understanding the Usefulness of Focus Groups	1
Knowing the Limitations of Focus Groups	1
2. Planning a Focus Group	2
Choosing the Team	2
Choosing the Participants	2
Deciding on the Time and Location	2
Inviting the Participants	3
Preparing the Consent Form	3
Preparing an Outline	3
3. Preparing a Focus Group Guide	4
Developing Questions	4
Asking Questions That Yield Powerful Information	4
Writing a Focus Group Guide	5
4. Following Ethics in Conducting Focus Groups	7
Ensuring Voluntary Participation	7
Respecting People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity	7
Using Professionalism and Competence	7
Exercising Confidentiality	7
5. Being Ready for the Focus Group	9
Knowing What to Bring	9
Knowing What to Do	9
6. Being an Effective Focus Group Facilitator	10
Knowing the Roles and Responsibilities of the Facilitator	10
Knowing the Skills of Effective Facilitators	10
Knowing the Roles and Responsibilities of Note Takers	10
Knowing the Skills of Effective Note Takers	11
7. Developing Skills That Build Rapport	12
Viewing Participants as Experts	12
Having Familiarity with the Community and Sensitive Topics	12
Balancing Rapport and Professionalism	12
8. Developing Listening Skills	13
Listening Actively to Participants	13
Avoiding Dismissing or Ignoring Participants	13
Being Neutral During the Focus Group	14
Using Silence to Gather Honest Information	14

9. Developing Skills to Ask Probing and Clarifying Questions	15
Keeping Them Talking Without Finishing Their Thoughts	15
Avoiding Making Assumptions	15
Avoiding Using Leading Questions	16
Dealing with Incomplete or Irrelevant Answers	16
Minimizing Pressure to Conform to a Dominant Viewpoint	16
10. Developing Time Management Skills	17
Using the Focus Group Guide	17
Managing Time during the Focus Group	17
Dealing with People Who Dominate the Discussion	18
Not Rushing Participants	18
11. Dealing with Difficult Situations	19
Someone is Dominating the Discussion Repeatedly	19
People Are Participating at Different Levels	19
No One Is Responding to a Question	19
Dealing with Other Common Scenarios	20
Example of a Focus Group Script	23
Example of a Consent Form	24
Example of Focus Group Ground Rules	26
Example of a Focus Group Guide	27
Example of a Note Taking Form	28
Confidentiality Guidelines	30

I. KNOWING WHAT A FOCUS GROUP IS

A focus group is a carefully planned group discussion among about ten people plus a facilitator and a note taker that collects information about a specific issue.

UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF A FOCUS GROUP

The purpose of a focus group is to obtain diverse ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest in an environment that fosters the exploration and expression of different points of view, with no pressure for consensus. A focus group:

- Gathers opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about issues of interest
- Builds perspectives from spontaneous combination of participants' comments
- Provides an opportunity to learn more about a topic or issue.

Focus groups are used a lot in the health and social service sectors to get feedback from community stakeholders, participants or potential participants of services and programs, and those affected by policy in the development and design phases of our work. Focus groups can be an opportunity to mobilize community members, raise awareness, empower them and build community.

Understanding the Usefulness of Focus Groups

Group dialogue tends to generate rich information.

- Participants give insights that can trigger others in the group to share their personal experiences and perspectives.
- The group energy can more easily tease out issues behind complex topics.

Focus groups provide information that comes directly from individuals who are invested in the issue. Participants can:

- Hold expert knowledge about a topic
- Provide insights about actual conditions and situations
- Represent diverse opinions and ideas.

Focus groups are also a low cost and efficient way to get a lot of information.

Knowing the Limitations of Focus Groups

The facilitator's can affect a focus group with their bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of findings. Also:

- Focus groups can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.
- Focus groups can generate information with limited generalizability to a whole population.

Focus groups normally have between seven and ten participants.

- Groups with fewer than seven participants can result in a limited range of ideas and opinions being represented.
- Groups larger than ten may be hard to manage and record.

2. PLANNING A FOCUS GROUP

Choosing the Team

Conducting focus groups requires a small team, made up of:

- a facilitator to guide the discussion
- a note taker who will make hand-written notes and observations during the discussion, who serves as a back-up in case something happens with the recording equipment.

Choosing the Participants

Focus groups can be held for different groups. One part of planning a focus group is to identify the most suitable individuals to participate in each group.

- When recruiting for focus groups, be sure that participants fit the criteria established for inclusion in a particular focus group.
- Make sure that focus group participants represent the diversity of the larger group about whom you want to learn.
- Depending on the issues being explored, it may not be appropriate to invite men and women to participate in the same focus group.
- As the example below shows, it is very important to be sensitive to tendencies toward social comparisons when composing focus groups.

