
Guide to Conducting Focus Group Research



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Originally Developed for

The Gay and Lesbian Community Action Council
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	i
1. FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH: WHAT? WHO? WHERE? WHEN?	1
What a focus group is and why it's being used in this project, who should be included, where a group should be conducted, and time guidelines.	
2. STAGES OF CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH.....	7
Explanation of the stages of conducting a focus group — the purpose and goals of each stage (from “setting the stage” to “wrap up”).	
3. ROLES FOR THE FACILITATOR AND RECORDER.....	11
A discussion of the role of the facilitator and moderator in conducting a focus group. Explanation of purpose and strategies for moving a focus group through the various stages and monitoring group participation. Role of recorder in capturing group discussion in several forms.	
4. DEBRIEFING -- KEY THEMES	15
How to capture the information gleaned from the focus group process. This includes identifying key points in the group process (conflicts and chaining); and drawing out “headline” results of group answers to key questions.	

APPENDICES: Also included in this guide are the *forms* to be used or adapted for conducting focus groups and for “debriefing” or capturing key results after the group is completed:17

- A. Facilitator Guide** — Guidelines for the group facilitator, including worksheet space for creating group questions for each stage in conducting a focus group. 18
- B. Recorder Guide** — Guidelines for the group recorder to follow in preparing for and carrying out the focus group discussion. 21
- C. Debrief Template** — A form for recording key observations about group process, to be used as soon as possible after the group concludes. 23

EXAMPLES. Finally, this guide includes *two examples* which show questions and materials developed for two different groups:

- EXAMPLE 1: STATEWIDE ADVOCACY GROUP** 25
 - Facilitator Protocol..... 26
 - Debrief Template..... 29
- EXAMPLE 2: BATTERED WOMEN’S SHELTER**..... 33
 - Shelter: Focusing the List of Stakeholders..... 34
 - Focus Group Questions 35
 - Debrief Template..... 38

BIBLIOGRAPHY41

INTRODUCTION

This guide grew from materials which Rainbow Research developed to train staff of an organization interested in reaching out beyond its current members and identifying issues, concerns and hopes for the future. This information was used for strategic planning, so that the organization could plan for a future which was more inclusive of all of its constituents and various communities -- particularly those traditionally overlooked or marginalized. These materials were helpful in building the capacity of that organization to gather information, reflect on that information and enhance effectiveness in fulfilling their mission.

We decided to make this guide available as a tool for other groups and organizations who want to increase their capacity to gather and use information from the constituents they represent. In short, this guide is intended for community -based or nonprofit groups who want to reach beyond their current audiences or activities to listen more systematically and effectively to varied parts of their communities.

By contrast, this is not a guide to conducting focus groups used for academic or scholarly research; the purpose of these groups is to build grounded theory and the approach, design and analysis is quite different. Neither is this a guide to the kind of focus groups used for marketing, new product testing, or public opinion research. Again, the purpose, approach and results are quite different. (For those interested in more information about different kinds of focus groups, suggestions for further reading are provided in the bibliography.)

This guide includes information about the basics of focus groups -- what, who, where, and when -- in a narrative, explanatory format. Description and advice about the stages of the focus group, roles for facilitator and recorder and how to “debrief” or capture useful information from the process are also provided. The appendices include worksheets for developing questions for focus groups and guidelines which a facilitator and recorder can adapt for use in conducting a group. Finally, we include examples adapted (and made anonymous) from two groups with whom we have worked -- one is a state-wide advocacy group, the second a shelter for women who are survivors of domestic abuse. These provide illustrations of the questions and approach used in planning a focus group for a specific purposes and audience. We're confident they provide useful ideas and questions which might be used by others.

We are interested in hearing from you about how the guide has been helpful and ways in which you and your group have used focus groups to build your capacity to listen. We would welcome examples and ideas -- with your permission, we would include these in updated, future versions of this guide. Our interest is in promoting the conversations about what works and how socially-concerned organizations can improve their impact and effectiveness. We know you have lessons to share with us, and with others.

Becky Swanson Kroll

1. Focus Group Research: What? Who? Where? When?

WHAT? Focus group research is a form of information gathering, typically involving a facilitator and a small number of group participants. The facilitator uses questions, simulations or projective techniques to hear detailed responses about what people think, or how people think about an issue or product. Focus groups have become enormously popular in market research (to get at consumer reactions to existing or new products), in litigation (to seek ways in which jurors might react to a real or hypothetical case) and in a number of other areas. They are used in evaluation research for some of the reasons explained below.

