

FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR INFORMATION SHEET

Focus groups are structured conversations to explore people's attitudes and key concerns. People interact differently in groups than one-on-one, so managing group dynamics is a key part of a focus group moderator's role. This requires the moderator to be well prepared and practiced in a number of soft skills. Key aspects of each step of preparing and moderating a focus group are covered below.

PREPARING FOR A FOCUS GROUP

- Ideal number of participants is six to eight, and no more than 10.
- Ideal length of time is 60 to 90 minutes. You might consider providing a break if the topic is intense (or for online workshops).
- Make sure your questions are open ended. You want to open up the conversation to get people's opinions; and encourage discussion
- Anticipate and develop response protocols for adverse or risky situations that might arise. This is particularly important when you are discussing sensitive subjects. For example, how will you respond if someone becomes distressed? (We suggest allowing them to take a break, then checking if they want to continue; it may also be appropriate to connect them to a support person following the interview, with their permission.)
- Prepare the environment, ensuring participants will be comfortable. Think of the focus group moderator as the 'host', responsible for welcoming participants, and making them feel at home. If you're running the group face to face, think about seating – people are generally more comfortable around a table, with the moderator sitting among the participants, rather than at one end of the table. Also ensure participants know where bathrooms/ beverages etc are.
- Sometimes it is appropriate to have activities during the focus groups, e.g., with younger people; activities can increase the interest level of participants while also providing another way to express opinions rather than talking – for example, using post-it notes, drawing, sorting cards, voting with stickers. Prepare any items you will need for activities ahead of time.

OPENING A SESSION

"The first few moments of a focus group are critical. In a brief time, the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide ground rules, and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to the development of this open environment." (Krueger & Casey, 2015)

When opening your focus group, there are a few things you'll want to explain.

- The research and why participants were invited

- Your role as moderator and what you will be doing
- The need for confidentiality – what is raised in the room, stays in the room.
- Any other important ground rules for the conversation – for example, giving everyone a chance to speak, respecting differences of opinion and no right or wrong answers
- How the information will be used and written up (no individuals will be identified in the report or other documents)
- Whether it is OK to record

Next, you may want to ask people to introduce themselves. One of the best ways to do this is to ask people to say their name and answer an innocuous question that will get everyone talking. Ideally, stick to factual questions that are easy to answer, and will not set any one individual apart from the group. For example, How long have you been living around here?

If you really want to get a general sense of the perspective of all group members on key questions, build this into your interview guide. One way we do this is through 'sociometry.'¹ This means asking a question that can be answered on a response scale (such as, know a lot to know nothing about this topic, or very confident to not all confident, or strongly disagree to strongly agree this is a good idea) and asking them to stand (or indicate on left to right of a screen if you are conducting a session online) where they would answer along the response scale.

This gives you a chance to see the perspective of all group members. You can then ask a few people at different points in the scale to share their thinking. This process also creates space for divergent views.

DURING THE SESSION

The moderator's primary role is to direct the discussion, listen insightfully – drawing out the meaning of participants' statements – and keep the conversation flowing. They exercise mild, unobtrusive control over the group.

They must keep an eye on the time and how much time is allocated for each section of questions. But if really good information is coming out from one group of questions, a good moderator may choose to spend longer on those (and shorter time on others).

It's important to know before starting, what are the **key questions** that must be answered and make sure you cover those.

Successful moderators:

- are animated, spontaneous and respond flexibly to the group dynamic—they go where the energy is
- are aware of participants' levels of comfort
- are empathetic (understand how others feel and see life from their perspective, without judgement)
- are curious about the topic and the participants
- respect participants and their time
- have a friendly manner and sense of humour

¹ Concept courtesy of Vic McWaters, Creative Facilitation.

- let the participants do the talking and gently steer the conversation
- don't rush to fill silences, but do use body language/ gestures to encourage speakers
- are in a mindful state of alertness, free from distractions, anxieties, or pressures that would limit their ability to think quickly while remaining present and listening
- don't read out questions (which stops flow of conversation) – it's OK to glance at them occasionally!
- don't give their own opinions, and can note their own biases if appropriate
- listen for 'sticky points', friction, power imbalances, and differences, and draws them out for discussion (where appropriate, and with attention to not isolating individuals)
- pay attention to non-verbal communication – gestures, facial expressions, etc., that indicate participants' levels of comfort, and engagement or feeling about what others are saying
- know how to have a 'meta-discussion' – a conversation about the conversation (or about *how* participants are talking). For example, "I noticed you were looking a lot at [other participant] a lot while we talked about that topic – is that something you work on together?" You can learn a lot about acknowledging what you're noticing about them in the conversation²
- listen openly and deeply
- check they understand meaning by stating back participants' views in their own words
- give everyone the chance to participate - ask 'what do others think?'
- are non-judgemental – controls body language so restricts head nodding, avoids saying 'good', 'correct', etc.
- probe deeper when they don't understand the answer, comments are inconsistent or unclear (e.g., if the participant is speaking in the abstract and you're not sure how it translates to the concrete, ask them 'Can you give me some examples?')
- create the space for all participants to have their say - if someone dominates/ tries to dominate it's okay to cut them off 'thanks for that, that's really valuable feedback – does anyone else have something to say about that/ add?'. It's also important to be able to draw out participants who may be hesitant to express or defend opinions.

CLOSING A SESSION

- At the end of the group, give a short (two or three minute) summary of main points and ask if this perception is correct – invite comments, amendments, or corrections
- A good question to ask towards the end of a discussion guide is: What, if anything, have we missed today? Is there anything you thought we'd ask about that we haven't?
- Thank people for participating. Note any next steps, e.g., if they will be provided with feedback on the session to review, etc.

TIPS FOR A GREAT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

- Aim to keep your list of questions as concise as you can. Focus group discussion guides with too many questions can make people feel like they're doing a survey rather than participating in a discussion. As a guide, for a 60-minute group discussion involving six to eight people, you probably want to ask no more than six questions.
- Ask open-ended questions and use prompts and further questioning to gently bring people to the topic. Most human thought is visual, metaphorical, and emotional;

² <https://transom.org/2021/treat-an-interview-like-a-relationship/>

accessing these mental zones typically requires subtle, indirect approaches to asking questions. Consider how you might use non-verbal techniques that involve visualisations or role-playing to deepen engagement.³

- Consider having a series of prompts underneath your high-level questions. Think of these probes as helping you explore people's responses, making sure you build a deep understanding of the issues.

MORE RESOURCES

- Moderating Focus Groups (35 minute video):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjHZsEcSqwo>
- Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey. 2015. Focus Group Interviewing Methods (30 page guide with text examples of aspects of focus group moderation)
<https://richardmaryanne.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/notes-focus-group-interviewing-research-methods.doc>

³ David W. Stewart and Prem N. Shamdasani. 2011. Focus Groups, Sage