

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

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ETHICS, CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONSENT

Principles of Research Ethics

1. Voluntary participation
2. Confidentiality
3. Professional Competence
4. Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity
5. Justice

Voluntary Participation

- Individuals must agree to participate in the survey, focus group, or interview of their own free will. Written consent is preferred, but verbal consent that is recorded on tape is acceptable as well. Adults may agree to participate in a survey without having to sign a consent form or tape record their agreement to participate. However, the use of consent forms is recommended for focus groups and key informant interviews.
- It is essential that individuals understand that their participation is voluntary and that there are no consequences for refusing to take part in the study or to answer specific questions.
- The nature of the study must be explained, openly and honestly. It is helpful to make sure that there is adequate time to answer any questions that an individual may have before and during the survey, focus group, or interview.
- Should an individual look confused or withdrawn, it is a good idea to ask them if they have any questions before proceeding. If an individual does not want to continue his or her participation in the survey, focus group, or interview, his or her desire to withdraw should be respected.

Confidentiality

- Personal information that is revealed during a survey, focus group, or key informant interview must be kept confidential. This means that you can not share the information gained through these efforts with anyone except another person involved in the information gathering effort. This also means that you can not share any information that would allow another person know who participated in the study.
- Individuals must know how confidentiality will be protected. Only you will know their name and only other members of the information gathering effort will have access to their information. No information will be publicly reported that would identify them as a participant in the study.
- When these conditions of confidentiality can not be met, the individual must be made aware of the limitations. For instance, participants should know that while the information they reveal in the survey, focus group, or interview will be kept confidential, their participation may not be confidential as their names were brainstormed in a public meeting.

Professional Competence

- You must not misrepresent or misuse your position as an information gatherer. You should undertake only those tasks for which you have been trained. For example, if a client begins to open up to you during an interview, you must not act as a counselor if you have not been trained as such.
- Information gatherers should ask for help when needed to ensure quality interactions with individuals and the collection of quality information.

Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity

- Any information gathering effort must respect the rights, dignity and worth of all people.
- Information gatherers are respectful of the rights of others to hold values, attitudes, and opinions that differ from their own.

Justice

- Information gatherers must strive to maximize the possible benefits of assessment efforts while minimizing possible harms.
- Information gatherers have an obligation to ensure that participants are not unduly burdened by their participation in assessment efforts. Participants should be selected on the basis of their relevant knowledge and experience; they should not be selected simply due to their availability, compromised position, or manipulability.

For further information about Research Ethics, please review

The Belmont Report available online at:

<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm#xethical>

Tips for Writing Informed Consent Documents

The ethical principle of respect for persons requires that subjects be given the opportunity to choose what shall and shall not happen to them. Valid informed consent requires: (1) **Disclosure** of relevant information to prospective subjects about the research; (2) their **comprehension** of the information, and (3) their **voluntary agreement**, free of coercion, to participate.

Upon being provided with all relevant information about a survey, adults may choose to complete the survey without signing a consent form. However, consent forms are recommended for adults who participate in focus groups and key informant interviews. Additionally, if your information gathering efforts require the participation of youth under the age of 18, you *must* obtain written or verbal parental consent. Below are some suggestions on how to develop consent forms.

1) Disclosure

It is important that a participant in a study understand the type of information gathering effort being conducted and the purpose of the effort before they agree to participate. The participant should be made aware of the expected length of their participation as well as any risks and benefits associated with their participation. Participants should also receive the information gatherers' information should they wish to ask questions or withdraw from the effort.

Before signing a consent form, participants should also be made aware of the confidentiality (or lack thereof) of the process. Participants of research projects share valuable and sometimes sensitive information with the researcher, and they trust that the researcher will ensure that their identity is protected. Researchers, or persons conducting the data collection, must agree to keep personal information that is revealed to them confidential. Specific data or information that identifies individuals as participants in the study cannot be shared. To ensure confidentiality, codes can be used instead of participant names on all documentation, including written notes during or after a focus group or interviews.