WHY? Focus groups are a form of qualitative research which focuses on rich, detailed and insightful information about an issue, or to better understand concerns of a particular constituency. In evaluation research, it's particularly useful to include focus groups along with other ways to gather information, as it provides an opportunity for hearing constituent voices directly, along with an opportunity to probe and elaborate about issues which otherwise might not be as well understood. Furthermore, there are benefits and insights which come from the group interaction that couldn't be accomplished by other methods of gathering information (e.g., a written survey or a telephone interview).

Focus groups offer rich, detailed qualitative information, but are drawn from very small numbers of people (relative to the total in a population of interest). So, the information gathered through focus groups can't be safely generalized to represent larger groups. Focus groups are best suited for initial exploratory research, or in combination with other methods (sometimes referred to as "triangulation") to explore information in more detail and depth.

WHO? There are two ways to think about **who** should be involved in a focus group. First, *those who will convene and conduct the focus group*, and secondly, *those who would be invited to participate*. This guide is developed for community-based and

nonprofit organizations; we are presuming that people engaged in those organizations would convene and conduct the groups. This might include staff, board members, volunteers or people who are in other ways active members or participants in the organization. It is best to have two people conduct each group -- one who serves the facilitator role and the second serving the role of recorder.

It is important to think about who would best convene the various groups from whom you wish to hear. It is very important to avoid a situation where constituents or clients are being asked to reflect on or evaluate programs or services in groups led by the staff who provide those services. It may be important to select group facilitators who are knowledgeable, familiar with and have credibility in traditionally marginalized communities (communities of color, people with disabilities, gay/lesbian/bisexual or transgender communities, etc.). If your organization doesn't have among its staff, board or volunteers people with such credibility, you may want to investigate partnerships or seek expert help from people who have more familiarity and credibility.

This guide is intended for those who will conduct the focus groups. Copies should be made available and time spent to develop questions appropriate for the purpose and specific groups with whom you will be working. Ideal circumstances would provide some meeting time among all of those conducting focus groups, as well as organizational representatives responsible for gathering and using the focus group information. Reviewing the material, rehearsing and role playing will allow everyone involved to feel more prepared and confident for conducting their groups.

The second answer to the question about **who** should be involved in a focus group concerns *who is invited to participate*. A typical focus group should include between 5 and 15 members. (An ideal small group size is 5 to 7, but time, costs and the need to include representative viewpoints in a group often push toward larger numbers.) Do try to avoid more than 15. More than 15 makes it difficult for all to feel heard, as well as difficult to touch on issues in any kind of depth. (Often in groups larger than 12, a subset of the group will do most, if not all, of the talking while others remain silent.)

Deciding how to compose the focus groups can be a challenge in and of itself. Typically, you are searching for people who can speak thoughtfully about the concerns you are investigating. In some cases, it's important to speak with people who have been the participants or intended beneficiaries of a service or program. In other cases, you want to hear from people who aren't typically included or served. One of the examples included with this packet (Example 2, a women's shelter) begins with a list of all possible stakeholders. The planning group for this project first generated the list of all stakeholders, and then thought about what each group

or perspective might contribute. A similar listing might be helpful for defining who to invite to a focus group.

It's also important to think about how each group is composed, among the variety of people whose viewpoints you wish to include. A focus group is usually most informative when its participants feel comfortable and safe. This often means a group that is relatively homogeneous. It may feel more comfortable or safer for women to talk with other women, for young people to meet with a group of other youth, or for people of color to meet with others who share their racial and cultural identity. This may be especially important in soliciting information about sensitive issues or when people fear that their comments might affect relationships with the nonprofit group or organization.

While it may be useful to have these homogeneous groups at times, it is important that the collection of groups you conduct include a range of diverse viewpoints. Overall, those included in groups should be representative of the diversities in the communities you are trying to reach. This means consciously trying to contact and invite:

- Males and females;
- People of varied racial/cultural identities;
- People with disabilities (either visible or voluntarily disclosed disabilities -- there may be people who have disabilities which won't be apparent to you);
- People of varied sexual orientation;
- People who represent varied economic statuses;
- People with varied levels of formal education;
- People of varied ages.

