



## TOOL | FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group has a well framed topic and involves a small group of 6 to 10 people that fit a set of criteria. The goal is to learn about people’s opinions on the topic that help the host plan future actions. It should be guided by a trained facilitator/leader.

### THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF A FOCUS GROUP

Advantages of a Focus Group	Disadvantages of a Focus Group
<p>Get to spend extended time with a small group of people who are likely interested in or seen to be interested in your initiative.</p> <p>Focus Groups allow you to see the conversation: body movements, facial expressions, how participants interact, etc. Sometimes focus groups are recorded.</p> <p>A smaller group allows you to diver deeper into a conversation than you could in a large group. In other words, you can go vertical on a topic more readily than you can in a larger, more diverse group.</p> <p>Focus groups can be a helpful component of “data-mining”. You can use data you have gleaned about stakeholders Example: gender imbalance about service usage could be explored, asking the dominate gender why they are engaged while asking the minority gender why they aren’t.</p> <p>Focus groups can also be a good tool for exploring or determining the types of questions you might ask in a survey.</p> <p>Can provide opportunities for disadvantaged or marginalized groups to participate – e.g. those who are illiterate, children, the homeless and other groups that may not want to attend a town hall meeting or being interviewed one on one or fill out a survey.</p>	<p>Small groups are not as diverse as larger groups, so to fully address diversity you may have to hold numerous focus groups.</p> <p>What people say and what people do can be very different things. Focus groups are not real life and you can’t be sure if what you are being told actually translates into corresponding action.</p> <p>Focus Groups can be time-consuming and expensive. Also in some cases you might have to pay a focus group participant for their involvement.</p> <p>Controversial or very personal questions may not be well received or answered honestly by participants. Examples include: asking questions about marital problems, serious health issues, views on abortion, or views of a certain segment of the population (e.g. immigrants) may be problematic.</p> <p>The results of the focus group, even if honestly provided by participants, may not represent the larger population.</p> <p>Not everyone makes a good Focus Group facilitator. It can be difficult to find a qualified, experienced focus group lead and those who are tend to be in demand and expensive.</p>

Are a good way to engage people who do not speak the mainstream language... if the focus group is held in their language.

Participants may be uncomfortable being observed, much less recorded and such discomfort can impact what they say.

## APPROACHES

**Single Moderator:** Many if not most focus groups have a single moderator whose job it is to facilitate the session, help ensure smooth transitions from question to question, and ensure equitable participation.

**Dual Moderators:** One would fulfill the responsibilities as above while the other would be observing, recording, and perhaps interjecting with follow up questions.

**Duelling Moderators** might be use if you are exploring two sides of a question (e.g. the pros and cons of social housing in a neighbourhood). One moderator in this instance might be pro social housing while the other against it and their questions would be framed accordingly.



**Single Way and Two Way Focus Groups:** In the former there is just one group engaged in the conversation. In a Two Way Focus Group, one group is engaged in a conversation about the topic at hand while the other focus group is observing the other group and discussing what the other group is saying and also their interactions.

## UP FRONT CONSIDERATIONS

If you are going to set up focus groups, make sure you answer these questions:

- What's the purpose of the focus group and how does it fit into other engagements we are doing?
- What will you use the results for and will you explain that up front to participants?
- Will their participation be anonymous?
- Who will lead/facilitate the focus group and what skills do they need and what familiarity should they have with your subject or purpose?
- Who will you be inviting (demographics, interests, affiliations, etc.)?
- How will you invite people to participate and how will you decide who you include and exclude?
- Who will be the recorder? Will you video tape the session? Will you share the results with participants?
- What legal forms may be required that participants will be asked to sign?
- How many focus groups will you be holding?
- Where will they be held and for how long?
- How might you assist participants with accessing the focus group session (transportation, child care, food).
- Will you be compensating participants?

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS

The questions posed at a focus group should be those that participants have, or should have, some knowledge about. For example, you would not ask a group of lay people, *What should be done about the flu that is going around?* That might be a good question for a group of doctors or public health nurses. If you are engaging a group of residents in a group focus, you likely shouldn't ask them technical questions about an area redevelopment plan, but you might ask them, *What are your ideas about how to make the new park family friendly or What are your ideas on how to make the neighbourhood safer?*

Typically focus groups are about having a structured conversation that begins with open ended questions but also allows for iterative engagement (asking follow up questions based on responses). The following examples may be a helpful guide to phrasing your questions:

- What do you think about...?
- What are the pros and cons of...?
- What would you change about...?
- What would make you want to...?
- What bothers you most about...?
- Would you prefer this or that... How come?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Issues including advantages and disadvantages:

<http://focusgroups.pbworks.com/w/page/5677430/Issues%20including%20advantages%20and%20disadvantages>

Running a Survey vs. a Focus Group: What's the Best Way to Collect Customer Reviews?

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/running-survey-vs-focus-group-best-way-collect-customer-reviews/>

Focus Group Questionnaire Fundamentals - Basic Questions

<http://www.focusgrouptips.com/focus-group-questionnaire.html>