2) Comprehension

Use headings to make informed consent documents clear and easily understandable. The following are suggested headings to include in a consent form:

- Introduction
- The purpose of this information gathering effort
- Procedures for this information gathering effort
- Potential risks and discomforts associated with the information gathering effort
- The benefits of participating in the information gathering effort, if any
- Other choices available besides taking part in the information gathering effort
- What will happen to the information that is collected
- Compensation, if any
- How to withdraw from the information gathering effort
- Explanation of confidentiality

3) Voluntary Agreement

Participants should understand that their participation is voluntary and that there are no consequences for refusing to answer specific questions. It should also be explained that participants may withdraw from the focus group at any time. Once a person has been made aware of the purpose of the information gathering effort as well as the associated risks and benefits, they must indicate their agreement to participate, or their agreement to allow their child to participate, in one of two ways:

- By signing the consent form
- By indicating verbally on tape that they (or their child) wish to participate in the study.

Tape-recording is also voluntary. Although participants sign the consent form, you should always ask the group, before starting, if anyone objects to being tape recorded. If any one person objects, you cannot tape the group and should prepare to take very detailed notes.

PLEASE SEE **APPENDIX I** FOR SAMPLE CONSENT FORMS

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus Groups—An Overview

"A focus group is a data collection procedure in the form of a carefully planned group discussion among about ten people plus a moderator and observer, in order to obtain diverse ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest in a relaxed, permissive environment that fosters the expression of different points of view, with no pressure for consensus" (Focus Groups: Background and "How To" Guidelines, 1995).

Focus groups normally have between seven and ten participants. Groups with fewer than seven participants may not provide enough information. Groups larger than ten may be hard to manage and record.

Why are focus groups useful?

- ❖ *Group dialogue tends to generate a lot of good (rich) information, as participants tend to get each other talking about different ways of experiencing or thinking about something.*
- ❖ *Focus groups provide information from people who can provide unique insights.* Focus groups provide information directly from individuals who are most involved in an issue or hold expert knowledge about a topic of which little is known among researchers.
- ❖ *Focus groups provide a representation of diverse opinions and ideas.*
- ❖ *Focus groups provide a relatively low cost and efficient way to generate a great deal of information.*

What are some limitations of focus groups?

- ❖ *Focus groups are susceptible to facilitator bias, which can affect whether information about what participants feel and think is shared (validity of findings).*
- ❖ *Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.*
- ❖ *The information gathered through focus groups often has limited generalizability to a whole population.*

Tips for Focus Group Guide Development

In order to conduct a structured discussion with focus group participants, the use of a focus group guide is recommended. If your organization will be holding more than one focus group, use of a focus group guide will ensure that similar information is being collected from different focus group participants.

- ❖ To begin, identify what kind of information you would like to collect. Organizations often have a difficult time distinguishing between *interesting* and *important* kinds of information. As a 1 ½ hour focus group usually consists of 5-6 questions, it is imperative that organizations decide what is important information and create questions to elicit this information from participants.
- ❖ Develop 5-6 questions broad, open-ended questions that will encourage focus group participants to share their knowledge and experience on the subject of interest.
 - Avoid asking yes/no questions.
 - Use caution when asking “Why” questions as they can make people feel defensive and cause them to take “politically correct” sides on a controversial issue.
 - “What and “How” questions are the most useful in facilitating a good discussion.
- ❖ For each question, identify *probes* that may help stimulate a conversation among focus group participants, or hone in on a specific element of the question. Examples of probes include:
 - Can you say more about that?
 - Can you be more specific?
 - Can you give me an example of that?
 - Do others have similar or different experiences to share?
- ❖ When asking primary questions or probes, avoid phrasing questions in a way that may influence a participant's response. Through the development of focus group guides, organizations will have the opportunity to identify questions that may prohibit participants from sharing their honest thoughts and opinions.
- ❖ Focus group guides can be revised after conducting one or more focus groups. It is always useful for facilitators to “debrief” after focus groups to discuss what went well and what could be improved upon. If it becomes apparent that a question isn't eliciting the desired information, it can be modified or removed entirely. New questions that weren't initially thought of but that emerge through focus groups can be added to the guide as well.

PLEASE SEE **APPENDIX II** FOR AN EXAMPLE OF
A FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Tips for Recruiting Focus Group Participants

Selection and recruitment of focus group participants is an important part of the focus group process. As you identify the kind of information you would like to collect, you must also clearly identify the population and focus group participants who can represent that population. Deciding the composition and number of focus groups to conduct is an important step in the overall focus group process.

