

Focus Group Checklist

Consider the following items when you plan focus groups and develop focus group guides.

Advance Notice

- Contact participants 1–2 weeks before the session.
- Send each participant a letter of invitation.
- Give the participants a reminder prior to the session.
- Over-recruit the number of participants necessary for each focus group by three to five participants.

Logistics

- Make sure the room is satisfactory (e.g., size, tables, comfort).
- Arrive early to make necessary changes.
- Eliminate background noise as much as possible.
- Bring name tags for participants.
- Bring extra supplies such as tapes, batteries, note pads, and extension cords.
- Seat loud/disruptive participants next to the moderator.
- Seat shy and quiet participants directly across from the moderator.
- Serve refreshments before discussions begin.
- Bring enough copies of handouts and/or visual aids.

Questions

- The introductory questions should be answered quickly and should not identify personal characteristics of participants.
- Questions should flow in a logical sequence.
- Key questions should focus on the critical issues of concern.
- Consider probing or followup questions.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Provide a summary of the discussion and invite comments.

Moderator Skills

- Be well rested and alert for the focus group session.
- Practice the introduction without referring to your notes.
- Make sure the participants are comfortable and relaxed.
- Ask questions with minimal reference to your notes.
- Be careful to avoid head nodding (i.e., showing support or favoritism for answers).
- Avoid comments that signal approval (e.g., “Excellent,” “Great,” “Wonderful”).
- Avoid giving personal opinions.

Immediately After the Session

- Prepare a brief written summary of key points as soon as possible.
- Check to see if the tape recorder captured the comments.

Focus Group Guide

Introduction

Start with an introduction of yourself and any other colleagues. Identify the sponsoring program and evaluation company (if appropriate), and state the purpose of the focus group, promising confidentiality and inviting participation. Keep the introduction short (approximately 3–5 minutes).

Example

Good afternoon. My name is Martha Zamder and this is my colleague Randy Xyler (e.g., the recorder). Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion today. We are here to talk about your ideas for improving the services your program currently provides to victims.

Mr. Xyler will be taking notes and tape recording the discussion so that I do not miss anything you have to say, as I explained when we scheduled this meeting. As I mentioned, everything we discuss today is confidential. No one will know who said what. I want this to be a group discussion, so feel free to respond openly and freely (i.e., without waiting to be called on). However, I would appreciate it if only one person speaks at a time. The discussion will last approximately 1 hour. We have a lot to discuss, so at times I may move us along a bit.

Opening Questions

Have participants introduce themselves in a manner that allows them to answer quickly, build rapport, and convey facts rather than opinions.

Example

Now, let's start by everyone stating their name, what they do, and how long they have been with the program.

Introductory Questions

Introduce the general topic of discussion, provide participants with an opportunity to reflect on past experiences and their connection with the overall topic of the focus group. This helps foster conversation and interaction among participants.

Example

I want each of you to think of an adjective that best described your service delivery approach 2 years ago and one that describes it now. If you do not think your approach has changed, you may select one adjective. We're going to go around the room so you can share your choices. Please briefly explain why you selected the adjective(s) you did.

Key Questions

These questions drive the focus group; the number of questions varies, but typically ranges between four and five. The questions are designed to obtain answers at the heart of your evaluation and require the greatest attention.

Example

What types of standards-based practice have you exposed your clients to? If none, why not?

Would you have exposed your clients to these approaches if you had not participated in the trainings? (Probes: Where would you have gotten this information? How would the information have been different?)

Of the strategies introduced to you during the trainings, which ones have you applied to your approach? (Probes: Tell me about how you have used this strategy. Of the strategies not mentioned, Has anyone tried _____? Tell me why not.)

Of these strategies, which ones have been most effective? (Probes: Tell me why you think they have been effective.)

Which have you found to be least effective? (Probes: Tell me why you think they have not been effective. It's interesting, _____ found that strategy to be effective, what do you think may account for the difference?)

What areas do you feel you need more training in? (Probes: Why do you say that? What would be the best avenue(s) for receiving that training?)

Ending Questions

These questions bring closure to the discussion, enable participants to reflect on their participation, and may include an “all things considered” question that allows participants to state their final position on critical areas of concern. After summarizing the discussion, it is important to ask, “Have we missed anything?”

Example

Sounds like the training provided invaluable strategies for improving program service delivery. Does anyone want to say anything else about this issue that we did not cover earlier or that they did not get a chance to say earlier?