1 Overview of Focus Groups

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- The Focus Group Is a Special Type of Group
- The Story Behind Focus Group Interviews
- Why Do Focus Groups Work?
- Characteristics of Focus Groups
- The Uses of Focus Groups
- How Focus Groups Can Be Used With Other Research Methods
- Criticisms of Focus Groups

Being in groups is a common experience. We find ourselves invited, herded, or seduced into groups for planning, decision making, advising, brainstorming, learning, sharing, or self-help. Groups can be fun and fruitful; they can also be agonizing experiences that are unnecessary, unproductive, and time-consuming.

We believe there are two reasons that group experiences turn into wasted time: an unclear purpose or inappropriate processes. The purpose of the group may be to suggest ideas, to clarify potential options, to nominate candidates, to react to ideas, to recommend a course of action, to make a decision, to plan, or to evaluate. Each purpose is considerably different from the others. If leaders aren't clear about the purpose of the group, or if they say it is one thing but lead the group in another direction, people get confused and frustrated. It is tough to fulfill your purpose if you don't know what it is.

Even if the leader is clear about the purpose, he or she may not have the skills needed to guide the group. Group process skills are essential if the group is to accomplish its purpose. But, the skills necessary for leading one type of group experience may not work in another. The processes used to get participants' reactions to ideas are different from the processes used for group decision making. The purpose of this book is to help you—the reader—learn to do focus group research. We share what we have learned—what has worked for us. We hope that, as a result, you will be clearer about the purpose of focus groups and the processes used to conduct focus group research.

The Focus Group Is a Special Type of Group

A focus group isn't just getting a bunch of people together to talk. A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. The purpose of conducting a focus group is to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service. Focus groups are used to gather opinions.

Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. The researcher creates a permissive environment that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus. And the researcher doesn't do just one focus group. The group discussion is conducted several times with similar types of participants, so the researcher can identify trends and patterns in perceptions. Then, careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provides clues and insights as to how an idea, product, service, or opportunity is perceived by members of the groups.

A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. Each group is conducted with 5 to 10 people led by a skilled interviewer or moderator. The discussions are relaxed, and often, participants enjoy sharing their ideas and perceptions.

The Story Behind Focus Group Interviews

The label *focus groups* has been applied to many different group encounters. We have heard town meetings, reading groups, and study circles called focus groups. A local newspaper ran a photograph of a man dressed in a suit standing in front of a school auditorium full of people. The caption said it was a focus group. These aren't focus groups. They don't contain the essential elements of focus group interviewing.

In the late 1930s, social scientists began investigating alternative ways of conducting interviews. Some social scientists doubted the accuracy of information gathered through traditional individual interviews that used a predetermined questionnaire with closed-ended response choices. This approach had a major disadvantage: The respondent was limited to the choices offered, and therefore, the findings could be unintentionally influenced by the interviewer through oversight or omission. Stuart A. Rice (1931) was one of the first social scientists to express concern. He wrote:

> A defect of the interview for the purposes of factfinding in scientific research, then, is that the questioner takes the lead. That is, the subject plays a more or less passive role. Information or points of view of the highest value may not be disclosed because the direction given the interview by the questioner leads away from them. In short, data obtained from an interview are as likely to embody the preconceived ideas of the interviewer as the attitudes of the subject interviewed. (p. 561)

As a result, social scientists began exploring strategies whereby the researcher would take on a less directive and dominating role. Respondents would be able to comment on the areas they thought were most important. In effect, the emphasis of nondirective interviewing was to shift attention from the interviewer to the respondent, placing considerable emphasis on getting in tune with the reality of the interviewee. Nondirective interviews used open-ended questions and allowed individuals to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories. The open-ended approach allowed the subject ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes. Nondirective interviewing increased in appeal in the late 1930s and 1940s. Roethlisberger and Dickson (1938) cited it in studies of employee motivation and Carl Rogers (1942) in psychotherapy.

During World War II, social scientists began using the nondirective interviewing technique in groups—this was the beginning of focus groups. In one of the first focus group studies, Robert Merton explored morale in the U.S. military for the War Department. He found that people revealed sensitive information when they felt they were in a safe, comfortable place with people like themselves. Many of the procedures that have come to be accepted as common practice in focus group interviews were set forth in the classic work by Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall (1956) in *The Focused Interview*.