- ❖ Once you have identified the desired outcomes and the information to be obtained, then you can design the group composition and set the number of focus groups. A focus group may be homogenous or heterogeneous depending on how you want participants to interact to reach your desired outcome. For instance, you might want responses related to particular types of individuals (e.g. men, women, African Americans, Latinos, gay, lesbian, children, young adults, business leaders, nonprofit leaders, etc...). In this case, your group composition would primarily target one of these populations with perhaps heterogeneity within that population. In another case, having a mixed group of individuals may be preferable (e.g. older and younger, men and women, etc...).
- ❖ The group composition and number of focus groups will also depend on your target population. If your target population is a “community” then you will want to conduct multiple focus groups with various target groups. If your target is a program with 20 participants, one focus group of six individuals may be representative.
- ❖ Individuals must be representative of the target population as well as be willing and able to provide the information you are seeking.
- ❖ Recruitment of individuals can take place via a random or convenience sampling. Either way the sample needs to be comprised of people who can provide information on the topic of the focus group. You may also want to recruit a few extra participants in case there are no shows.
- ❖ When the individual is contacted (mail, phone, or in person) to be invited to participate in the focus group, you should provide a general explanation of the focus group. If there will be incentives (e.g. money) or a meal provided this should also be noted. Provide written confirmations, if possible, and reminders closer to the date of the focus group.
- ❖ Provide incentives, if possible. Incentives can be effective in attracting a potential respondent’s attention, and make him or her more likely to participate. For a focus group, incentives can be monetary or it is often common to provide food.
- ❖ Select days, times, and locations that are convenient for your target population, and remove any barriers that may prohibit participation (e.g. provide transportation or childcare).

Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

❖ Obtain written consent

Make sure participants understand their rights, and ensure them that their personal names and identifying information will not be revealed in any public way. If participants are unable or unwilling to give written consent, they may give verbal consent by stating their name and agreement to participate on a tape recording.

❖ Establish rapport

Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is helpful for the facilitator to outline the purpose and order of the discussion at the beginning of the session and set the group at ease. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal; everyone is expected to participate; and differing views are welcome.

❖ Follow the Focus Group Guide

The focus group guide previously developed by your organization should provide a set of questions for the facilitator to explore, probe, and ask regarding different topics. Initiating each topic with a carefully crafted question will help participants share their experiences but in a focused and meaningful manner. It is helpful to follow the focus group guide as much as possible when facilitating a focus group, to increase the credibility of the research results. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient. If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can ask their own questions to help obtain fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques are:

- *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* – “Anything else?”

❖ Other Tips for Guiding the Discussion

In focus groups, it is not uncommon for a few individuals to dominate the discussion. Sometimes in mixed gender groups, one gender may tend to speak more than the other. To balance participation, and ensure that every participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, you might consider the following strategies:

- Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk
- Give nonverbal cues (look in another direction or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period)
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion

❖ **Minimize Pressure to Conform to a Dominant View Point**

When an idea is being accepted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a single viewpoint has occurred. To minimize this, the facilitator should probe for alternative views. For example, the facilitator can raise another issue, or 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?”

❖ **Define key terms**

Review the focus group guide ahead of time and identify words that you think participants may have a difficult time understanding without a little explanation. When it is time to ask the focus group question with the difficult or confusing term, explain to participants what you mean by the term. Also, pay attention to when there is little being said in response to a question. You may want to ask participants if they would like more information about the question. If more explanation is needed, ask participants what they would like more information about. Keep your explanation as neutral as possible.

❖ **Record the discussion**

Ideally, focus group discussions will be recorded using both tape recording equipment and hand-written notes. Hand-written notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any observations you have about what went well and did not go well about the discussion. After recording the focus group, write down all the major thoughts and comments you think are important for someone who was not there to know about what was said. If you can’t tape record a discussion for any reason or the tape does not record well, please take extra time to write down as much as you remember about participants’ discussion of each question.

Adapted from: USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation. “Conducting Focus Group Interviews.” *Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips*. 1996 (10).

Building Rapport

Building rapport is important to the focus group process, because it can dramatically influence whether or not the participants answer and how they answer the questions they are asked.

In the Beginning of the Focus Group

The purpose of the focus group is to get an idea of the participants' perspectives and to understand where they are coming from on the topic of interest.