There may be other constituencies about whom you need to be consciously inclusive. For example, it may be important for a neighborhood group to include both home owners and tenants. Think about the various factors which may affect perspective and representation in the communities you work with and be sure that your groups incorporate as many of these diversities as possible.

A direct contact (by phone or in person) is usually the best way to invite someone to a focus group. This provides an opportunity to explain the purpose of the group and to answer any questions someone might have. It's important to be as clear as possible about the purpose of the group and how/why this person has been invited to attend. It is, of course, entirely voluntary and no one should be badgered into attending.

Where possible, a confirming letter should be sent to those who agree to attend the focus group. The letter should reiterate the purpose and provide some additional, current information about the issue you are exploring. The letter should tell participants it will take about two hours, be completely confidential, and food will be served. Plan the group meeting to provide some refreshments, as a sign of hospitality and welcome to those who attend.

In order to accommodate all of those who might attend, you also want to consider the possibility of including:

- a sign language interpreter (for those who hearing impaired);
- a translator (for those who don't speak English or who don't have English as a first language); and/or
- the need for child care.

It would be helpful when contacting people to attend the group to inquire about whether these accommodations would be needed by those attending. This can be repeated in the confirming letter, with information about who to contact if someone needs to request an interpreter or translator, or how to confirm the need for child care.

WHERE? Try to arrange a comfortable, private space for the discussion. Furniture should be arranged (if possible) so that folks are in a circle and can easily have eye contact with one another. If possible, it's best to be away from outside distractions. Food should be accessible and help set the tone for a comfortable, relaxed conversation.

WHEN? Schedule the focus group so that those conducting it (moderator and recorder) have some time before and after the group to prepare and "debrief." The meeting itself may last from one and one-half to two hours, but schedule two hours. Don't go much longer than two hours--work groups diminish after about two hours. (If others are excited and wish to continue the conversation, encourage them to do so, but thank them and leave. It's probably important that the >"official" focus group not exceed two hours.)

At the same time, don't turn off your own ears when you turn off the tape recorder. Formal instruction for interviewers suggests that some of the best reflective insights are offered after the "formal" interview is over and people feel a bit more relaxed. Watch for participant reactions, comments to one another, key observations and reflections--note on the debrief form.

Finally, try to find time as soon as possible after the group has concluded to fill out the debrief form. It's extremely helpful if you can do this with some immediacy-- your reactions and memory will be somewhat different if you wait until you've been through many more meetings ("Now, was it in the focus group that someone said....?") and particularly after you've returned home.

2. STAGES OF CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Although there is no single formula or recipe for carrying out focus groups research, there is a general outline and a “rhythm” to conducting focus groups. We describe it in four separate stages:

Stage One:	Setting the Stage
Stage Two:	Filling Out the Landscape
Stage Three:	The Focus
Stage Four:	Wrap Up and Reflection

In **Stage One**, the basic administrative tasks of the focus group should be briskly completed. The facilitator(s) should introduce themselves and explain the purpose, including how this information will be used. Basic ground rules, particularly emphasizing mutual respect and confidentiality, are reviewed. Participants are assured that there are no right or wrong answers and the group is not expected to agree--in fact disagreement and divergent viewpoints are wanted!

In **Stage Two**, beginning questions are asked to help people feel comfortable and to begin to sketch in the larger framework for the discussion. Open ended questions ask people to fill in their perception of the “landscape”, related to the issues of concern. People are asked to speak about more general, abstract things and begin to feel comfortable in a group discussion.

In this beginning phase, people are likely experiencing “*primary tension*” that comes with being in a new group, or a new group meeting for the first time. It is a typical social unease experienced when we meet new folks and we’re slightly uncertain about what will occur in the group. This phase is characterized by:

- *extreme politeness,*
- *soft and tentative speaking,*
- *long pauses,*
- *some sighing and yawning.*

If prolonged, these characteristics will continue and be joined by signs of apparent boredom and tiredness. (It is boring and tiring to be in a group which is in prolonged primary tension.) Until the tension is released, the group won’t be optimally candid, comfortable or productive.

The facilitator should work to dispel that tension. One way is to have everyone introduce themselves and tell something about themselves. That basic introduction gives people some sense of others and usually some demographic connections that make them feel more comfortable. Providing time for food, casual conversation and joking also help ease the stiffness.