Example: A Focus Group with Immigrants to Learn How They Navigated the Health Care System

To learn about what barriers immigrants faced in getting their needs for services met, it is important to talk to those who have successfully navigated such systems, as well as those who have struggled to do so.

But it is probably not a good idea to have them in the same focus group as there may be issues of shame associated with being relatively less successful in navigating systems of care.

Also, limit participants to immigrants in the specific community you are studying.

Deciding on the Time and Location

Focus groups normally last about an hour and a half, though they may be longer in some cases. It is up to you to judge the situation and decide on the best, most appropriate location.

- Set a time and date. Plan a time of day that is convenient for the participants and responsive to their life circumstances.
- Reserve a space. Conduct focus groups in locations that are convenient and comfortable for participants, are quiet, and have some degree of privacy.
- Depending on the community, it may be necessary (and reflect a greater degree of cultural sensitivity) if the group met in a public space, such as a church or community center.
- Arrange for food and drink.

Inviting the Participants

Before the date of the focus group, invite appropriate participants to take part in the focus group.

- Use established selection criteria as your guide.

It can be helpful to contact confirmed participants the day before the group to remind them of the time and location of the focus group and to re-confirm their participation.

Preparing the Consent Form

The consent form helps participants understand their role and rights in the discussion and their signature indicates that they understand these. (A sample consent form is attached in the appendix.)

- Give each participant two copies of the consent form so that they can keep one for themselves.

Preparing an Outline

The outline is like a script that makes sure all the important topics get covered. The facilitator should give participants the opportunity to ask questions regarding the form or anything else covered in the introduction. (A sample script of an outline is attached in the appendix.)

The outline should include:

- welcome and introduction to the facilitator and note taker
- review of the research that explains:
 - what the nature and purpose of the research is
 - how the results will be used
 - why they were asked to participate.
- review of confidentiality that explains openly, honestly and plainly:
 - the potential risks and benefits to the participant of participation
 - the fact that they may withdraw from participation at any time.
- review of the consent form where each participant reads it and then signs it.
- review of ground rules. (Sample ground rules are attached in the appendix.)

3. PREPARING A FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

When planning for a focus group, it is important to develop the focus group guide ahead of time. The focus group guide is a set of questions prepared in advance for specific participants that covers the topics and issues to be explored.

- The focus guide is designed with the overall research questions in mind.
- It ensures that the topics covered in the focus groups relate to these research objectives.

Developing Questions

Questions should be:

- short and to the point
- focused on one thing at a time
- from general to specific
- clearly worded
- open-ended, i.e. worded in a way that prevents 'yes' or 'no' answers
- non-threatening or embarrassing.

Twelve is the maximum number of questions for any one group.

- Ten is better.
- Eight is ideal.

Asking Questions That Yield Powerful Information

- Use open-ended questions.
- Be cautious of phrases such as, "*How satisfied...*" or, "*To what extent...*"
- Avoid questions that can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'.
- 'Why' is rarely asked.
- Ask questions about characteristics or features of the topic, or influences. Influences are things that prompt or cause action.
- Use "*Think back...*" questions. Take people back to an experience and not forward to the future.
- Use questions that get participants involved such as reflection, examples, choices, rating scales, drawings, etc.

Example: Open-Ended Questions

- *What did you think of the program?*
- *How did you feel about the conference?*
- *Where do you get new information?*
- *What do you like best about the program?*

Writing a Focus Group Guide

A focus group guide has five levels of questions:

1. Opening Questions

These are answered in a round robin where participants introduce themselves.

Example: Opening Questions

- *What is your first name?*
- *How did you come to be involved in _____?*

2. Introductory Questions

Participants are introduced to the topic of discussion.

Example: Introductory Questions

- *How do you use _____?*
- *When do you use _____?*

3. Transition Questions

Participants explore and are lead up to the topic.

Example: Transition Questions

- *Think back over the past year of the things you did in the program. What went particularly well?*
- *What needs improvement?*
- *Tell me about positive experiences you've had in the program?*
- *Tell me about disappointments you've had with the program?*
- *What influenced your decision to participate in the program?*
- *When you participated in the program, what were you looking for?*

4. Key Questions

Participants get to the meat of the issue. These questions ask participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions on topics of importance to the researchers.

Example: Key Questions

- *Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important to you?*
- *Think back over all the years that you've participated in this program and tell us your fondest/ most enjoyable memory.*
- *Take a piece of paper and jot down three things that are important to you when you participate in this type of program? Let's list these on the flip chart.*
- *If you had to pick only one factor that was most important to you, what would it be? You can pick something that you mentioned or something that was said by others.*

5. Ending Questions

These questions ask participants to check if anything was missed in the discussion.

