

CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE FOCUS GROUPS

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Focus groups serve a variety of purposes for the Human Resources professional. They can be used to gather feedback on pilot programs or to check the pulse of the workforce following a major change or reorganization. Focus groups can also be used as a vital and useful supplement to employee surveys. While surveys are most effective at providing quantifiable data, focus groups can be used to "enrich" these results by revealing the more qualitative perspectives underlying the numbers.

Although focus groups have multiple uses, there are some common guidelines for making them optimally effective. It's an easy thing to gather a group of employees in a room, ask a few questions and have a "discussion." It takes care, however, to ensure that the discussion yields reliable data that can serve as a basis for decision-making. A productive focus group is much more than a chat session. Too often, the assumption is made that if a group of people are gathered into a room, a collective and representative opinion will naturally emerge. However, principles of group dynamics suggest otherwise. In fact, it is safe to say that, left to chance, a focus group will almost certainly fail to live up to its potential.

The discussion below will focus on three important keys to conducting effective focus groups: adequate preparation prior to the session, effective facilitation and a sound process for conducting the actual session. The goal of a focus group is reliable, representative and actionable information. If appropriate attention is given to preparation, process and the facilitator's role, this goal is likely to be achieved.

Laying the Ground Work

Adequate preparation is the first and perhaps the simplest key to an effective focus group. Taking a few steps prior to the session can make a major difference. There are three tasks involved in preparing for a focus group: 1) selecting participants, 2) creating a purpose statement and 3) designing questions.

Because a focus group is intended to produce representative information, it is very important to select participants who adequately represent the employee population. Few companies can devote the resources required to meet with all employees. Even if this is possible, such "all hands" meetings are rarely conducted in a way that facilitates the sharing of representative perspectives. Developing a complete and thorough picture of the views and concerns of employees requires the level of interaction available via focus

groups.

To meet the challenge of gathering representative information while working within the constraints of available time and resources, a limited number of employees is selected. *Random selection* is used to ensure that a cross-section of employees will be selected to participate (random selection is a process in which every member of the group has an equal chance of being selected).

Along with random selection, an important consideration is *voluntary participation*. Employees who are selected at random should have the option of participating in a focus group. While the ideal is that all employees will be productive participants if called upon, the reality is that some simply will not be comfortable sharing their views in a group setting. By incorporating voluntary participation and random selection, focus groups will be both representative and include employees who are willing to share their views and opinions.

The mechanics of using random selection while ensuring voluntary participation are simple. First, a larger number of employees than is required are randomly selected. Then the first 10 to 12 are contacted regarding participation. When one of these employees declines, the next name on the list is contacted and so on until 10 to 12 employees have committed to participating in the focus group. (A word on group size: a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 12 is the rule of thumb).

The second task in preparing for a focus group is creating a purpose statement. Again, this is a simple task but one that should not be overlooked. The purpose statement provides a concise and clear rationale for conducting the session. It describes the "focus" of the focus group. For example, if a company intends to use focus groups to gather feedback regarding a new benefit plan, the following might be an appropriate purpose statement:

- To discover, clarify and record themes regarding employee perception of and reaction to the new benefit plan.

Question design is perhaps the most critical step in preparing for a focus group. The key here is specificity. Questions should be designed to solicit the views of participants regarding specific issues. General questions generate general thoughts. Specific questions generate specific thoughts and bring to light the detail necessary to define issues in such a way that effective action can be taken.

Consider the differences:

- "What do you folks think about the new benefit plan?"
- "What are the two most important changes in the new benefit plan?"

- "What is the most positive aspect of the new benefit plan and why?"

The first question, if asked of a group of employees, will most likely generate little more than shrugs. The other two questions, however, ask participants to categorize their thoughts around specific aspects of the topic. Using more specific questions incites the type of discussion that yields meaningful, rather than vague and general, information.

Facilitation: Make or Break

The facilitator plays a key role in a focus group. He or she does much more than merely ask questions. The facilitator is ultimately responsible for the outcome of the session. If the facilitator plays his or her role effectively, a meaningful result is much more likely.

Following are a few of the major tasks of this critical role:

Gate-Keeping. The facilitator invites (and limits, as appropriate) input to ensure that varying points of view are given an opportunity to be expressed. It is very easy in any group interaction for one or two points of view to dominate. In fact, this will be the most natural outcome if an intentional effort is not made toward balanced participation. Each participant must have an equal opportunity to share his or her views on the particular topic.

To achieve this balance, the facilitator must work toward establishing a "norm of participation." It is normal for at least some participants to be hesitant at the beginning of any group discussion. A good facilitator uses gate-keeping to invite participation in a non-threatening manner. Having each participant's name clearly displayed on a name tag or tent card so that he or she can be called on by name is useful. The facilitator can also help foster this norm of participation by calling on one or two participants he or she believes are likely to speak up without hesitation. Once others see that input is received without critique and that being called upon carries no embarrassing penalty, a balance of participation is much more likely.