Although Merton was a respected sociologist, most academics did not embrace the focused interview. In fact, Merton’s pioneering work laid dormant in the social sciences for decades. The acceptance of focus groups, and of qualitative research methods in general, was stymied in academic circles for a variety of reasons including a preoccupation with quantitative procedures, assumptions about the nature of reality, and a societal tendency to believe in numbers. Social science research paid attention to experimental designs, control groups, and randomization. This sojourn with numbers has been beneficial in that we gained in our experimental sophistication, and it also has nurtured a desire for more understanding of the human experience. Too often, quantitative studies were based on imperfect assumptions about people, about things, or about reality in general.

Even though academics weren't interested in focus groups, market researchers embraced focus groups beginning in the 1950s. Business was booming after the war, and market researchers were charged with finding out how to make their companies' products attractive to potential customers. Businesses used focus groups to design new products, improve existing products, understand customers, and test advertising campaigns. The sensible strategy was to listen to people and stay in touch with current and potential customers. For example, soft drink companies discovered via focus groups that consumers often drink beverages because of the sociability features associated with the product, not because they are thirsty. It is no wonder then that slogans promoting these beverages highlight how "things go better" or bring about increased personal popularity on the beach (Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstrucker, 1976). Focus group interviews are widely accepted within marketing research because they produce useful results at a reasonable cost.

Since the 1950s, a whole industry has been created to support for-profit focus group research. In every major city across the United States, there are market research firms that provide services relating to focus groups: finding the right participants, recruiting them, providing rooms with one-way mirrors and video and audio recording options, arranging for catering services for clients and groups. In every major city, there are also professional focus group moderators who spend their lives conducting focus groups for businesses. Most of these professionals learned to do focus groups through apprenticeships. Initially, the technique was used to get information from white, middle-class people with disposable incomes.

Academics rediscovered focus group interviewing in the 1980s, often learning from market researchers. But, some of the accepted practices in business focus groups just didn't work well in academic or nonprofit settings. Academics took the strategies used in market research and adapted the technique to work in other settings. These scholars also returned to the work of Robert Merton to learn how the technique was originally used.

There are several approaches to focus group interviewing. Consumer-oriented, market research focus groups use different strategies than focus groups conducted for academic or scientific purposes. Academic focus groups might use different strategies than those conducted in nonprofit and public environments. And focus groups conducted in a participatory research environment, where community members or volunteers are involved as researchers in the study, use different strategies. Yet another approach is used in international environments, where major disparities occur between the sponsor and the participants in terms of culture, language, income, and traditions. Other approaches continue to

evolve and employ telephones or the Internet instead of face-to-face discussions. Each approach is distinctive, but they all have common elements of focus group research. These different approaches are discussed in greater length in Chapter 8.

Why Do Focus Groups Work?

Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected, and free to give their opinions without being judged. The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. We want to know what people really think and feel. For some individuals, self-disclosure comes easily—it is natural and comfortable. But for others, it is difficult and requires trust, effort, and courage. Or disclosure may be easy in some settings but not others. Children have a natural tendency to disclose things about themselves, but through socialization, they learn the value of dissemblance. Over time, the natural and spontaneous disclosures of children are modified by social pressure. Sidney Jourard (1964) expands on this tendency:

> As children we are, and we act, our real selves. We say what we think, we scream for what we want, we tell what we did. These spontaneous disclosures meet variable consequences—some disclosures are ignored, some rewarded, and some punished. Doubtless in accordance with the laws of reinforcement, we learn early to withhold certain disclosures because of the painful consequences to which they lead. We are punished in our society, not only for what we actually do, but also for what we think, feel, or want. Very soon, then, the growing child learns to display a highly expurgated version of his self to others. I have coined the term “public self” to refer to the concept of oneself which one wants others to believe. (p. 10)

A familiar story, especially for mothers, is that of a child running home to tell of an exciting and possibly a dangerous experience. Mom is horrified at the tale and tells the child to never, never do that again. Mom’s unexpected response leaves an indelible impression, and the child learns one of two things: Either never repeat the experience or, if you do, don’t tell Mom!

A young mother was visiting the Sunday school class of her 6-year-old daughter. The lesson was on proper behavior in church. The teacher asked the children to name places where we should not run. Kids waved their hands wildly, and the teacher called on one child at a time. The children offered their answers—school, the library, grocery store—but no one mentioned church. The visiting mother proudly noticed that her daughter’s hand was still waving in the air, undoubtedly armed with the answer the

teacher sought. Finally, the teacher called on the daughter. With great enthusiasm, the 6-year-old responded, “The liquor store—my dad said that I should never run in the liquor store because I’ll knock down the bottles.” The mother was momentarily speechless, as liquor stores were held in disrepute by this church. The child had not yet developed a public self, at least as far as the church was concerned.