Example: Ending Questions

- *Have we missed anything?*
- *Is there anything else that you would like to say that we have not talked about already?*

Exercise: Developing a Focus Group Guide

Pick an issue that is important to you or your community. Develop a focus group guide to research that issue that has one each of the following types of questions:

- *opening*
- *introductory*
- *transition*
- *key*
- *ending.*

4. FOLLOWING ETHICS IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

Ensuring Voluntary Participation

People must understand that their participation is voluntary and must agree to participate in the focus group of their own free will.

- Participants need to know that there are no consequences for refusing to take part in the focus group or to answer specific questions.
- Written consent is preferred, but verbal consent that is recorded can be used.

Respecting People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity

Researchers and their work must:

- Respect the rights, dignity and worth of all people.
- Respect the rights of others to hold values, attitudes, and opinions that differ from their own.
- Advance and protect the public good.

Using Professionalism and Competence

Researchers should:

- Do only those tasks for which they have been trained.
- Ask for help when you need it to make sure you have quality interactions with people and collect quality information.

Explain openly and honestly and in a way that people can understand:

- the nature and purposes of the research
- the potential risks and benefits to the participant of participation, and
- the fact that they may withdraw from participation at any time.

Exercise: Using Ethics When Addressing Sensitive Issues

Brainstorm some issues that may be sensitive in the communities where you will be conducting focus groups that require you to respect people's diversity and exercise professionalism.

Exercising Confidentiality

One of the most important principals of research ethics is maintaining confidentiality of research participants. Participants can share valuable and sensitive information with the researcher, and they trust that the researcher will make sure that their identity is protected.

Keep personal information that is revealed confidential.

- You cannot share the specific contents with anyone except another researcher on the project.
- You also cannot share any information that would allow another researcher or outsider to know who participated in the study.

Explain how confidentiality will be protected.

- Explain that only you will know their name and only other researchers will have access to their information.
- Explain that no information will be publicly reported that would identify them as a participant in the study.
- Explain to people when confidentiality cannot be met.

5. BEING READY FOR THE FOCUS GROUP

Knowing What to Bring

On the day of the focus group, remember to bring:

- Two writing utensils (in case the lead in a pencil breaks/ a pen runs out of ink)
- A notepad with sufficient paper for taking notes during the entire focus group
- A flip chart
- Dry erase and/ or regular markers of different colors
- Name tags or badges
- Tape for affixing flip chart pages to the wall, as needed
- Recording equipment:
 - a tape recorder
 - extension cord
 - extra tapes
 - extra batteries
- Consent forms (enough copies for all participants)
- Extra pens for participants to sign consent forms
- Focus group guide
- Note taking form

Knowing What to Do

Before the focus group, remember to:

- Arrive at the focus group location a few minutes early.
- Set up the room and your materials.
- Meet your contact people.
- Discuss issues to do with food for participants.
- Find out where the bathrooms are.
- Test run the recording equipment.

6. BEING AN EFFECTIVE FOCUS GROUP FACILITATOR

Both facilitators and note takers have roles and responsibilities. They also need to have specific skills to be effective.

Knowing the Roles and Responsibilities of the Facilitator

The roles and responsibilities of the facilitator are:

- Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested.
- Monitor time and use limited time effectively.
- Use prompts and probes to stimulate discussion.
- Use the focus group guide effectively to ensure all topics are covered.

Politely and diplomatically enforce ground rules:

- Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable.
- Limit side conversations.
- Encourage one person to speak at a time.
- Be prepared to explain or restate questions.
- Diffuse and pre-empt arguments.

Knowing the Skills of Effective Facilitators

Effective facilitators:

- Have good listening skills.
- Have good observation skills.
- Have good speaking skills.
- Can foster open and honest dialogue among diverse groups and individuals.
- Can remain impartial, i.e. do not give her/ his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say.
- Can encourage participation when someone is reluctant to speak up.
- Can manage participants who dominate the conversation.
- Are sensitive to gender and cultural issues.
- Are sensitive to differences in power among and within groups.

Knowing the Roles and Responsibilities of Note Takers

The roles and responsibilities of the note taker are:

- Bring the following materials for the focus group:
 - materials to record the focus group, including writing utensils and a lot of paper
 - a flip chart as well as markers of different colors for recording information (as needed) on a flip chart
 - tape for affixing flip chart pages to the wall, as needed.
 - recording equipment: a tape recorder, extension cord, extra tapes, and extra batteries.

- Ensure that ground rules for the focus group are written clearly and neatly on a flip chart (it may be helpful to do this beforehand).
- Assist the facilitator in arranging the room, e.g. seating, flip chart stand and paper, placement of the ground rules, etc.
- Record major themes, ideas, comments and observations regarding group dynamics in hand-written notes using the focus group note taking form.
- Capture any new insights that emerged as a result of this discussion with the facilitator.
- Keep any papers with notes of the focus group discussion. These will be stored with other data collected through the needs assessment.

