

Frank discussion in focus groups can yield useful data

Organizations everywhere are trying focus groups. People gather in small groups for 60 to 90 minutes to critique professional development plans, rate trainer materials, offer feedback on their experiences in a leadership academy, explain why they never participate in study groups, or register kudos and gripes about web sites or online courses.

Participants' ideas and opinions can be valuable to leaders conducting formative evaluations to improve programs as they are implemented. Their opinions also can be part of summative evaluations. Yet despite the buzz about focus groups, they don't always produce enough insight to make them worth the effort.

Recently a district administrator described a district's substantial effort to gather data from stakeholders through focus groups. Ten concurrent focus group discussions took place around the district within a two-week period.

"It took much more work than we ever expected, but it was a very interesting process," the administrator said. "We heard a lot of ideas. We got some unexpected positive feedback about the initiative, too. But we also heard a lot of repetition. And a lot of other agendas crept into the discussions."

As the administrator described how the district team had prepared for and conducted the focus groups and how leaders had tried to analyze the data, it became clear they had underestimated the importance of certain ingredients in the focus group process. What may have seemed minor details in the focus group process made the difference between getting solid qualitative data vs. questionable or even unusable data.

THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

A focus group is a small group of selected participants who engage in a focused discussion about a planned topic. The technique's major appeal is its versatility. Focus groups can provide a convenient forum for frank discussion and stakeholder feedback on different aspects of professional development at various stages, from new ideas, draft plans, and training materials to policies and requirements, gov-

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erning structures, electronic learning tools, learning models, and full-fledged programs.

Another appeal of the focus group technique is that people enjoy being asked to share their opinions in a short meeting with others of similar interest, passion, or experiences. Focus groups work because the process is informal but also structured and well-focused.

To obtain good data, you must include the essential ingredients. You need:

- A topic that matters;
- The right participants;
- A trusting atmosphere;
- A skilled facilitator;
- A good set of questions;
- A system to record proceedings; and
- A plan for analyzing and interpreting the data.

A topic that matters

Focus groups work best when the organization sponsoring the event is not in crisis. Participants may be suspicious or angry, and discussions veer off topic when problems in other arenas affect participants' lives.

The discussion topic should have immediacy and be of interest to every member of the group. Make the topic of the discussion session clear in your letter inviting participants. Indicate the group's purpose, what you hope to learn, and what you aren't able to do in the session.

For example, if you need to hear what kinds of support school improvement teams need so you can revamp how staff development facilitators use their time, make those parameters clear at the beginning. Participants' job in a focus group is not to solve the problem or to create a new system or plan. Their job is to focus on the topic, give their unedited ideas, respond to others' points, explain their preferences, and share their experiences.

The right people

Selecting the right participants can be tricky. Random sampling is unnecessary and probably won't produce the right mix of people. Purposeful sampling usually works well.

First develop a pool of potential participants. Include people who have something to say. Group those with a common connection to the topic. You might want to hear several different perspectives, but you need different focus groups for that result. Individuals' connection to the topic is the common bond that helps create a comfort level that



In each issue of *JSD*, Robby Champion writes about how to collect and evaluate data effectively. Her columns can be found at www.nsd.org/library/champion.html.

propels the conversation.

Aim for six to 10 people per group. Invite 12 or 14 participants, anticipating that some won't participate or will have a last-minute conflict. Fewer than six participants will not produce enough discussion. Too many encourages whispering around the table. Participants might all be new principals from across the state who are participating in a leadership academy sponsored by the state education department. Or they might be special education teachers from various schools in a big district, all of whom have been training classroom teachers on inclusion strategies. Sometimes the common bond is something all have NOT done, i.e., none of the participants has ever taken the district's semester courses after school.

Ideally, participants do not know each other well or at all. Some experts argue that strangers make the best focus groups since familiarity can prohibit disclosure. Avoid including a supervisor and supervisee in the same group. Relationships and rank differences often make people cautious about what they say.

In the introductory example, school district planners erred by allowing participants to join any focus group at whatever location they wished. That decision created several mismatched groups, and some participants weren't frank for fear of repercussions.

A trusting atmosphere

A trusting atmosphere is critical to capturing good focus group data. Provide a comfortable setting in a convenient location. Easy-to-read signs directing participants to the location and a registration table create

a welcoming atmosphere. A staff member or volunteer should greet each person. Name tags or table tents encourage participants to address each other during the discussion.

Refreshments are not essential but help break the ice and make people comfortable. Make them available 30 minutes before the session.

Anticipate that some participants will bring children, so have a staff member available for child care. Set up a play area or offer a children's movie in the adjoining room.

A skilled facilitator

Facilitating a focus group requires skill and respect for the process. The facilitator should not be closely involved with the program or issue being discussed. Neutrality is key to success.

The group members depend on the facilitator's skill in asking the questions, tracking the conversation's flow, and including everyone's ideas. The facilitator models good lis-

tening and gets participants to respond to each other. The facilitator also encourages different points of view.

In the introductory example, the district used untrained, volunteer facilitators who lacked the skill to probe for amplification, get examples from participants, and encourage participants to respond to each other. Most interaction was between the facilitator and one participant.

Good questions

The facilitator uses different kinds of planned questions. The session opens with questions intended to get everyone to speak without discussing the topic in any depth, then moves on to key questions, and ends with closure questions. The facilitator judges the value of the questions and time needed for each as the discussion proceeds.

Key questions begin about one-third of the way through the meeting. Responses to each key question should take 15 to 20 minutes, depending on how many people answer. The facilitator should probe for amplification, encourage ideas, and discern when to move on.

Sometimes the facilitator might have participants write their answers. For example, participants might rank a program from 1 to 10 on an index card.

Closure involves more than thanking everyone and bidding them farewell. The "final thoughts" kinds of comments often synthesize the whole discussion. Use questions such as, "If we were to redesign the whole action research initiative, what is the one change that you, as a potential participant, consider most crucial?"

System for recording proceedings

Before the session begins, test electronic recording equipment carefully, and adjust microphones around the table to maximize their effectiveness. Expect background noises to interfere with recording. They will make transcription very tedious.

It helps to have two people taking notes manually or on laptop computers as backup to electronic recording. Good written notes can help clarify any confusion in the electronic recording. Provide note-takers with a seating chart to help identify who said what.

Planning the data analysis

Analyzing focus group transcripts requires knowing content analysis techniques. The analysis needs to be systematic, thorough, free of bias, and defensible. The process involves examining the data from various perspectives to determine the major and minor themes and subpatterns. If you have conducted several different focus groups, the process also will involve a cross-group analysis.

Whoever analyzes the data should have observed the discussions. Even the best transcript is not easy to decipher if you were not present to note the nonverbal messages.

You should expect to explain and defend your analysis process to stakeholders when you report your findings. ■

MORE INFORMATION

- *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 3rd edition, by Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000).
- *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, by David L. Morgan (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).