Listening

In the first few minutes of the focus group, be accepting and curious, and show the participants that you are a person who is prepared and willing to listen to them with interest. At the same time, it is important to make sure that participants are talking about the question asked. Listen first, but re-ask the question if participants go too far off topic.

You Are There To Learn From Them

Also, let the participants know that you are there to learn from them. This interest in them as "experts" will be key to setting the tone for the focus group.

Presenting Yourself

Your Role

It is important to present yourself as someone there to do research rather than as a friend. There is an element of formality in doing so; however, taking their contribution seriously does not have to be at odds with building rapport. This formality communicates to the participants that their participation is important.

Balance Rapport and Professionalism

Part of your role is to achieve a balance between building rapport with the participants and professionalism. Your role during the focus group is not to be a good conversationalist or a friend who provides feedback, but to be a professional. You will want to achieve a balance between being formal and casual during your focus groups. If you are too formal, the respondents may feel intimidated by you and not be as willing to reveal information. By being too casual, the respondents may not see you as someone who is prepared to take what they have to say seriously.

Keeping Them Talking

Probing

As a general rule, you want to interrupt the focus group participants as little as possible. If you feel that you need to follow-up with something they said by using probes, make a mental note of it and ask them about it when they have finished their thought.

Finishing Their Thoughts

Again, you want to show the participants that you are there to listen to what they have to say. Interrupting them may influence how they answer and whether they answer other questions you ask. If a focus group participant strays off course, encourage them to finish their thought. After they have finished their thought, it is appropriate to bring them back to the question you asked to make sure that they have answered it completely.

Concluding the Focus Group

Thanking Them for Their Participation

Remember to thank the participants for their time and participation. Let them know that the information they have shared is valuable for this project.

Future Contact

Related to rapport, it is important to end the focus group on a positive note and to get the participants to agree to be contacted again in the future if necessary. You may need to contact them to clarify something they said. If you promise to do something for them such as find out more information, make sure you keep those promises.

Listening to Focus Group Participants

The guidelines to conducting focus groups are closely connected to building rapport. These guidelines include communicating to the participants that you are listening to them as well as these strategies: neutrality, silence, and guidance.

Communicate That You Are Listening

Show Them That You Are Listening

You will want to focus your efforts on listening to the participants so that you will be able to probe at appropriate points during the focus group. You want to pay attention to the participants, which is a way to show them that you are listening to what they are saying. This includes noticing body posture and facial gestures and any changes in their nonverbal language.

Listening and Elaboration

If the participant feels that you are not listening to them with great care, they may not elaborate or provide much detail with their answers.

The Importance of Neutrality During Focus Groups

Staying Neutral

While paying attention to the participants you also want to remain as neutral as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about something. Use phrases such as “Thank you. That is helpful.”

Gathering Honest Information

You want to gather information during the focus group that is as honest as possible. If a participant senses that you have an opinion, they may want to change their responses to ones that seem desirable to you rather than what they truly believe or feel about a topic.

Silence

Silence is Acceptable

Conducting a focus group is different than typical conversations we have with people. Something to keep in mind is that silence is acceptable. It is important not to get impatient during your focus groups even though you may tend to want to fill the pauses in conversation.

Silence Encourages Elaboration

Allowing silence at times encourages elaboration by the respondents, because it gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information.

Guidance

Not Rushing the Focus Group Participants

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. Again, you want to make sure that you interrupt the focus group participants as little as possible and not rush them with their answers while keeping them on course with the interview guide.

Asking Clarifying Questions

Guidance includes giving the focus group participants clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be and asking them for clarification, details, and examples. Make small steps in your questioning, not big leaps. This way you will get more detail and elaboration from them and will keep you from making assumptions about what they have shared.

Monitoring Time

As a part of guidance you also want to achieve a balance between following the focus group guide, monitoring time, and asking the respondents for more detail through probing. By arriving and leaving on time you are presenting yourself as a professional, being considerate of their time, and building rapport.

Individuals tend to want to talk about their experiences and may go on and on about them. As the facilitator, your job is to politely move the focus group forward when what the respondent is sharing is less useful given your research questions. At times, you may want to acknowledge that your time together is waning, and there are some other aspects of their 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.

If you do run out of time before you have covered all the questions in the focus group guide, be sure to use your remaining time asking and exploring only the most important questions remaining. 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 already have provided relevant information (indeed, adequately answered) questions you have not yet asked. This will ensure that your questions do not feel redundant to the participant and that the interview, overall, flows smoothly and efficiently.