Knowing the Skills of Effective Note Takers

Effective note takers:

- Have good listening skills.
- Have good observation skills.
- Have good writing skills.
- Are able to take notes that are comprehensive but not word-for-word.
- Use the note taking form provided.
- Act as an observer, not as a participant.
- Can remain impartial, i.e. do not give her/ his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say.

7. BUILDING RAPPORT

Building rapport refers to establishing a connection with participants that facilitates comfortable and open communication. Rapport can dramatically influence the willingness of participants to answer questions, and how openly and honestly they answer the questions they are asked.

Viewing Participants as Experts

Individuals are being invited to participate in focus groups because they are viewed as having important knowledge about particular experiences, needs, or perspectives that you hope to learn more about.

- Let participants know that you are there to learn from them. This helps to establish a respectful appreciation for contributions that they will make.
- Recognize participants for their time and contributions at the beginning. This is one of the most important things you can do to help create rapport.
- Thank participants for their time and participation at the end.
- Tell them that the information they have shared is valuable for this project.

Having Familiarity with the Community and Sensitive Topics

First and foremost, become familiar with some of the critical issues affecting the community represented by participants. It is true that, as the facilitator, you are there to learn from participants.

- Have a basic awareness of sensitive issues so that you do not offend or insult participants unknowingly or unintentionally.

Balancing Rapport and Professionalism

Your role during focus groups is not that of a good conversationalist or a friend who provides feedback, but a professional.

- If you are too casual, participants may not see you as someone who is prepared to take what they have to say seriously.
- If you are too formal, participants may feel intimidated by you and may not be as willing to reveal information.
- Strive to achieve a balance between being formal and casual.

Exercise: Building Rapport with Diverse People

There are different rules of rapport in relation to gender and age. Discuss what might be important in building rapport when having a male community elder, or a female homemaker as a focus group participant.

8. DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS

Good listening is a key to conducting focus groups that will result in the collection of useful information. Being a good listener means being interested. This is done by demonstrating that you are paying attention to what participants are sharing, staying neutral or impartial, and practicing appropriate silence.

Listening Actively to Participants

Active listening allows you to probe effectively and at appropriate points during the focus group. Active listening involves not only hearing what someone is saying, but also noticing body posture and facial gestures, i.e. any changes in nonverbal behavior, that might provide cues as to the appropriate or necessary ways to engage participants.

Show participants that you are listening to what they are saying.

- Lean forward slightly.
- Look directly at participants while they are speaking.
- Nod at appropriate times.

Such behaviors not only indicate that you, as the facilitator, are more engaged, but also help maintain the engagement of the participants themselves.

Avoiding Dismissing or Ignoring Participants

If participants suspect that you are not listening to them with great care, they may take their role of sharing expert knowledge less seriously and, therefore, may not elaborate or provide much detail with their answers.

Avoid:

- looking away.
- yawning.
- frequently checking your watch.

These behaviours will most likely make participants feel that you are not listening.

Exercise: Listening Actively

*Role-play nonverbal signs that may indicate that you are not listening.
Then practice actions that are nonverbal signs of active listening.*

Being Neutral During the Focus Group

While showing participants that you are actively listening and interested in what they are sharing, you will also want to remain as neutral or impartial as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about something.

- Use phrases such as, “Thank you. That is helpful.”

Comments such as, “I can’t believe it!” or, “You really think that?!” are not appropriate remarks for a facilitator to make. They infer your opinion and impose judgment on the participant, which will shut down discussion.

Exercise: Being Neutral

Brainstorm a list of responses that should be avoided and others that would be appropriate in a circumstance in which the facilitator has a strong, opposing opinion to what a participant is sharing.

Using Silence to Gather Honest Information

You want to gather information during focus groups that is as honest as possible. Silence gives respondents a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information.

- Allow silence at times to encourage elaboration by participants.
- Strike a balance between keeping the conversation moving (so that you use your time well) and allowing participants adequate time to share and process what has been shared.

9. DEVELOPING SKILLS TO ASK PROBING AND CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

Using probing and clarifying questions are an important part of facilitating focus groups. These types of questions serve two main purposes:

- Clarify what a focus group participant has said.
- Get more detailed information on topics of interest.

Using probes lets the focus group participant know that you are listening to their answers and that you would like to know more detail about where they are coming from. It lets them provide more than just a brief answer to the questions.

Example: Effective Probes

- *Please tell me (more) about that...*
- *Could you explain what you mean by...*
- *Can you tell me something else about...*

Keeping Them Talking Without Finishing Their Thoughts

Show them that you are there to listen to what they have to say.

