

Sample Focus Group Protocol

Much of the following protocol comes directly from Donaldson and Franck's "Needs Assessment Guidebook for Extension Professionals" (2016).

Preparation

When planning and preparing for focus groups, consider the following:

- Secure a location that will be comfortable for the specific group you're expecting. Some groups may not be comfortable in a government building, for example, so be sensitive to those dynamics when selecting a location.
- Set up the room so that groups of seven to 10 people plus a moderator and recorder/note taker can interact comfortably. Round tables are good options for this. Also provide name tags and refreshments.
- Ensure that you have at least one recorder or note taker per group, and that these individuals have the equipment or supplies they need to record or take notes.
- If you think the focus groups may go longer than one hour, plan for a break after an hour.
- Review the list of "Moderator Best Practices" at the end of this protocol.

Introduction

The introduction sets the tone for the focus group. The moderator introduces her/himself and any others who are playing a working role in the activities (i.e., recorders, moderators). Also cover the following:

- Background: provide a high-level background about CSUE, including our mission to "empower Coloradans to address important and emerging community issues using dynamic, science-based educational resources."
- Purpose of the event: explain that the purpose of the focus group is to understand your perspectives on the issue or populations they've been chosen to represent so that CSUE can more clearly understand specific community needs.
- Confidentiality: explain that we have recorders/note takers because we want to make sure to capture your experiences and ideas. **That said, everything that you say is confidential. We ask that you do not share what others have discussed with people outside of this group.**
- Length of the focus group: Reiterate the agenda and time boundaries of the focus group, including any planned breaks.

Ground Rules

1. First, there are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your opinions and perspectives on the needs of your community.
2. Second, you do not have to agree with everyone else in this room if that is not how you really feel. We expect people will have different views on these questions.
3. Third, we want you to feel comfortable saying good things as well as critical things. We are not here to promote a particular way of thinking. We just want to understand your viewpoints.
4. Fourth, we ask that you talk one at a time.
5. Consider other ground rules (such as turning cell phones off if possible) or opening it up to the group to suggest other ground rules (time permitting).

Sample Questions for an Issues-based Focus Group

1. I would like to start by learning more about each other. Can you introduce yourself and provide a little background on your work or experience with X issue?
2. Based on your background and experience, what do you see as some of the contributing factors associated with this particular issue in our community?
3. Are you aware of others who are working to address this issue/these issues, including potential partners for CSUE?
4. Knowing what you do about CSUE, can you suggest any kinds of strategies for us to develop and/or deliver educational resources to address this issue? Please feel free to suggest bold opportunities for how we might work in new ways.
5. If we were to develop and/or deliver these educational resources, what kinds of barriers come to mind about how people may find and access them?

Sample Questions for a Demographic-based Focus Group

1. I would like to start by learning more about each other. Can you introduce yourself and provide a little background on your work or experience with Y demographic?
2. Based on your background and experience, what do you see as some of the main issues facing this demographic in our community?
3. Can you think of any contributing factors associated with these issues (such as mental health being one possible contributing factor to homelessness)?
4. Are you aware of others who are working to address these issues, including potential partners for CSUE?
5. Knowing what you do about CSUE, can you suggest any kinds of strategies for us to develop and/or deliver educational resources to address these issues? Please feel free to suggest bold opportunities for how we might work in new ways.
6. If we were to develop and/or deliver these educational resources, what kinds of barriers come to mind about how people may find and access them?

When developing your own custom questions to ask, open-ended questions are best. For example:

- “Where does your child do homework?” rather than “Does your child do homework in your car on the way to school?”
- “What do you like best about...?” and “Think back...” questions usually work well.
- Question order needs to be logical; ordering questions from general to specific works well.
- Many focus groups use fewer than 10 questions.
- Avoid “Why” questions — Instead of “Why did you attend the Grain Conference?” ask, “What prompted you to attend the Grain Conference?”

Closing

To close, thank the participants for sharing their experiences and perspectives. Thank the moderators and recorders/note takers. End with an opportunity for participants to ask questions of you, time permitting.

Moderator Skills

The person conducting the focus group will be referred to as the ‘moderator.’ The first skill in moderating is the ability to “initiate and maintain a conversation with a stranger” (Frey & Oishi, 1995). A good moderator uses the following skills:

- Be mentally prepared.
 - Be alert, friendly and free from distractions.
 - Listen.
 - Be completely familiar with questions.
- Discourage any controlling talkers.
 - Look at other participants.
 - Look down while they are talking.
 - Cross your hands.
 - Change your posture.
 - Shuffle your notes.
 - More direct techniques — “Let’s take the next four minutes to silently write ideas for this question. [After four minutes] Now, I would like each person to share one idea at a time.”
- Control your reactions.
 - Remain neutral; don’t evaluate or judge in any capacity.
 - Keep your opinion to yourself.
 - Never say “that’s good” or “excellent.” Nod your head to encourage dialogue but don’t show agreement with an idea.
 - Think about what you are communicating verbally and nonverbally.
- Keep listening.
 - Do not defend or justify.
 - If a participant seems especially emotional (angry, euphoric, etc.), ask the person to describe how they feel.
 - Validate by saying, “I understand why you would feel that way. Tell me more.”
 - Validate by saying, “We’re trying to get as much information as possible, so I appreciate you. Would anyone else like to share?”
- Offer appropriate questions.
 - Use pauses and probes.
 - Ask your question then pause.
 - Don’t talk to fill the silence — allow people to think about the question.
 - After someone stops speaking and no one else responds, wait 5 seconds, then call on someone else to comment.
 - Probes:
 - “Would you explain further?”
 - “Tell me more.” or “Would you provide an example?”
 - “I don’t understand. Tell me more.”
 - Repeat the question.
 - Repeat the reply.
- Be flexible and consistent.
 - Moderators balance flexibility in questioning with consistency between and among different focus groups.
 - If everyone has spoken, ask if there’s anything else, then move on to the next question.

Participants should be having a conversation with each other; you are listening to that conversation.