It is very important that everyone in the group have an opportunity to speak in this introductory stage. If group members don't speak in the first five to ten minutes, the likelihood increases that they will become silent group members. An initial turn taking assures that each group member successfully overcome the (sometimes unconscious) question about how they will be received by other group members, increasing the likelihood that they will become active group participants during the rest of the meeting.

The kinds of questions asked in **Stage Two** can also help ease the tension and let the group discover their connections or common ground. In the examples used in this guide, there are general questions about how people perceive the climate, their communities and some reference to changes over the past five years. These allow group members to provide general observations and reveal something about their own history and experiences. The purpose of these questions is to help the group paint in broad strokes the general landscape of concern.

In **Stage Three**, the focus narrows to the specific concerns of the focus group research. The group agenda shifts from the general background landscape to the specific issues -- the questions create this focus from general to specific, somewhat like a funnel. For the two cases included in this guide, questions move from general discussion of the climate and communities to specific questions about knowledge and perceptions of the sponsoring organizations. Questions ask group participants about what the organization does, the importance and quality of its services, and ideas about its future. At this point, divergent opinions and speculative ideas are encouraged.

In moving to **Stage Three**, the group communication will also change. A good focus group will have periods of loud, even raucous communication. It is important to recognize what these are and take note of the content which generates such outbursts of activity. The characteristics to watch for include: *noisier, louder voices; two or three people talking at once; a high level of interest; and nonverbal participation (like head nodding, leaning forward, animated faces)*. These moments come about due to one or two things:

Chaining: Small group experts describe the “chaining” process when a group member tells a story or anecdote with which others identify and sympathize. Members of the group become involved verbally and nonverbal, often adding their own similar experience to the discussion, or elaborating, embroidering and extending the story told. They react to the story in a way that is sympathetic to the teller and are indicating that they endorse this way of depicting social reality.

Conflicts or Secondary Tension: Small group experts observe that when groups go beyond primary tension, they will typically and periodically hit upon points of secondary tension. Groups members see issues in different ways and offer challenges or conflicting points of view (we wouldn't bother to convene a group if everyone thought alike). This is important and helpful for focus groups--the purpose is to discover and bring forward these varied and divergent points of view.

Watch for and expect chaining and conflicts to appear in **Stage Three**. They are normal and to be not only expected, but encouraged. The facilitator and recorder should also note what kinds of content (the stories, issues, or concerns) trigger chaining or conflict. These provide important clues to what is important to the group and what generates high levels of involvement and emotional response.

In **Stage Four**, the moderator needs to begin to wrap up the group and provide some closure. At this stage, questions are designed to help participants reflect on things they've learned from the earlier discussion. The moderator signals the end is near (often observing the time) and asks a specific reflective question. Participants are asked to think back over the group discussion and be realistic about time and resources. Final thoughts are solicited and the moderator brings the group to a close, with thanks to participants.

As you moderate or observe the focus group, you will discover that it's difficult to move a group in a linear or sequential way through the questions outlined, or questions you've planned. That's typical and to be expected. If you remember the purpose of each stage and know what to expect, you'll be best able to adapt and move through to closure.

3. ROLES FOR THE FACILITATOR AND RECORDER

The Facilitator's Role. The role of the facilitator is critical to the success of the focus group discussion. The facilitator moves the discussion along and ensures that all important topics are covered in the time allotted. The facilitator sets the tone by asking open-ended questions. Questions that start with “what,” “how” and “why” elicit much richer information in comparison to questions that can be answered with “yes”, “no” or “maybe”. Finally, it is the facilitator's job to encourage everyone to provide input into the discussion, yet at the same time, don't unduly pressure participants to speak about issues they would prefer not to talk about.

Specifically, the facilitator performs the following tasks/functions in each stage:

In **Stage One**, the facilitator spells out the purpose and basic “rules” of the discussion. S/he needs to cover the following specific points:

1. Purpose of the group and how the information will be used
2. Ground rules for participation:
 - Mutual respect
 - No “right” answers -- looking for divergent viewpoints
 - Confidentiality of participants, their comments
 - Time parameters, moderator role in conducting group
3. Call for any questions, issues that need to be clarified

In **Stage Two**, the facilitator is working to dispel primary tension. It is important at this point to be sure that everyone talks. So a beginning question that includes self-introductions gives everyone the opportunity to “break the ice”. (Remember, assuring that everyone in the group speaks in the first 5-10 minutes makes it more likely that everyone will continue speaking. Those who don't speak in the first 5 to 10 minutes are likely to become silent, non-participating group members for the duration of the group.)