- Avoid interrupting the participant. It may influence how they answer and if they answer the questions you ask.
- If you want to follow-up with something they said, make a mental note of it and ask them about it when they have finished their thought.

If a participant strays off course, encourage them to finish their thought.

- After they have finished, bring them back to the question you asked to make sure that they have answered it completely.

Avoiding Making Assumptions

Using probes for clarification helps you to gather good information while avoiding the assumption that you understand the participant's meaning of a word, phrase, or perspective. It helps you see things from the participant's perspective. It also gives the participant clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be. An example of a question that imposes assumptions is: *"So you're telling me thatRight?"*

- Ask participants for clarification, details, and examples.
- Avoid assuming you know the opinions of the participant.
- Make small steps in your questioning with simple questions, not big leaps. This way the participant will give more detail and elaboration.

Avoiding Using Leading Questions

Using probes to clarify what the participant has said reinforces the fact that they have expert knowledge, based on their direct experiences with the topic that you want to understand. It tells them you are there to learn from them.

However, using leading questions may lead the participant to answer questions according to what you expect to hear, rather than how they really feel. Leading questions reflect your opinions or assumptions about a topic. Participants may start matching your opinions rather than sharing what they truly believe or have experienced. An example of a leading question is: *"Don't you think...?"*

- Avoid asking questions that lead discussion in a direction that does not belong to the participant.
- Stay as neutral as possible during the interview.

Dealing with Incomplete or Irrelevant Answers

If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can probe for fuller, clearer responses.

- Repeat the question – repetition gives more time to think.
- Pause for the answer – a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
- Repeat the reply – hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation.
- Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions – they provoke more detailed information.
- Use neutral comments such as, *"Anything else?"*

Minimizing Pressure to Conform to a Dominant Viewpoint

When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a dominant viewpoint has occurred. To minimize this group dynamic, the facilitator should probe for alternative views.

- Raise another issue.
- Say, *"We have had an interesting discussion, but let's explore other ideas or points of view. Has anyone had a different experience that they wish to share?"*

Exercise: Using Probing and Clarifying Questions

Pick a topic that you or community is interested in. Think of some effective questions you could ask as a probe, and some phrases that you would want to stay away from.

10. DEVELOPING TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Time management is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of facilitating focus groups. It is important that the facilitator and participants have agreed upon the amount of time they will spend in the focus group, and that this time is managed appropriately so that all the topics can be covered.

Using the Focus Group Guide

The focus group guide provides a framework for the facilitator to explore, probe, and ask questions. A well-developed focus group guide increases the credibility of the research results. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient.

- See where you can insert prompts into the guide if necessary that remind you to do a time check periodically, to make sure that the focus group is progressing appropriately.
- Follow the focus group guide as much as possible.
- Listen for relevant information to questions that you have not yet asked so that you can skip these later.
- If you run out of time before you have covered all the questions, use your remaining time asking and exploring only the most important questions left.

The more familiar you are with the focus group guide, the easier it will be for you to prioritize particular questions and to recognize when participants have adequately answered questions you have not yet asked. This will ensure that your questions do not feel redundant to participants and that the focus group, overall, flows smoothly and efficiently.

- Familiarize yourself with the focus group guide beforehand.

Managing Time during the Focus Group

People love to talk about their experiences and may have a tendency to go on and on about them. Remember your job is to:

- Structure the focus group so that you get a complete response to questions
- Probe insightfully so that you get the level of detail you need to address the issues adequately.

It is also your job to politely move the focus group forward when participants are sharing less useful information given your research questions.

- Listen for a segue – something that the respondent talks about that is relevant to another question or set of questions.
- Acknowledge that your time together is waning and there are some other aspects of their work and experience that you want to be sure you have time to learn about and explore, and, for this reason, you are going to move on.

It is polite and good practice to check in with participants, and it also allows you to move to the most critical questions.

- At least once during the focus group, ask participants how they are doing with time.
- Use your perception to sense if participants are feeling strained to continue. If someone has another commitment, they may be feeling rushed.

Dealing with People Who Dominate the Discussion

In focus groups, it is not uncommon for a few people to dominate the discussion. Sometimes in mixed gender groups, one gender may tend to speak more than the other. To manage time while balancing participation, ensuring that every participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, try the following:

- Give nonverbal cues to the dominant talker that signal you want to move on. You can look in another direction or stop taking notes when one person talks for an extended period.
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion.
- Start by addressing questions to people who are reluctant to talk.

Not Rushing Participants

Overall, you want to achieve a balance between collecting necessary information and gathering important data that have not been anticipated. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference until you ask clarifying questions or probes.