So when do people self-disclose? When do they say what they really think and feel? When they feel comfortable. Think about bus, train, or plane rides. People are seated close to strangers for hours. It is not unusual for travelers to strike up a conversation where they share information about themselves. In some circumstances, travelers reveal information to strangers—personal attitudes and feelings about work, family, or life that they might not share with acquaintances. People are more likely to share when they perceive that they are alike in some ways. It may be that they have one or more characteristics in common, such as age, gender, occupation, marital status, or hold similar attitudes on a topic of discussion. Jourard (1964) has found that individuals decide to reveal based on their perceptions of the people they are with. In his studies of self-disclosure, he found that “subjects tended to disclose more about themselves to people who resembled them in various ways than to people who differ from them” (p. 15).

Our goal is to create a comfortable, permissive environment in focus groups. Occasionally, the focus group is composed of strangers—people who probably won’t see each other again. In other situations, the participants may be acquainted. But, we always select participants who have something in common, and we emphasize that aspect in our introduction. In a focus group, the interviewer underscores the commonality of the group by saying something like this: “You were invited because you have certain things in common that we’re interested in. You all farm within this watershed, and you’ve all tried different soil conservation measures. We want to tap into those experiences.”

The interviewer is not in a position of power or influence. The interviewer encourages comments of all types—positive and negative. The interviewer is careful not to make judgments about the responses and to control body language that might communicate approval or disapproval. The role of the moderator is to ask questions, listen, keep the conversation on track, and make sure everyone has a chance to share.

The groups are held in locations where the participants will be comfortable. This will be different for teens than for corporate employees. It may be someone’s home, the church basement, a pizza joint, a community center, a neighborhood coffee shop, or a business conference room. Often, when talking to participants, we call it a small group discussion rather than a focus group, so the process doesn’t seem intimidating or like a big mystery to people. We try to make people feel comfortable.

Characteristics of Focus Groups

Focus group interviews typically have five characteristics or features. These characteristics relate to the ingredients of a focus group: (1) a small group of people, who (2) possess certain characteristics, (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest. Other types of group processes used in human services (delphic, brainstorming, nominal, planning, therapeutic, sensitivity, advisory, etc.) may also have one or more of these features but not in the same combination as focus group interviews.

Focus Groups Involve People

Focus groups are typically composed of 5 to 8 people, but the size can range from as few as 4 to as many as 12. The group must be small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions. When the group exceeds a dozen participants, there is a tendency for the group to fragment. Participants want to talk but are unable to do so because there is just not a sufficient pause in the conversation. In these situations, the only recourse is for participants to share by whispering to the people next to them. This is a signal that the group is too big. Small groups of four or five participants afford more opportunity to share ideas, but the restricted size also results in a smaller pool of total ideas. These smaller groups—sometimes called *mini-focus groups*—have a distinct advantage in logistics. Groups of four or five can easily be accommodated in restaurants, homes, and other environments where space is at a premium. The quality of the discussion is greatly affected by the group size. This is examined in detail in Chapter 4.

The focus group is not an open meeting. Participants are invited to participate. The invitation ensures that participants have the required characteristics and that the group is the right size. This is in contrast to public forums or meetings where anyone and everyone can attend.

The People Possess Certain Characteristics

Focus groups are composed of participants who are similar to each other in a way that is important to the researcher. The nature of this homogeneity is determined by the purpose of the study. This similarity is a basis for recruitment, and participants are typically informed of these common factors at the beginning of the discussion.

This homogeneity can be broadly or narrowly defined. For example, suppose an adult community education program wanted to know more about how to reach people who haven't participated in their programs. In this case, homogeneity could be defined broadly as adults who live in the community who have not yet attended community education sessions. Group members could vary by age, gender, occupation, and interests, but they have the commonality of being adults, community members, and nonusers. If, however, the community education staff are interested in attracting more parents of children under 5, or residents in specific neighborhoods, or people who work at home, then the researcher would use a narrower definition of homogeneity in selecting participants. The issue is, then, who can give you the type of information you need.