The facilitator can further help to dispel tension by providing supportive responses. The food, humor and initial self disclosure are other forces that should help release the primary tension.

In **Stage Three**, the facilitator lets the group have its lead. Discussion that gets lively, people speaking back and forth to one another, etc. should be encouraged. The facilitator also probes with open-ended questions -- “Can you say more about that? “What do you think about that, John?” A “What could you agree with that you’ve heard so far?” “How would you disagree with what we’ve discussed so far?”

The facilitator at this point should focus on time and key questions--to help the group get as far through the agenda as possible. This is harder than it sounds! We’ve outlined a set of rational, linear questions--but we know groups don’t discuss them in that fashion. So watch for ways in which the discussion provides some insight to questions (e.g., a discussion of what they’re doing in the community automatically covers barriers--so that doesn’t have to be asked as a separate question) and make judgments about how to offer connections, segues, etc. to move the group along. *It’s more than likely you won’t be able to cover everything you’ve planned.*

The facilitator must also keep the discussion balanced by trying to keep all group members participating and by discouraging dominant talkers from taking control of the discussion. In short, the facilitator serves as kind of a “traffic cop” to keep all avenues of communication open and moving. Realize that there’s a great deal you can do by using eye contact, body movement and subtle hand gestures to draw out quiet group members and to limit or quiet dominant members. (Watch real traffic cops, who use grand-size gestures to reach folks in cars; practice the micro version of these to create tools you might use in the group.)

Finally, in **Stage Four**, the facilitator signals that the group is wrapping up. The facilitator should be watching the time and begin the wrap up 10 to 15 minutes before the end of the two hours. (If the group is smaller and less talkative, move to the end questions in sequence and don’t worry if you end sooner than the scheduled two hours. Who hates to end a meeting early?)

S/he asks the kinds of questions that should help the group begin to reflect on their discussion and make final points of advice, choice or insight about the focus group topic. Since the purpose of this discussion is discovery rather than decision making, the facilitator should not expect consensus from the group, but rather encourage the expression of diverse and divergent perspectives.

Finally, the facilitator is provided key support by the observer/recorder. The person who is recording can help keep track of folks who aren’t talking, point to key questions s/he sees as good to ask next, etc. The recorder may also be in a better position to watch the time and signal the facilitator about moving through the stages.

As soon as possible following the group closure, the facilitator and recorder should together go over and fill out the Debrief Form. Two heads will be better than one.

The Recorder's Role. The recorder's role is to assure the group discussion is captured in several ways. First of all, whenever possible the recorder will be responsible for audio taping the group discussion. The recorder should check the tape recorder's operation before the group meeting -- finding available outlets or assuring batteries are fresh and in operating order. Ideally, the recorder will conduct a sound test and arrange the microphone in the center of the group.

The recorder should also assure that all group members give permission for taping. (Either the facilitator or recorder may ask; but *the recorder* should be sure that each group member actively agrees -- asking for a yes, head nod, or other sign of agreement. Failure to object should not be taken as assent.)

Next, the recorder should assist the facilitator by monitoring time. It's possible to divide the planned questions and stages of the focus group into estimated times:

Stage One usually takes no more than five to ten minutes.

Stage Two shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes.

Stage Three should take the most time -- about an hour to an hour and a half of the scheduled group meeting time.

Stage Four should begin no later than 15 minutes before the end of the scheduled end time (usually one hour and forty-five minutes after the group began).

It's possible to have prearranged signals, or for the recorder to give some nonverbal signal (raising the hand, raising the index finger) that the moderator should attend to time and move on to the next stage.

Finally, the recorder can take responsibility to assure that s/he and the facilitator sit down as soon as possible after the group discussion is concluded to "debrief" the key points and impressions of the group.

4. DEBRIEFING -- KEY THEMES

“Debriefing” is the term we use for processing or passing on the information we’ve gathered. We want to capture information from these focus groups in several ways:

- Audiotape recording if participants agree.
- Notes taken by recorder.
- Debrief form filled out soon after the group concludes.