- Make sure that you interrupt the participants as little as possible.
- Avoid rushing them to finish their answers while keeping them on course with the focus group guide.

II. DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

Difficult situations may arise during your focus group. The following are some examples of common situations that can occur and what you can do in each of these situations.

Someone is Dominating the Discussion Repeatedly

Focus groups, ideally, allow researchers to collect the opinions and ideas of a variety of people. If someone is doing a lot of the talking, however, this may prevent others from contributing their thoughts, and limits the usefulness of the focus group. It is important to notice when this is happening and do what you can to try to make sure that other people have the opportunity to say things, even if they seem reluctant at first or insist that what is being said by others reflects what they would have said. It is important to have people say things in their own words as much as possible.

- Respectfully acknowledge their contribution, and thank them, saying something like, *"I really appreciate your comments."*
- Then make direct eye contact with other people and ask something like, *"I'm very interested in hearing how other people are feeling about this issue,"* or *"It's very interesting to get a variety of perspectives, and I would like to hear from other people as well."*

People Are Participating at Different Levels

This situation is very similar to the one highlighted above, in which a few people are dominating the conversation to the exclusion of others. So, you may be able to apply many of the same strategies. Often, if there is inequality in how much men or women are participating, it is the women who speak up less and the men who speak more, though it is possible for the opposite to occur. It is vitally important that both men's and women's voices be heard.

- Focus on encouraging men to participate less. Respectfully thank a man who has just spoken, then suggest that it would be great to hear from some of the women present, as well.
- Focus on encouraging women to participate more. If women seem to be participating less, try to make a lot of eye with women, and even ask individual women direct questions.

No One Is Responding to a Question

In this kind of situation, it is helpful to try to understand why people are not responding. Below are some options and explanations.

ASKING A QUESTION THAT WAS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND

- Try asking the question in a different way.
- Be familiar with the research objectives of a particular focus group. You will be more successful in rephrasing or rewording a question in an appropriate way that ensures that issues are explored and the research integrity of the group discussion is maintained.

ASKING A QUESTION THAT IS UNCOMFORTABLE TO ANSWER

A participant may not feel comfortable answering a question from the focus group guide. Or, it may be an issue of permission from a spouse to discuss the topic. This must be honoured according to research ethics and informed consent: a participant may elect to not answer any question at any time.

- At the beginning of the focus group always make it clear that they may decline to answer a question(s).
- If this happens, say, *"thank you, I acknowledge and appreciate your honesty."*
- Then, ask them if it would be okay to move on to the next question in the focus group guide.

ASKING A POLITICALLY SENSITIVE QUESTION

Asking a politically sensitive question is something that people are afraid to answer honestly because it might make others angry.

- Move to a different question or topic that is less sensitive.
- Try coming back to the topic later.
- Use probes during a different line of questioning, that might get at aspects of the sensitive topic but more subtly.
- Rephrase the question or ask a slightly different question. Either approach may make it possible to pose a less controversial question to the group.

Dealing with Other Common Scenarios

PEOPLE ARE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH TALKING

This typically occurs at the beginning of a focus group.

- Remember to start the focus group with an icebreaker in the opening questions to set a comfortable tone and put people at ease in the beginning.
- If, however, this continues to be an issue during the focus group, you may need to back up and do a little work to make people feel more comfortable.
- Talk about easier topics, things that you think participants may be more familiar with or comfortable talking about, or, perhaps, things that you know are particularly interesting to them. This may help the participants begin to feel more comfortable talking in a group setting.
- It's okay sometimes to just wait it out. Be quiet for a moment and allow people time to think. Often, someone will speak up, either to answer the question or to ask a question that allows you to have a better understanding of the silence.

PEOPLE ARE TIRED OF TALKING ABOUT THE TOPIC

At times, people may become tired of a topic and have no more to say about it.

- Simply state, *“Is there anything else that you would like to share? [pause] If not, we can move on to our next question.”*
- This communicates to participants they have an opportunity to contribute any additional thoughts and it allows you to move on to the next topic more naturally and politely.
- Rather than trying to force things, just be aware that there may be an opportunity to elicit information in probing that occurs with other questions. In other words, there may be important linkages and connections to explore throughout the focus group that emerge through subsequent discussion.

PEOPLE ARE HAVING SIDE CONVERSATIONS

If people are having side conversations, that is, conversations among themselves, it can disrupt the focus group by making the other participants feel uncomfortable, making it hard for people to hear what others are saying, and for the facilitator to focus on what is being said.

