

# FOCUS GROUPS



## *What is it?*

**A focus group is a small group discussion** with professional leadership. A carefully selected group of individuals convenes to discuss and give opinions on a single topic. Participants are selected in two ways: random selection is used to assure representation of all segments of a population; non-random selection helps elicit a particular position or point of view.

### **Basic features:**

- A carefully-crafted agenda, with five or six major questions at most;
- Emphasis on gathering perspectives, insights, and opinions of participants through conversation and interaction;
- Identification of major points of agreement and divergence of opinion;
- Minimal presentation of material to set context and subject;
- Gleaning, not shaping, of opinions or perspectives;
- Eight to twelve participants

## *Why is it useful?*

**A focus group leader explores attitudes in depth** through follow-up questions. It offers an opportunity to get behind people's expressed attitudes and assess policy directions and program objectives. It is a chance to review allocation of resources. It helps confirm or deny established goals or set new directions.

**Informality encourages full participation.** The small size of the group lowers barriers to speaking out. A focus group is a place for people to speak out without criticism of their comments. Spontaneity in responding produces fresh information. Participants are not required to prepare for the discussion

**A focus group supplements other forms of employee involvement.** It serves the narrowly defined need for direct and informal opinion on a specific topic. For broad participation from all employees on the same or other topics, alternative forms of involvement are used.

## *Who participates? How?*

Depending on the goals to be achieved, a focus group is heterogeneous (with a variety of people from different backgrounds) or homogeneous. Members may be randomly selected or invited from previously identified, non-random groups.

Individuals within the group may react to others' opinions or bring up their own ideas. The facilitator of the group guides discussion to cover all agenda items and assure that all individuals get a chance to speak

A purpose for the group is clearly identified beforehand. Its agenda fits closely within the information needs of a larger project or program. Opinions derived from the group inform the larger effort.

### ***Who leads a focus group?***

**A focus group needs a facilitator.** The facilitator is essential to hold the group to the agenda and elicit opinions from each participant. In some cases, the facilitator is essential to keep a single participant from dominating the proceedings. In other instances, opinions may be lost in a sea of anecdotes unless the facilitator firmly steers the group toward the agenda. (See Facilitation.)

**A facilitator needs guidance on the agenda and purpose** of the focus group. The sponsor can provide sample questions for the group to the facilitator. The sponsor may be present at the group in a non-participatory function or as an outside observer. During a break in the discussion, the sponsor may confer with the facilitator to assure that all agenda topics are covered.

### ***What are the costs?***

**A focus group is relatively inexpensive** compared with the costs and effort involved in administering a full opinion survey. It consumes less time in both implementation and analysis. Extensive statistical analysis is not required, because a focus group provides only qualitative information. However, organizations often choose an outside firm to provide a paid, neutral facilitator.

**A focus group need not be time-consuming.** Meetings are seldom longer than two or three hours. For the participants' convenience, it may be held after work hours. Schedules can be tailored to fit needs of participants and the sponsoring agency. If required, a focus group can be organized within a matter of weeks following a decision to proceed. It takes a moderate to long amount of time to select, invite, and confirm participants. The time required to prepare focus group agendas and questions is not major if an experienced facilitator is available to work with the sponsor.

### ***What are the drawbacks?***

**A focus group provides solely qualitative responses.** It is not statistically representative of society at large, because a focus group includes only a sample of the community.

**A focus group brings no consensus.** Potentially opposing groups do not deliberate important issues. The goal is to obtain opinions—not disseminate information. Specific viewpoints of individuals or the groups they represent are the principal product of a focus group meeting. Thus, the results are used as a guideline for further thinking and analysis.