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Focus Group Discussions

KEY INFORMATION SHEET 2

Focus group discussions have become a popular method of obtaining qualitative information regarding numerous topics. Such a discussion can provide insight into issues that cannot easily be covered in a formal survey. Focus groups are a good method to have people involved in the decision-making process and providing their input regarding the topic. However, while participants in a focus group session might feel it as free flowing, relatively unstructured and simple, a good focus group discussion requires careful planning and preparation...

What is the objective?

Its objective is to gain more and in depth information on a specific issue, which often concerns ideas, concepts and/or perceptions of groups.

The idea is that group members discuss the topic amongst themselves, which will provide information to the initiator of the discussion but also will provide an exchange of ideas between the participants.

Core components

There are seven core-components to FGD:

- 1 team preparation
- 2 discussion context
- 3 sensitive listening
- 4 sensitive questioning
- 5 judging responses
- 6 recording the discussion
- 7 self-critical review.

What is a focus group discussion?



A focus group discussion is a discussion with a small group, usually between 6-15 people.

Participants talk spontaneously and freely about a certain topic on which you, or they, want to focus. There is a facilitator who guides the discussion.

When can a focus group discussion (FGD) be used?

A focus group discussion can for example be used to:

- Gather qualitative information for relevant research
- Formulate well-defined questions for a larger survey
- Understand (and solve) certain problems arising during a programme
- Evaluate and/or monitor the progress or results of a programme in a participatory way
- Explore sensitive topics

Depending on the objective and the time available, sometimes one FGD will be sufficient, in other cases more sessions might be needed.

Practical tips

Preparation phase

- 1 Define your objective for the FGD clearly.
- 2 Discuss objective, date, time and location together with the participants.
- 3 Be aware that women and men have different time-schedules.
- 4 Ensure that you have the right participants who are knowledgeable about the subject and can discuss the topic freely.
- 5 Agree beforehand how long the session will take, so people can plan accordingly. (And so can you). Keep in mind that after about one-and-a-half hours people lose interest and might get bored.
- 6 Prepare yourself properly. Agree with your teammate on who does what. Make sure you have all materials needed.

“ Examine what is said, not him who speaks ”

~ Arab Proverb ~

- 7 Be prepared with some questions to get the discussion started and write these down. You might refer to something you observed with the people or in the environment.
- 8 Think about the seating arrangement. A circle or U-setting is advisable for FGD, as everyone needs to be able to see everyone.
- 9 When you are the discussion leader, your teammate should take notes. If you're alone you also could use a recorder, but always ask permission to use it. Sometimes, with very sensitive topics, it will not be possible to record or write down anything during the discussion. You then will have to do that afterwards.

The discussion

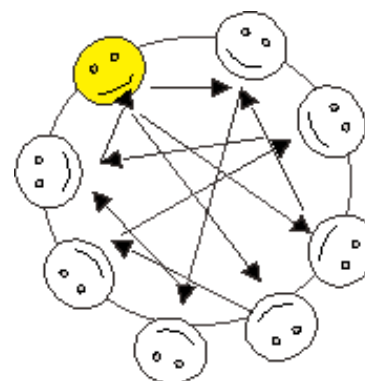
- Open the session, introduce yourself and state the objective of the meeting. Then let the participants introduce themselves, agree on some basic rules for discussion (participatory, one person speaking at a time, raise hand for interrupting or questions).

“ The time to stop talking is when the other person nods his head affirmatively but says nothing ”

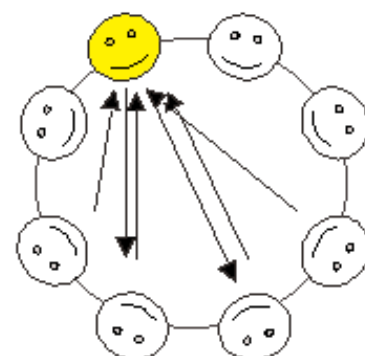
~ Anon ~

- Ensure that you are part of the group.
- Remember you want information from them. Which means that you only talk:
 - To get the discussion started
 - To re-direct questions
 - To rephrase an answer or to summarize
 - To get other members involved who keep quiet ('what do you think Mrs C.? I see that you want to say something')
- Re-direct questions in order to ensure a lively communication between all participants. ('Abdul, what do you think of the remark of Anwar?'; See picture A). Avoid a question and answer session between you and the individual participants (See picture B).

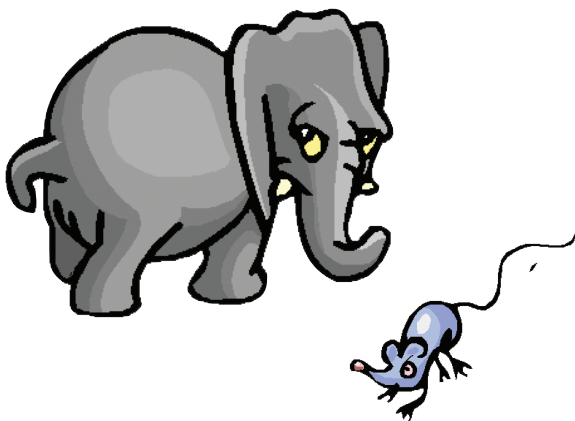
A



B



- Ensure that the discussion is not dominated or monopolised by that one person, who always seems to be present. Address him/her, say you have heard his/her opinion, which is very much appreciated. However, now you would like to hear from Mr X.
- Be sensitive to the group dynamics.
- Cross check the information you get by asking: 'Do you agree, Mrs Y?' 'What do you think Mr B.?'
- Speak clearly and loudly enough to be heard. Look around continuously and keep eye contact.
- Be active yourself, show interest, enthusiasm, sincerity and be an attentive listener.
- Be aware of non-verbal communication. Body language and facial expressions can tell you if people agree, want to say something, are angry, bored etc.
- At the end of each topic, summarize the discussion. Do the same at the end of the discussion, and ask if they agree with what you're saying. Highlight the important issues.
- Thank everyone for their valuable contribution and time.



Be aware of certain characteristic behaviour such as that which resembles the elephant, who can stubbornly block the way and wants to dominate; or that of the mouse, who is too timid to speak up on any subject.

Self-critical review

After the discussion you can ask yourself the following questions:

- Was the objective of the focus group discussion reached? Did you get the information you were looking for?
- Which steps did you take to prepare yourself for the FGD?
- How did you define the date, time and location?
- How did you feel yourself, when leading the FGD?
- What was the seating arrangement during the FGD?
- Were all participants actively involved in the FGD? If no, what do you think was the reason?
- How long did the FGD take? Was there enough time? Was it too long?
- Was there anything special you observed during the FGD?
- What do you consider to be more important: the discussion itself or the outcome/ conclusions/ recommendations? Please explain why.
- When reflecting on the FGD you conducted, what would you like to do different next time?
- What do you think about your skills/ understanding in conducting a FGD? Are these sufficient or are there any gaps?
- Additional remarks.

Further reading & information:

- *A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups:*
www.unu.edu/Unupress/food2/UIN03E/uin03e00.htm
- *An extensive guide on Focus Group Discussion with examples from practice:*
www.idrc.ca/en/ev-56615-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html
- *How to gather information:*
www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/focus.html
- *The use and misuse of focus groups:*
www.useit.com/papers/focusgroups.html