Focus Groups Provide Qualitative Data

The goal of a focus group is to collect data that is of interest to the researcher—typically to find the range of opinions of people across several groups. The researcher compares and contrasts data from across groups. In order to do this, at least three groups are needed. This differs from other group interactions where the goal is to come to some conclusion at the end of a discussion—reach consensus, provide recommendations, or make decisions among alternatives. The data in the focus group are solicited through open-ended questions. The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others—just as they are in life. The researcher serves several functions in the focus group: moderator, listener, observer, and eventually analyst.

Focus Groups Have a Focused Discussion

The questions in a focus group are carefully predetermined and sequenced. The questions are phrased and sequenced, so they are easy to understand and logical to the participant. The moderator uses open-ended questions. These questions appear spontaneous but are carefully developed after considerable reflection and input. The set of questions—called the *questioning route* or *interview guide*—is arranged in a natural, logical sequence. Questions near the beginning of the group are more general. As the group continues, the questions become more specific—more focused. The beginning questions help get people talking and thinking about the topic. Questions near the end of the group typically yield the most useful information. There is no pressure by the moderator to have the group reach consensus. Instead, attention is placed on understanding the feelings, comments, and thought processes of participants as they discuss the issues.

The Uses of Focus Groups

Focus groups work particularly well to explore perceptions, feelings, and thinking about issues, ideas, products, services, or opportunities. Here are some of the ways the information gathered in focus groups is used. These categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive or all inclusive. Instead, they present a beginning way to think of the variety of uses of focus group interviewing.

Focus Groups Can Help With Decision Making

Earlier we said focus groups aren't used for decision making. Now, we're saying they are. Here is the difference: When using focus groups, decisions are made after all the focus groups are completed, not during individual focus groups. The study sponsor uses the findings from the focus groups to make decisions. The focus groups are used to gain understanding about a topic, so decision makers can make more informed choices.

Focus group findings have been used to advise decision making before, during, or after an event or program. When focus groups are used to gather information before a program, we call it *needs assessment, asset analysis, a climate survey*, *planning,* or *pilot testing*. When focus groups are used during a program, we call it *formative evaluation, process evaluation, feedback*, *monitoring,* or *reporting* . When it is used for decision making after an event, it might be called *summative evaluation, outcome evaluation,* or just *feedback*.

Focus Groups Can Guide Program, Policy, or Service Development

This model originated in the business and manufacturing environment, but we have been cheerleaders for the idea in the nonprofit and public sector. This is one of our favorite concepts.

There are three points in the development of a program, policy, or service when focus groups are helpful. At the first point, focus groups are used by the researcher to gain understanding—to see the issue (e.g., breast-feeding, recycling, getting a mortgage) through the eyes and hearts of the target audience and the staff who will have to implement the program, policy, or service. The researcher's goal with these focus groups is to learn how a target audience (and staff who will implement it) sees, understands and values a particular topic and to learn the language used to talk about the topic. How do they think about it? How do they feel about it? How do they talk about it? What do they like about it?

What do they dislike about it? What are their perceptions of people who do it or who don't do it? What keeps them from doing it (e.g., recycling), using it (your program), or buying it (your product or service)? What are the barriers? What would it take to get the audience to do it, use it, or buy it? What are the incentives? Design experts then use these findings to create alternative prototypes for the program or product. Typically, they develop three different designs of varying cost, intensity, or duration based on what was learned from the first-phase focus groups.

The second point in program, policy, or service development at which focus groups are useful is to pilot-test the prototypes created by the design experts based on information from the first focus groups. Potential users are asked to compare and contrast each prototype. They are asked what they like and what they don't like about each option. This information helps the planners fine-tune ideas, concepts, or plans before spending a lot of resources on implementation. The designers then take what they learned from the pilot test focus groups to create the final plan for the program, policy, or service. If the redesign is major and there are substantial financial risks, then additional focus groups might test the final design before it is produced or implemented.

The third point where focus groups can be helpful is after a program, policy, or service is up and running. They can be used for evaluation. How can the program be improved? Does it achieve the expected results? What works well and what doesn't?

This three-stage process of focus group research (shown in Figure 1.1) was first used to develop consumer products, but it has now been used to design nonprofit and government agency programs and policies.