Process Guarding. The facilitator must ensure that the focus group operates within its purpose and that the rules are followed (see below). The facilitator pays attention to process while allowing the participants to generate the content (actual views and opinions). Objectivity is extremely important. The facilitator must remain neutral while the group generates and clarifies its own views of the issue. A good facilitator simply refuses to give opinions or steer the group in any one way.

Interviewing. Asking good questions is perhaps the most important task of the facilitator. Starting the group off with thought-provoking questions helps to incite discussion. Following participant comments with related questions helps to foster reflection and insight. Sensitivity to participants is also important. The facilitator must be aware of when a participant's comment was perhaps misunderstood, when a participant may not have had ample opportunity to complete his or her thoughts or when a participant does

not seem to be saying what is on his or her mind. Probing questions (e.g., what, why, when) are useful here, as is the technique of paraphrasing and repeating back specific comments or emerging themes so that they may be clarified and validated.

Recording. This is the task of actual data collection during the focus group discussions. Comments are recorded as participants respond to the facilitator and to each other. During the discussion, as much of what is said as is possible should be recorded. Listing comments on flip charts in front of the room is a good practice since it allows participants to calibrate their thoughts with what has already been said. Recording detail at this point is important.

Following the focus group, the facilitator can review the recorded notes and synthesize participant comments. The goal here is to arrive at themes--perspectives on the topic that were shared by members of the group and are consistently reflected in the recorded comments. These themes may have been stated plainly or they may emerge as several seemingly unrelated comments. .

(Note: Separating the roles of facilitator and recorder can be an effective approach, especially if multiple focus groups are planned and a large amount of data will need to be recorded and subsequently synthesized.)

The Session: Process, Process, Process

As noted above, the facilitator is responsible for creating an environment in which participants can generate and share meaningful data. The facilitator ensures appropriate context so that participants can provide content. A sound process is key in developing the right context for a focus group. Random selection (with voluntary participation), specific questions, a purpose statement and the tasks of the facilitator are all critical components of this process. Three other components make the process complete: 1) rules of participation, 2) an agenda that includes an opening activity and 3) individual reflection prior to group discussions.

Participants who share their views, listen to one another and reflect on one another's comments make for the most productive focus groups. There are five rules of participation that help establish the parameters for this type of interaction. The five rules are as follows:

- Facilitator is neutral.
- Everyone participates.
- Listening is as important as talking.
- Disagreement and differences of opinion are good.

- Common courtesy is exhibited at all times.

Participants should understand that these rules represent expectations the facilitator has of them and that they have of one another and the facilitator. The rules apply to everyone involved in the focus group. The first two rules help define the two roles represented in the focus group. The final three rules are simple common sense guidelines for human interaction. If followed, they will result in creating an environment for the session in which participants feel safe in sharing their views and are given the opportunity to thoroughly articulate them.

An opening activity as part of the agenda has two primary objectives: to make participants comfortable and to stimulate thought regarding the topic at hand. This activity can be as simple as having the group break into pairs and share their views on a topic. A specific question can help facilitate the dialogue. For example, a question such as, "If you could make one point today about the new benefit plan, what point would you make?" might be helpful in stimulating these "mini-discussions."

Once participants are ready to actually begin the focus group, they should be given the opportunity to review each pre-designed question prior to it being addressed by the group as a whole. Two or three minutes of this quiet review allows each participant an opportunity to formulate his or her thoughts. Participants also can be encouraged to jot down notes during this individual time. This brief period of reflection provides the basis for balanced participation during the discussion.

Following is a simple outline for a focus group intended to assess employee reaction to a new benefit plan.

Session Outline

I. Purpose

- To discover, clarify and record themes regarding employee perception of and reaction to the new benefit plan.

II. Opening Activity

- Pairs discussion: "If you could make one point today about the new benefit plan, what would that point be?"

III. Rules

- Facilitator is neutral.
- Everyone participates.

- Listening is as important as talking.
- Disagreement and differences of opinion are good.
- Common courtesy is exhibited at all times.

IV. Discussion

- Presentation of question.
- Individual review (2 minutes).
- Discussion.

Summary

The focus group is one of the best data collection tools available to the HR professional. The interaction of employees in a group setting can yield rich information that provides a thorough understanding of issues and serves as a basis for action planning. The keys discussed above can be used to help ensure that a focus group achieves its potential. In summary, here once again are the key steps toward a successful focus group:

- Select participants randomly but allow for voluntary participation.
- Develop a clear and concise purpose statement.
- Devote sufficient attention prior to the session to designing specific questions.
- Practice the key tasks of effective facilitation.
- Communicate and follow the rules.
- Use an opening activity to generate participation and focus thoughts on the topic.
- Allow for individual reflection prior to group discussion.

Thanks to Terry R. Satterfield, SPHR for writing this article. It is intended as information, and is not a substitute for legal or other professional advice.

For more information on this subject, send an e-mail to the SHRM Information Center at infocen@shrm.org, please [click here](#) to ask the Information Center for help.