If it’s possible to use a tape recorder, it’s most helpful to use a tape recorder with a microphone. The microphone should be placed in the middle of the group to best capture voices. You will probably need more than one tape and/or to turn over the tape during the session. The person assigned to be recorder should be responsible for the tape. Label the tape immediately after the meeting.

The recorder should also take notes during the meeting. It might be possible to use the debrief form to take notes--or individuals may have their own preferred style. In addition to keeping track of the general thread of the conversation, be alert to:

Chaining....Times when people become nonverbal and verbally animated....they embroider, elaborate and add their story to someone else’s... people nod, agree and participate in the story/discussion....

Conflict....Times when people become animated but because they disagree or see things differently....Voices become louder....several people may talk at once....positions become somewhat polarized.....

Memorable Quotes....Times when someone says something in a way that is moving, insightful, or otherwise striking.....Tracking such quotes can be very helpful for both the evaluation research and for use in articulating the concerns and issues of the community(ies) being interviewed.

Finally, the facilitator and recorder should together fill out an official debrief form after the meeting -- as soon after as is practically possible. They should note on the form (see sample Debrief form and examples) instances of chaining and conflicts-- indicate the topics about which people had such animated discussions. They should also indicate the most important and memorable key points, phrases, etc. Sometimes it’s helpful to think of the “headline”-- imagine you’re doing the news broadcast or news story. *How would you headline it? What’s the capsule version? the sound bite?*

Another useful addition to debriefing is for the focus group staff to think of their impressions, reactions and what they've learned from this focus group. The Debrief form and the women's shelter example both include questions specifically for the focus group staff, including questions like: *What was surprising? What was not? What was new information for you? What were the two or three most important things you learned?*

APPENDICES:

FORMS/WORKSHEETS FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

- A. Facilitator Guide
- B. Moderator Guide/Role
- C. Debrief Form

A. Facilitator Guide

SETTING THE STAGE

1. The facilitator begins by welcoming participants and thanking them for coming. The facilitator and recorder should introduce themselves, followed by group members introducing themselves.

The facilitator should then explain the purpose of this group and the participants' rights to confidentiality:

- XXX organization is gathering information for xxx purpose, to be able to better describe and represent its constituencies.
 - Recording and use of information from the group will not identify individuals, record names, or otherwise challenge anonymity. Ask that group members hold what they hear in group confidentially.
2. Ground rules for focus groups. Explain briefly the following:
 - Be respectful of one another -- disagree with ideas, but respectfully.
 - There are no right or wrong answers, not seeking group consensus.
 - Interested in your opinions -- and getting varied, divergent ideas.
 3. Facilitator's role. Explain briefly the following:
 - Facilitator will ask questions, keep track of time to get through all the issues we want to cover.
 - Facilitator will also try to be sure everyone is heard and time distributed somewhat evenly.
 4. Request permission to audiotape. (Respect confidentiality once tape is on.)

FILLING IN THE LANDSCAPE

Questions in this stage of the focus group (FG) help acquaint and orient the group. Group members need to become comfortable and begin to focus on the context and issues of concern. Good questions might ask for their current level of knowledge, prior experiences, reference to some past time (five years ago) or desired future, compared to today, etc. (See examples.)

Your questions:

6.

7.

8.

FOCUS ON XXX

At this stage, the facilitator focused on detailed questions about the group/organization or issue of concern. Questions seek FG members' ideas about qualities, benefits, impact and direction of programs or organizations. This portion of the FG has the greater number of questions and occupies the greatest amount of time. (See examples.)

9.

10.

11.

12.

REFLECTION AND WRAP UP QUESTIONS

In this final stage of the group, questions help FG participants reflect back on their discussion and make final comments, observations or choices. The facilitator is guiding group members to think back over what they've discovered or learned during the discussion, while building to a sense of closure -- followed by a formal conclusion and thanks to all.

Your questions and closing:

15.

16.

17.

Thanks....

FINAL STEPS FOR FACILITATOR AND RECORDER

- Thank all for participation--turn off tape recorder.
- Be alert to "post interview" discussion and observations.
- Fill out debrief form as soon as possible after group concludes.

B. Recorder Guide

PREPARING FOR THE GROUP

The recorder should help prepare for the group discussion by:

- Make sure the room is set up as you want it -- typically, comfortable chairs in a circle, space away from distracting noise or interruptions.
- Bringing an operating tape recorder, microphone and extension cord (and/or fresh batteries).
- Bringing a fresh audio tape and labeling it with the name, date and time of the group.
- Setting up the equipment and conducting a sound check.