On the surface, this design strategy seems so reasonable that we assume that it is regularly done. In fact, it has been our observation that the method most often used to design and deliver programs in the public and nonprofit sectors is quite different. It often looks like the process illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Too often, it begins with an influential person, typically a person who controls budgets and organizational decision making, who has a hot idea. The idea is often reasonable and, on the surface, sounds logical. Because the boss is excited, and because the boss controls the resources, the subordinates jump on board and work on the idea. Because of limited feedback, the program doesn't meet expectations and needs revisions. It is modified and implemented a second and third time, each time

incurring considerable expenses. Worse, when the implementation fails, morale is affected. This status quo strategy occurs far too often. Occasionally, it is successful, but more often, it wastes time, money, and morale and could be easily solved with careful listening and feedback during the design stages.

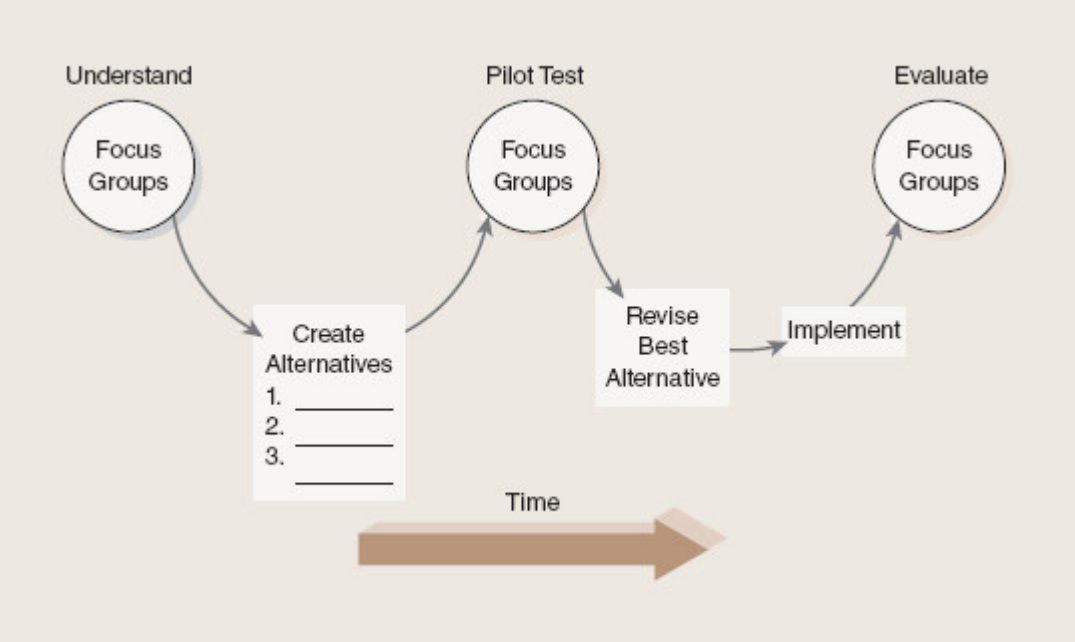

Figure 1.1 Recommended Strategy for Program, Policy, or Service Development

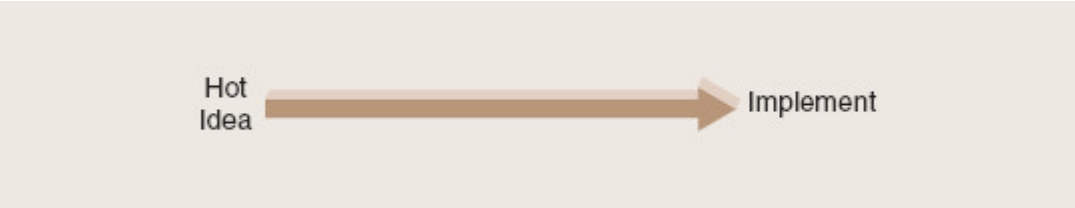

Figure 1.2 Status Quo Strategy for Program, Policy, or Service Development

Examples of questions in the development process

When using focus groups with the developmental process, the questions will vary depending on the purpose of the group. Here are examples.

Questions to seek understanding typically look like these:

- Tell me about your experiences with . . .?
- When people talk about . . . what do they say?
- What are the barriers that people face? What keeps people from . . .?
- What are the incentives that get people to . . .?
- What would it take for you to . . .?
- Tell me about the last time that you tried to change.