- One of the best ways to handle this situation is to address it before the focus group begins, when you tell the participants about focus group ground rules.
- Stress that it is *very* important not to have side conversations because it interferes with individual’s full participation in the group discussion and also poses challenges for recording the discussion.
- If side conversations do occur during a focus group, respectfully remind people of the ground rules and ask that people finish their conversations and rejoin the larger group discussion taking place.
- This kind of disruption may also signal that it is time to take a break, and you may want to suggest no more than a five minute break (so that people can use the restroom – make sure people know where to go – or to stretch).
- Make sure people know at what time the focus group will continue and be proactive about bringing them back together so that the focus group can re-convene.

SOMEONE IS TALKING ABOUT AN IRRELEVANT TOPIC

Sometimes the conversation will start to stray away from the topics of the focus group and a participant will talk about a topic that is not relevant to the research.

- When this happens, you might take advantage of a pause and say, *“Thank you for that interesting idea. Perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session. For the purposes of exploring further the specific topics that are the focus of this discussion, with your consent, I would like to move on to another item.”*
- Orient the group to the time you have remaining for your discussion. You do not want the duration of the focus group to extend beyond the amount of time you communicated to participants.
- You may want to mention this when discussion strays from the intended focus, and then refocus the discussion accordingly or use this as an opportunity to indicate that you want to be sure that you hear from others.

SOMEONE SKIPS TOPICS

At times participants may skip topics or move ahead of where you are in the focus group guide, providing information relevant to, or even completely answering, a question that you haven't gotten to yet.

- Use probes to get detailed information from them, and then gently return the person to the topic, falling back on the focus group guide.
- Do not interrupt them; rather, let them finish their thought and remain an interested listener.
- If they have already answered a question in the focus group guide, still ask the question when you get to it, acknowledging that relevant information may have been shared, but you want to make sure that the group has an opportunity to explore the issue more fully, if need be.
- Make sure that all of the topics in the focus group guide are discussed as completely as possible during the discussion.

SOMEONE BEGINS TO LEAVE

It is very important to try and keep people as fully engaged in the discussion as possible and for the entire focus group.

- Deal with this problem in advance by letting people know how long the focus group will take.
- Emphasize that it is important for people to stay for the entire discussion.
- Ask the group at the beginning if anyone has to leave early so that you can change the order of the questions to ask the most important questions before the first people leave.

Exercise: Dealing with Difficult Situations

Discuss some of the most difficult situations you've experienced or anticipate experiencing. Explore ways these situations might be handled.

EXAMPLE OF A FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT

Good evening everyone! I would like to start by welcoming you to this focus group and to thank you for taking the time to participate in our discussion. This evening we will be talking about how people in this community find health services for themselves and their family. Your contributions will help us in our work to improve access to the healthcare services for people in this community.

Before we continue, let me introduce myself. My name is _____ and I will be your facilitator. My role is to encourage and guide our discussion by listening and asking questions. I will be asking lots of questions because I would like as much feedback from you as possible.

Your participation and opinions are important! There are no right or wrong answers.

Our discussion is being tape recorded. All of your comments and responses to questions will be kept completely confidential. Your name and anything else that can identify you will be removed from all written records. Any of the materials that come out of our discussion will be evaluated only by staff working on this project and will be kept secure and protected.

Each of you should have a consent form. The consent form is meant to help you understand your role and rights in this discussion. Before we continue could everyone carefully read and sign this form. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Our discussion this evening will last about one and a half hours. We will not be taking a break. If you would like to use the washrooms before we start, they are located... Before we start, let's review the ground rules so everyone feels safe and comfortable.

Let's start by introducing ourselves... [Ask first question from the focus group guide.]

EXAMPLE OF A CONSENT FORM

Thank you for participating in today's focus group. This consent form provides you with information on the evaluation of the Remix Project, as well as an overview of today's focus group. After you have read over the consent form, please sign and date the last page and give it to the Researcher from EVIDENCE.

Information about the Evaluation

EVIDENCE is conducting an evaluation of Remix Project. The main reasons for doing this are: to understand how it is meeting its goals, which parts of program are useful to youth and which parts could be made better. This means that your ideas and honest feedback can help to make the program better.

The purpose of this focus group today is to look at:

- What you did while you were at Remix
- What you got out of it, or how Remix has made a difference in your life
- What worked for you and what did not.

Procedures

The focus group will take about one and a half hours. The discussion will be recorded onto a digital recorder. The recording will then be transcribed into a Word document. After the recording has been transcribed, it will be erased. The information collected will be shared with the staff at Remix only after it has been analyzed and interpreted by staff at EVIDENCE.

Eligibility

To participate in this focus group, you must have participated in the Remix Project.

Confidentiality

Your comments will be kept confidential to the full extent provided by law. In addition, neither your name nor any other personal information that can identify you will be used in any reports or publications about this focus group. In addition, no one at Remix will hear the recording or see the transcript of today's session. Your comments will remain anonymous.