DURING THE GROUP

Stage One: As the group begins...the facilitator should ask permission of group members to audiotape the group. The recorder should look to each group member for active assent--a “yes” or nodding of the head. (The absent of dissent should not be taken as assent.) If anyone objects, the audio tape should not be used. The recorder will still take notes during the discussion.

Stage One through Four: During the group discussion, the recorder can help the group facilitator in several ways, including the following:

- Keep an eye on time....
 - Stage One** should only take five to ten minutes.
 - Stage Two** should take about fifteen minutes.
 - Stage Three** should take up the bulk of the meeting time, about one hour to one and one half hour of the scheduled group meeting time.
 - Stage Four** should be started no later than 15 minutes prior to the end of the scheduled group meeting time (about 1 and 1/2 or 1 hour and 45 minutes after the group begins).

- Monitoring group participation....

Watch for indications that quieter members of the group are trying to say something.

Help the facilitator call for ideas and response from all group members.

The recorder also has a responsibility to keep handwritten notes during the group discussion. S/he can particularly look for:

Chaining....Times when people become nonverbal and verbally animated....they embroider, elaborate and add their story to someone else's.....people nod, agree and participate in the story/discussion....

Conflict....Times when people become animated but because they disagree or see things differently....Voices become louder...several people may talk at once....positions become somewhat polarized.....

Memorable Quotes....Times when someone says something in a way that is moving, insightful, or otherwise striking.....Tracking such quotes can be very helpful for both the evaluation research and for use in articulating the concerns and issues of the community(ies) being interviewed.

AFTER THE GROUP

Finally, the recorder should work with the moderator to complete the debrief form as soon as possible after the group meeting. This should then be kept with the audio tape and recorder's notes, as the complete summary of the group discussion.

C. Debrief Template

After the focus group is completed, please fill out the following form to capture key impressions and critical points in the group. It is helpful if this can be completed as soon as possible after the conclusion of the group

GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

Date of group meeting:

Time of group meeting:

Location of group:

Number in group:

Constituencies represented (indicate number of people in each category, or at least check all that apply):

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women | <input type="checkbox"/> Young/Generation X | <input type="checkbox"/> People with visible disabilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Men | <input type="checkbox"/> Mid-aged | <input type="checkbox"/> People with other disabilities |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Senior citizens | <input type="checkbox"/> People who are HIV+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> African American | | <input type="checkbox"/> Heterosexual/straight |
| <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian/Native American | | <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Pacific | | <input type="checkbox"/> Gay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chicano/Latino/Hispanic | | <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> European American | | <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rural | <input type="checkbox"/> Estimate low income (<\$18K/yr.) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Small town (under 5000) | <input type="checkbox"/> Estimate middle income | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medium town (500-25,000) | <input type="checkbox"/> Estimate higher income (\$50+/yr) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Large town (25,000 plus) | | |

Other relevant demographic characteristics:

TOTAL NUMBER IN GROUP: _____

FOCUS GROUP STAFF:

Moderator _____ Recorder _____

GROUP PROCESS

Note issues which generated animated group response (chaining) or conflict/secondary tension:

Chaining:

Conflict/Secondary Tension:

Memorable Quotes:

GROUP FINDINGS

Make brief notes (phrases, sentence fragments, any memorable quotes) about key points. Outline what you see as the major themes/issues at each stage to make debrief notes about:

SETTING THE STAGE:

FOCUS ON XXX:

WRAP UP AND CLOSURE:

FG STAFF OBSERVATIONS

It may be helpful to include some space for FG staff (facilitator and moderator) to immediately record their impressions and reactions to the group discussion. The following are good questions to capture those impressions:

What was surprising to you? Not surprising?

What was new information for you?

What were the two or three most valuable things you've learned in this focus group?

EXAMPLE 1:
STATEWIDE ADVOCACY GROUP

- **Facilitator Guide**
- **Debrief Form**

Facilitator Protocol

Example 1: Statewide Advocacy Group

SETTING THE STAGE

1. The facilitator begins by welcoming participants and thanking them for coming. The facilitator and recorder should introduce themselves, followed by group members introducing themselves.

