

Notes For Conducting Focus Group Methodologies

A Focus group is a planned, focused discussion involving a small group of people and facilitated by an interviewer. It is designed to obtain perceptions on a defined topic theme in a permissive, non-threatening environment. The technique was developed as a way of getting beneath of surface. It represents a qualitative research technique. Focus groups enable participants to explore issues, feelings, and opinions more widely and deeply than is usually possible in a structured interview or formal public meeting. It is particularly useful in the following situations -

- to obtain a range of opinions / perceptions on a theme
- to identify strengths and weaknesses in programmes / services
- to inform decisions about where to make improvements
- to stimulate new ideas
- to interpret research and surveys
- to inform policy decision.

A number of factors have been identified that maximises successful outcomes -

- involve an interviewer / facilitator who is knowledgeable about the subject material as well as skilled in group facilitation
- create a relaxed informal atmosphere
- define clearly the purpose of the meeting
- limit the number of participants to between seven and nine
- use a round-table seating configuration
- follow a predetermined format with a set of structured questions
- define clear objective(s) for the meeting
- ensure group agrees to a set of discussion ground rules
- ensure questions are -
 - open ended
 - focused
 - move from the general to the specific
 - simple and comprehensible
- ensure the meeting is fun and participants feel appreciated and positive about participation
- set and stick to an agreed time arrangement - monitor time closely
- keep discussion on track
- encourage participants to talk to each other, not to facilitator
- watch out for group domination and the loss of input from quieter people
- encourage divergent thought by giving individuals permission to have different views from the rest of the group
- ensure meeting is not a forum for bitter arguments, public speeches and confrontations between participants - steer conversation away from such potential situations
- keep a record of discussion - use a scribe who does not participate in discussion
- summarise often.