Probes

Probes are an important part of conducting focus groups and have two main purposes: to help clarify what a participant has said and to help get more detailed information on topics of interest. Probes allow the participants to provide more than just a one-sentence answer to the questions you ask.

Examples of Probes

Some examples of probes used to help clarify what a respondent has said include:

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

Using Probes for Clarification

Seeing Things from Their Perspective

Using probes for clarification helps you to gather good information while avoiding the assumption that you understand the meaning of a phrase or the perspective of the participants. Probes such as the ones above help you see things from the perspective of the person being questioned while building rapport.

Probes Help Avoid Making Assumptions

Probes also help you make small steps in your questioning, not big leaps, avoiding the mistake of making assumptions about what the interview respondent has shared or rushing them in their answers.

Probes and Building Rapport

The use of appropriate probes is also connected to building rapport with the focus group participants.

The Participants are the Experts

Using probes to clarify what the focus group participants have said reinforces the fact that you are there to learn from them as “experts.” Good probes let the participants know that you are listening to their answers and that you would like to know more detail about where they are coming from about the topic.

Good Probing is not Leading

It is important to avoid asking questions that are leading, meaning that they reflect your opinions or assumptions about a topic.

Avoid Asking Leading Questions

An example of a leading question is “Don’t you think...” This presents to the focus group participants that you have an opinion, not that you are there to learn from them as an unbiased listener. This type of questioning may lead the participants to answer questions according to what you expect to hear, rather than how they really feel.

The participants may also want you to look at them in a favorable way, matching your opinions rather than sharing what they truly believe or have experienced. So it is very important to stay as neutral as possible during the focus group.

Examples of Leading Questions

Too leading: “Would you agree that...”

Instead, you could say: “What do you think about...”

Too leading: “Do you think that...?”

Instead, you could say: “What are your beliefs about...?”

Too leading: “When will you...?”

This assumes that the person you are interviewing has the intention of doing something, but that may not be true.

Instead, you could say: Another way to approach this question would be to say, “Do you plan on...?”

Too leading: “How important do you believe it is...?”

Participants may or may not think the issue is important, so start by simply asking if they think the issue is important, and probe based on their answer to that question.

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 these situations.

❖ What do I do if no one responds to a question?

In this kind of situation, it is helpful to try to understand why people aren't responding.

- ***Did you ask a question that was difficult for the participants to understand?***

If you think this might be the case, you might try asking the question in a different way. The more familiar you are with the research objectives of a particular focus group, the more successful you will be in rephrasing or rewording a question in an appropriate way that ensures that salient issues are explored and the research integrity of the group discussion is maintained.

- ***Do you think you might have asked a politically sensitive question (i.e., something that people are afraid to answer honestly because it might make other people angry)?***

If you think this might be the problem, you might move to a different question or topic that is less sensitive, and try coming back to the topic later, or use probes, during a different line of questioning, that might get at aspects of the sensitive topic but less directly.

Here, again, it might be helpful simply to rephrase the question or ask a slightly different question. Either approach may make it possible to pose a less controversial question to the group

- ***Are people tired of talking about the topic and/or do they have no more to say about a topic?***

In this case, it may be important to 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 that this is their opportunity to contribute any additional thoughts and allows you to move on to the next topic more naturally and politely. If you, as the facilitator, think you haven't gotten all of the information you want on that topic, rather than trying to force things, just be aware that there may be an opportunity to elicit salient information in probing that occurs with respect to other questions. In other words, there may be important linkages and connections to explore throughout the focus group that emerge through subsequent discussion.

- ***Are people feeling uncomfortable about talking?***

This typically occurs at the beginning of a focus group and is less likely to occur when focus groups start with an icebreaker or the facilitator is able 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.

If no one responds to a question, and you aren't sure exactly what the problem is, 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.

❖ What do I do if someone is dominating the conversation?

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. If someone is dominating the conversation, you might want to 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."

❖ What happens if a participant skips ahead, providing information relevant to, or even completely answering, a question that I haven't gotten to yet?