Questions used to pilot-test often include the following:

- Here are examples of (e.g., curriculum materials, logos, Web sites, policies, building plans). Take a moment, and place them in order of your preference.
- What do you see as the advantages of each?
- What do you see as the disadvantages of each?
- Which one do you like least? What is it that you do not like about it?
- Which one do you like best? What features or qualities does it have that you like?
- What could be done to improve your first choice?
- Tell me about situations when this first choice might not work.

Questions used for evaluation might be like these:

Think back to your experiences with this program and tell me:

- How did you first hear about this program?
- What attracted you to participate in the program?
- What did you find most helpful about the program?
- What did you find frustrating?
- Now, after participating, what were the benefits of the program?
- What difference did this program make to you or to others?
- How could the program be improved?
- How would you describe this program to others?

Focus Groups Can Help Capture Insights on Behavior

Focus groups provide insights into behavior. Market researchers have been using them for years to discover how to get consumers to change their behaviors: to try a new product, to buy more of the product, or to switch brands. Practitioners in fields like health and medicine struggle with similar issues: How do they get people to start healthy behaviors or stop unhealthy behaviors? Here’s an example of how one medical team used focus groups to promote change. Doctors were having limited success helping low-income, inner-city African Americans who were newly diagnosed with high blood pressure. They wondered if advice from other African Americans in the community would have a bigger impact. The team conducted focus groups with patients who were successfully managing their blood pressure and asked them to share stories about how they changed their behaviors and what worked for them. The team analyzed the data for themes and to identify individuals with strong stories about lifestyle changes. They then invited key individuals back and videotaped them sharing their story. These success stories were produced on DVDs then used as intervention. The focus groups produced authentic and credible

stories of how patients overcame barriers, such as unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, or poor medication adherence. The stories worked because the target audience saw individuals like themselves describe how they overcame obstacles and obtained healthy benefits. The focus groups were beneficial because they created an environment where stories could be told and that in turn sparked others to remember and describe their stories. These stories told by culturally relevant members of the community were particularly persuasive. DVDs of the stories were shared with those in the treatment group and resulted in significant improvement (Houston et al., 2011).

In another study, Simon Rosser and his colleagues (2011) at the University of Minnesota have been using Internet focus groups to gain insight from men who have sex with men. His team is interested in how to reach the target audience with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention information. Because this audience tends to be tech savvy, it made sense to use Internet focus groups to obtain insights. Rosser used synchronous and asynchronous focus groups that afforded researcher confidentiality and participant anonymity. The permissive and nonthreatening environment of the focus groups produced useful insights for developing e-public health messages.

Focus Groups Can Provide Insight on Organizational Concerns and Issues

Certain topics or issues regularly interest organizations, and some of these topics lend themselves to focus group studies. Let’s highlight a few:

Customer Satisfaction

Focus groups are often used early in a customer satisfaction study to define the concept of satisfaction, identify the ingredients of satisfaction, and discover the conditions or circumstances that influence satisfaction. Armed with this information, survey researchers can then design instruments that can quantify satisfaction by region, type of use, customer demographics, or other relevant variables. Designing the survey instrument without listening to customers has been found to be hazardous to organizational health and well-being.

Organizational Development

Focus groups can offer valuable insights on an array of organizational issues like morale, engagement, productivity, or employee satisfaction. There is a tendency for organizations to engage prematurely in a human resources effort without an adequate understanding of the language, culture, and working situations of the target audience. Certainly, experts and savvy leaders have valuable insights into these matters, but we must not ignore insights and opinions of employees. Care is needed in listening so that employees feel they can honestly share their experiences without fear of reprisal. Focus group interviews have proven beneficial in understanding the dimensions of employee engagement, identifying and testing strategies for increasing productivity, helping the organization identify ways to meet its goals, developing the criteria and process steps of benchmarking, understanding the informal organizational culture, and improving working conditions.

Understanding Employee Concerns

Public-nonprofit organizations have many of the same types of employee concerns as for-profit organizations. There are concerns about employee morale and motivation, incentives and barriers to productivity, the influence of merit pay and compensation procedures, how welcoming the environment is to different kinds of diversity, and a host of other topics relating to human resource development. Focus groups with employees have been helpful in understanding the perspectives of staff and also in identifying or testing potential policies or solution strategies.

Planning and Goal Setting

Public institutions are expected to be inclusive in their planning and goal setting. Some organizations use focus groups to help them be inclusive. They purposefully and systematically listen to clients and employees to learn how these groups see the organization and where it should head. What are its strengths? Weaknesses? What's missing? What opportunities exist? What are the advantages and disadvantages of moving in this particular direction?