Also, as part of Evidence's continuing quality assurance of the evaluation, all staff members accessing records must maintain your confidentiality to the extent permitted by law.

Benefits

The results of the session will help staff at the Remix Project better understand the impact that the program has had from the perspective of program participants. The results of this session will also help to develop recommendations about how to improve the program.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. You may choose to withdraw from the session at any time. Your choice to not participate or your choice to withdraw will not affect any rights that you might have at Remix now or in the future.

Additional Information

If you have questions about the focus group or the evaluation that are not answered in this form, please ask them. In addition, if you have questions in the future, you may contact Evidence staff using this contact information:

Lavinia Lamenza, Research Manager
Evidence Research and Evaluation

215 Spadina Avenue, Suite 350
Toronto, ON M5T 2C7
Tel: (416) 323-9557 x229
Fax: (416) 323-9927
E-mail: info@evidenceconsulting.org

Agreement to Participate

I, _____, have read the information on the evaluation of the Remix Project, as well as an overview of today's focus group. This focus group has been planned to look at the impact of the Remix Project.

My role in the focus group is as a participant to help Evidence collect information about the Remix Project. If I had any questions, I am satisfied that they have been answered. By signing this consent form, I agree to attend the session, and to have it recorded. I understand that my name will not appear in any report, that my comments will remain anonymous, and that all information will be kept confidential.

I know that I can contact Lavinia for further information.

I have read this consent form and I understand its contents. I agree to participate.

Participant

Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

Person Obtaining Consent

Signature: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

EXAMPLE OF FOCUS GROUP GROUND RULES

These ground rules may be presented to the group, and displayed throughout the discussion, on a flip chart page that is taped or hung on a wall in a clearly visible location. In addition to these ground rules, which have been established prior to the focus group, it is important to invite participants to establish their own ground rules or guiding principles for the discussion. Once the ground rules have been presented, ask participants if they have anything to add to the list. Add these to the flip chart page.

1. One person speaks at a time.
2. Everyone gets a chance to speak.
3. Anyone can pass on speaking.
4. Respect everyone – make sure you leave enough time for others to speak.
5. It's okay to disagree, but do it in a respectful way.
6. Respect everyone's privacy – keep the discussion confidential.
7. There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view.
8. We're on a first name basis.
9. You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views
10. We ask that you turn off your phones or pagers. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.

EXAMPLE OF A FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Opening Questions

Why do you think art is important to youth like yourselves?

Introductory Questions

How did you first get involved with Remix?

- How did you hear about it?
- What made you decide to apply in the first place?

What was it like for you when you first came to Remix?

- What was it like meeting the Remix staff for the first time?

Transition Questions

How have the staff members made a difference to your experience at Remix?

- How would you describe your relationship with your program leader?

How has your mentor made a difference to your experience at Remix?

- How would you describe your relationship with your mentor?

Which parts of the program were most useful to you?

- What is it about [name of aspect] that you liked?

Which parts of the program didn't work for you?

- What didn't you like about it?

Key Questions

How did you do in achieving the goals that you set for yourself in the program?

- Is there anything that prevented you from achieving your goals during your time at Remix (or participating in the program more)?

In what ways has Remix made a difference in your life?

- What has changed in your life since you first got involved in Remix?
- What has stayed the same?

Last Questions

What kind of support do you need now to achieve your goals?

Is there anything else that you want to tell us about Remix that we haven't talked about already?

Thank you for sharing your experiences and opinions with us today!

EXAMPLE OF A NOTE TAKING FORM

Instructions: Please use this form to record the proceedings of the focus group. Notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any observations of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions, hand movements, group dynamics, etc.

Date of Focus Group: _____
Location of Focus Group: _____
Name of Note Taker: _____

Question 1: _____

Question 2: _____

Question 3: _____

Question 4: _____

Question 5: _____

Question 6: _____

Question 7: _____

CONFIDENTIALITY GUIDELINES

To make sure you have exercised confidentiality before, during, and after a focus group, ask yourself:

- Have all researchers on the project been trained prior to conducting the focus group to discuss confidentiality issues and review procedures for maintaining it?
- Have participants been given enough time to answer any questions they have before and during the focus group?
- Have you explained the nature and purpose of the research openly and honestly, in a way that people can understand?
- Have you communicate how the information obtained during the focus group will be used?
- Have you told participants of the potential risks and benefits of participation?
- Do participants know that they do not have to answer all the questions?
- Do participants know that they may withdraw from the focus group at any time?
- Have you avoided writing participants' names on forms for taking notes about the focus group?
- Have you kept participants' responses in a secure location to protect their identity?

FIRST  WORK

www.firstwork.org