At times a focus group participant may skip topics or move ahead of where you are in the focus group guide. You will want to use probes to get detailed information from them on the topic at hand, and then gently return the person to the topic of interest, falling back on the focus group guide. You do not want to interrupt them; rather, let them finish their response/thought and remain an interested listener. If they have already answered a question on the focus group guide you will still want to ask the question when you get to it because other people may have more to say. You will want to make sure that all of the topics in the focus group guide are discussed as completely as possible during the focus group.

❖ What do I do if I ask a question and a participant says that they do not feel comfortable answering it?

A participant may not feel comfortable answering a question from the focus group guide. This may be related to confidentiality and informed consent, or it may be related to embarrassment due to the sensitive nature of the questions. At the beginning of the focus group you want to make it clear that anyone may decline to answer a question(s) or choose to stop participating in the focus group at any time.

❖ What do I do if people are having side conversations (i.e., conversations among themselves)?

If people are having 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 making it hard 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, do not stop the conversation abruptly. You might 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). It will be important to make sure people know at one time the focus group will continue and be proactive about bringing people back together so that the focus group can re-convene.

❖ What do I do if someone in the group wants to discontinue their participation in the focus group?

There are several reasons why a focus group participant may want to discontinue their participation, and again, this is related to informed consent.

- If the person wishes to discontinue the focus group altogether, do it promptly. If you have the opportunity, follow up with the person outside of the focus group and ask if they have any questions or feedback to share with you.

Effective Focus Group Facilitation

*What are the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator?
What qualities does the facilitator need to possess to conduct a quality
focus group?*

Roles and Responsibilities of the Facilitator

- 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
- When participants aren't talking, ask them whether they need the question restated or explained
- Don't let arguments between participants develop
- Bring the following materials for the focus group:
 - Recording equipment: a tape recorder, extension cord, extra tapes, and extra batteries
 - Focus group packet of consent forms, participant information forms and focus group documentation sheet
 - If desired, flip charts with extra paper and different colors of magic markers (more than 1 so that it does not run out of ink)
- If unable to tape-record, record major ideas on flip chart paper and write down your thoughts and observations about group dynamics write after the focus group.

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

APPENDIX I

Sample Informed Consent Form

*THIS SAMPLE CONSENT FORM IS PROVIDED FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE.
CHECK WITH THE APPROPRIATE PERSON(S) TO SEE IF PARENTAL CONSENT IS
REQUIRED.*

We would like you to participate in the evaluation of *[program name]*. Your participation is important to us and will help us assess the effectiveness of the program. As a respondent in *[program name]* we will ask you to *[complete a questionnaire, answer questions in an interview, or other task]*.

We will keep all of your answers confidential. Your name will never be included in any reports and none of your answers will be linked to you in any way. The information that you provide will be combined with information from everyone else participating in the study.

[If information/ data collection includes questions relevant to behaviors such as child abuse, drug abuse, or suicidal behaviors, the program should make clear its potential legal obligation to report this information – and that confidentiality may be broken in these cases. Make sure that you know what your legal reporting requirements are before you begin your evaluation.]

You do not have to participate in the evaluation. Even if you agree to participate now, you may stop participating at any time or refuse to answer any questions. Refusing to be part of the evaluation will not affect your participation or the services you receive in *[program name]*.

If you have any questions about the study you may call *[name and telephone number of evaluator, program manager or program staff member]*.

- DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE
- DO AGREE TO PARTICIPATE

Signed: _____

Respondent or Parent/Guardian (if respondent is under 18)

Date: _____

Example of a Well Written Consent Form

Understanding the Cultural Assets of Southeast Asian Women to Promote Breast Health

CONSENT FORM

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The Asian Pacific Development Center (APDC) is doing this project to try to lower the risks of breast cancer for Southeast Asian women. APDC is talking with many women like you to learn about the things that they feel affect their health. APDC has asked a company called OMNI Institute (OMNI) to help review information and report on what is learned.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION?

Your participation will help us develop programs and information that support Southeast Asian women in protecting themselves from breast cancer and make help more available. Through your help, this project will benefit Southeast Asian women and communities in Colorado. To thank you for your participation and your time, we would like to extend a grocery gift certificate in the amount of \$15 to you.

WHAT AM I BEING ASKED TO DO?

Trained staff from APDC will ask to talk with you about things that affect Southeast Asian women and their health. You will be asked about things like:

- How easy is it for you to find a medical doctor you like?
- When do you feel it is important to see a doctor?
- How easy is it for you to find information about your health that you can use?
- What things put some women at greater risk of breast cancer, and what is a good way to talk about these things with other Southeast Asian women?