Over time, organizations tend to institutionalize, streamline, or abridge the planning processes, often with the best of intentions. Unfortunately, these changes begin to fracture the relationship between the client and the organization. Clients begin to feel that the organization is not responsive to their unique needs because the evidence used for planning by the organization is not visible and sometimes not understood or valued by the client. Ironically, the organization may be using sophisticated procedures for discerning public needs, but the individual perceives them as ineffective because there are no

obvious indications that the organization is listening. In this environment, focus groups have two advantages: They yield valuable insights from customers and clients, and they convey that the organization wants to listen.

Another way that organizations are using focus groups for planning is in identifying scenarios that could result from policies, programs, future events, or disasters. Experts, often from differing backgrounds or disciplines, are asked to reflect on the potential aftereffects of these situations. Listening to others with differing expertise and allowing focus group participants opportunities to interact foster new insights and solutions not available with traditional strategies.

Needs Assessment

Arguably, one of the most difficult tasks facing nonprofit or public organizations is needs assessment. What on the surface seems so simple—a discovery of needs—is often remarkably complex. Focus groups have proven helpful mostly because they provide an interactive environment. Focus groups enable people to ponder, reflect, and listen to experiences and opinions of others. This interaction helps participants compare their own personal realities to those of others. This is particularly evident when conducting focus groups on training needs, where an interesting pattern regularly occurs. What begins as a listing of training needs quickly evolves into a discussion of what it would really take to get employees to do more X or be better at X—topics such as rewards and motivation, communications, overall organizational culture. To organizational leaders, training and related educational experiences are often seen as solutions, whereas the participants of focus groups regularly see a disconnect between the problem and the solution. Training is one way of changing employee behavior, but employees are often frustrated by organizational barriers or a lack of incentives that thwart change.

Quality Movements

Focus groups have been helpful in developing and maintaining quality improvement efforts. These quality efforts depend on widespread involvement, open communications, feedback, and a nonthreatening environment. Focus groups are one of the strategies used to define quality, test monitoring procedures or solution ideas, and generally understand issues relating to quality.

Policy Making and Testing

In the past decade, a number of public organizations have used focus groups to help develop and test policy strategies prior to implementation. Focus groups have been helpful in identifying the criteria needed for successful rules, laws, or policies. By understanding these criteria, the policy makers can build in elements that will lead to successful outcomes. Then, by using focus groups to pilot-test the policies or procedures, the public organization can determine which options are easiest for the public to adopt or follow, easiest to understand, and easiest for the agency to enforce.

How Focus Groups Can Be Used With Other Research Methods

Focus groups are used to lay the groundwork for subsequent survey research. Some research begins by using focus groups to learn about language, concepts, and factors that might be included in later research procedures. With this insight, survey researchers can then develop meaningful instruments that allow for larger samples and statistical analysis. In other situations, focus groups have been used after other research methods to help interpret or to develop recommendations for later action or study.

Criticisms of Focus Groups

There have been a number of criticisms leveled at focus group interviewing, and it is instructive to listen to these. Some arguments are sound and deserve attention; others are superficial and lack substance. Let’ s examine these criticisms and reflect on what it means for those contemplating focus group interviewing.

We’d like to preface our examination by suggesting that no method is perfect and that research methods are highly situational, in that they are highly dependent on how they are used, the expertise of the researcher, and the environment in which the research is undertaken.

Focus Group Participants Tend to Intellectualize

When focus group participants discuss their behaviors, there is a tendency for them to portray themselves as thoughtful, rational, and reflective individuals. Behavioral experts tell us that not all behavior is thoughtful and reflective and that a substantial amount of human behavior may be unthinking or unconscious. Gerald Zaltman (2003), in his work on *How Customers Think,* argues that 95 percent of consumer decision making is unconscious. In fact, Zaltman argues that that is the reason many market research strategies, such as focus group interviewing, yield incomplete and erroneous results.

This criticism deserves careful attention particularly for those who want insight on behavior. This concern applies to all research methods that are based on questions and answers, including individual interviews, surveys, or electronic inquiries. Astute researchers address this problem by using a variety of methods, including observation and experiential exercises along with the questions. This problem is minimized when researchers use multiple strategies of inquiry.