These questions will be asked by someone who can speak your language. Staff from APDC will talk with you somewhere you feel comfortable answering these questions. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No. It is your choice to take part in a discussion with the APDC staff member or not. Your choice should be guided by your wish to share your thoughts and experience for this project. What you decide will not affect the services that you receive through APDC in any way. If you decide to take part, you can stop the interview at any time. You can choose not to answer questions that you don't want to answer. You also can ask questions at any time during the interview. This is very acceptable and welcomed.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE SHARED WITH OTHERS IN MY COMMUNITY?

No. Your name will not be used in the report. And, all those working on this project sign a written form saying they will not share information about you or any woman who takes part in the study. Other than the woman talking to you, no one needs to know if you took part in the study.

WHAT IF I DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT BREAST CANCER?

We understand that some things may not be easy to talk about, because they may be things that we do not usually discuss in public or with anyone other than members of our families. It is alright to say that you do not feel comfortable talking about a subject. You also can tell the person doing the interview that you do not wish to answer the question, and she will go on to the next topic.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE USED?

Your information will be combined with what we learn from other Southeast Asian women. It will be used to understand health issues and to benefit the Southeast Asian community. If you choose to take part, your name and personal information will be removed from all public documents.

You will be asked if it is alright to record your interview with a tape recorder. Tape recording allows us not to take notes during the conversation and to preserve your information as accurately as possible. Your name will not be written on the tape, and it will be destroyed when the project ends. If you do not want your interview to be recorded, what you say will be written down on paper and given to OMNI. Your name will not be written on these papers.

WHO DO I TALK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

If you have questions or wish to speak to someone, please let the person doing the interview know. She will make sure you can talk to the right person to help you. You also can call Jane Doe at the Asian Pacific Development Center (303-355-5555) or Judie Smith OMNI Institute (303-833-4444) directly.

Do you have any questions for me at this time? Was there any part of this that you would like me to go over again with you? Can I better explain any words or information about the study?

Please sign below if you agree to take part in this important project. Your signature means that you have read this consent form or that it has been read to you and you agree to take part in a discussion about health issues affecting Southeast Asian women.

Participant Signature

Date

Participant Printed Name

APPENDIX II

Example of a Focus Group Guide

Thank you for participating in this focus group. We will be talking with you all for the next hour about your experience with your internship, and any recommendations you might have for improving future internships offered by XXX organization in collaboration with local nonprofit organizations. We are interested in hearing your honest feedback and opinions. XXX organization will receive a summary of this focus group with no names attached, so you can be assured that the information you share with us is confidential. Although we hope to hear from all of you at some point during the discussion, you are not required to answer any question you don't feel comfortable answering. Do you have any questions? Does anyone object to being tape recorded?

We are going to talk about different elements of the internship program. Please keep in mind that these questions are about the internship process in general, and not necessarily specific to the organization where you interned.

Application and Matching Process

1. Thinking about your experience obtaining the internship, what recommendations do you have for improving the application or the application process? The matching process?
2. We understand that after you submitted your application, you were interviewed by one or more organizations for a potential internship. How was that process for you?
 - a. Probe: What challenges did you experience, if any?

Activities

1. Thinking about the activities you engaged in as a part of the internship, how were these activities of the internship similar to or different from your expectations?
2. What recommendations do you have for future internship programs?
 - a. Probe: What topics would you recommend for future learning circles? Was the format effective?
 - b. Is there any other feedback you would like to provide regarding the learning circles?

Experience

1. How have your views of the nonprofit sector been affected by your participation in this internship?
 - a. Probe: How has the internship affected your desire to participate in the nonprofit sector?
 - b. Probe: Do you feel your experience interning has prepared you to seriously consider a career in the nonprofit sector?

Additional Comments

1. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to share with us about your internship experience?

Thank you for participating in this discussion!

Filename: Focus Groups Training Guide.doc
Directory: C:\Documents and Settings\BenjaminSieber\My
Documents\Bens\OMNI\RPS (Regional Prevention Services)\Needs Assessment
Workbook Tools
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\BenjaminSieber\Application
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot
Title: CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS
Subject:
Author:
Keywords:
Comments:
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