Focus Groups Don’t Tap Into Emotions

If your goal is to get people to change their behavior, you might consider strategies that identify emotions attached to that behavior. When discussing behavior, it is easy for people to intellectualize and give well-meaning answers. Often, individuals are unaware of what really drives their behavior. For some individuals and in some situations, behavior is a result of a thoughtful, reflective, cognitive process. But, those who study behavior argue that many decisions are nonrational and often emotional responses. Steven Reiss (2004) identifies 16 motives that drive behavior, and Barry Feig (2006) argues that emotions are the key drivers or hot buttons of behavior. These models identify emotional motives that influence behavior, and these can offer insight into how behavior is changed.

Individuals may not be aware of the emotions that influence their behavior or may be unable to articulate the emotions. As a result, focus group moderators have used several strategies for obtaining these insights. Projective questions, questions that ask about feelings as opposed to thoughts, as well as exercises in sorting, arranging, drawing, and similar activities, can give insights into these emotions. Leading a focus group in which attention is placed on emotions can be exciting, challenging, and unpredictable. Some moderators are uncomfortable with displays of emotion in the focus group; you have to be ready for people crying, getting tense, or getting defensive or angry. There is an art to leading these groups, and before using these strategies, you as a moderator must be comfortable with emotional displays, be sensitive to how others share their feelings, and have a tolerance for ambiguity.

Some individuals will be reluctant to share their feelings. The researchers should consider using individual interviews as well as focus groups when examining emotional concerns. For some, the individual interview is a more appropriate place to share emotions; others find that supportive groups sanction and encourage this type of sharing.

Focus Group Participants May Make Up Answers

Focus group participants are sometimes asked questions about topics or behaviors where they have limited or no experience. The truest response ought to be “I don’t know,” but that answer can be embarrassing or reflect negatively on the individual. So, instead of admitting lack of knowledge, the individual invents an answer that seems plausible and would likely be the response if he or she had actually encountered the experience.

Market researchers tell us that focus group participants have described how they purchase groceries for their families and that the quality of the food is the most important factor. However, when researchers examine their pantries and freezers, the foods on hand are sometimes quite different from what the shopper had described. Some have said that the focus group tends to give us a picture of how the consumer wants to be seen by others, as opposed to their actual lives.

Savvy market researchers have been aware of this tendency for decades and are cautious in how they ask questions so as not to elicit intellectualizing. These strategies are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Focus Groups Produce Trivial Results

Yes, this can certainly happen. It tends to occur when the groups are too large and the topic is complicated. In general, focus groups of 10 to 12 participants are risky when the topic is complicated. When you truly want a conversation and when you want to observe how participants discuss an issue, you clearly need to restrict the group size. Or, in circumstances where time is limited and you must complete the focus group in 60 to 90 minutes, then the size must be restricted, or you are likely to get superficial and trivial comments.

Dominant Individuals Can Influence Results

Yes, this does happen, but a skillful moderator can minimize the risk and even turn it into a beneficial learning experience. In Chapter 5, we discuss moderator skills; one of those important skills is handling individuals who wish to dominate the group. One of the benefits of the focus group is to observe the influence of various arguments and points of view on other participants. Much can be learned by watching situations in which a participant seeks to persuade others. The critical role of the moderator is to serve as a leveling force that allows participants to reflect on various arguments without pressure.

You Can’t Depend on the Results of Focus Group Research

Malcolm Gladwell (2005) makes this claim in *Blink.* He uses the example of how focus group participants panned the Aeron chair developed by Herman Miller—a chair that later turned out to be a great commercial success. Gladwell argues that the focus groups were at fault. But as Judith Langer (2007) and others point out, it is more likely that other factors were involved, such as if the participants actually sat in the chair. It is not the most attractive chair to look at, and perceptions might change with experience. How many focus groups were held? And were those participating the appropriate sample? When information is lacking, it is easy to place blame.

Summary

Focus groups are special creatures in the kingdom of groups. In terms of appearances, focus groups look very much like other kinds of group experiences. On closer inspection, however, focus groups have a distinctive cluster of characteristics: Focus groups collect qualitative data from homogeneous people in a group situation through a focused discussion. Focus groups have been found useful prior to, during, and after programs, events, or experiences. They have been helpful in assessing needs, generating information for constructing questionnaires, developing plans, recruiting new clientele, finding out how customers make decisions to use or not use a product or service, testing new programs and ideas, improving existing programs, and evaluating outcomes.