The facilitator should then explain the purpose of this group and the participants' rights to confidentiality::

- XXX organization is gathering information from throughout the state for xxx purpose, to be able to better describe and represent its constituencies.
 - Recording and use of information from the group will not identify individuals, record names, or otherwise challenge anonymity. Ask that group members hold what they hear in group confidentially.
2. Ground rules for focus groups. Explain briefly the following:
 - Be respectful of one another -- disagree with ideas, but respectfully.
 - There are no right or wrong answers, not seeking group consensus.
 - Interested in your opinions -- and getting varied, divergent ideas.
 3. Moderator's role. Explain briefly the following:
 - Moderator will ask questions, keep track of time to get through all the issues we want to cover.
 - Moderator will also try to be sure everyone is heard and time distributed somewhat evenly.
 4. Request permission to audiotape. (Respect confidentiality once tape is on.)

FILLING IN THE LANDSCAPE

6. How would you describe the current climate for xxx's constituencies in your organization/community?
7. How is this different from five years ago?
8. What are the things you and others in your community did to create that kind of change? What kinds of assets, resources have you contributed? What were the obstacles?
9. What would you like to see change in the next five years? What changes would you like to see in your organization? In the broader community?
10. How can these changes come about? What kinds of resources and assets can be mobilized to make these changes? Are there things that would help build your community's capacity to work on these changes?
11. Are there partnerships or alliances that could help women in your organization/ in your community move toward these changes? What individuals and groups can you effectively work with for these changes?

FOCUS ON XXX

12. Does XXX have a role in the changes that have taken place in the past five years? How has their presence made a difference? In Minnesota? In your community?
13. What do you know about XXX and its services, programs and activities? Do people in your community know about these services? Use them? Why or why not?
14. How would you rate the quality of XXX services, programs and activities? Are there ways you believe they could be improved?
15. Does XXX have a role in the changes you would like to see in the next five years? What can it do to mobilize and build capacity in your organization? community? To have an impact on broader communities? (*You might actually have them brainstorm a list at this point.*)

16. What do people in your organization/community have to contribute to XXX? What resources, talents, special expertise do you have?
17. Are there allies and partners that XXX could join with to help make these changes? What others could XXX work with effectively to make these changes? Are there other benefits from partnerships?

REFLECTION AND WRAP UP QUESTIONS

18. This group has made good suggestions about what XXX might do in the future. We need, too, to be realistic about what can be done with limited resources -- of both staff time and money. If you had to choose those activities, programs or services which you believe would have the *greatest impact* (in making changes you'd like to see), what would they be? (You might actually have people vote--each person gets two or three votes.)
19. What is the *one most important thing* that XXX does now?
20. If you had to choose *just one new thing* that XXX would do in the future, what would it be?
21. Are there other issues or concerns we didn't address that you would like to mention? Final thoughts, based on our discussion?

FINAL STEPS FOR FACILITATOR AND RECORDER

- Thank all for participation--turn off tape recorder.
- Be alert to "post interview" discussion and observations.
- Fill out debrief form as soon as possible after group concludes.

Debrief Template

Example 1: Statewide Advocacy Group

After the focus group is completed, please fill out the following form to capture key impressions and critical points in the group. It is helpful if this can be completed as soon as possible after the conclusion of the group

GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS

Date of group meeting: _____

Time of group meeting: _____

Location of group: _____

Number in group: _____

Constituencies represented (indicate number of people in each category, or at least check all that apply):

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Women | <input type="checkbox"/> Young/Generation X | <input type="checkbox"/> People with visible disabilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Men | <input type="checkbox"/> Mid-aged | <input type="checkbox"/> People with other disabilities |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Senior citizens | <input type="checkbox"/> People who are HIV+ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> African American | | <input type="checkbox"/> Heterosexual/straight |
| <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian/Native American | | <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Pacific | | <input type="checkbox"/> Gay |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chicano/Latino/Hispanic | | <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> European American | | <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rural | <input type="checkbox"/> Estimate low income (<\$18K/yr.) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Small town (under 5000) | <input type="checkbox"/> Estimate middle income | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Medium town (500-25,000) | <input type="checkbox"/> Estimate higher income (\$50+/yr) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Large town (25,000 plus) | | |

FOCUS GROUP STAFF:

Moderator _____ Recorder _____

GROUP PROCESS

Note issues which generated animated group response (chaining) and points of conflict/secondary tension:

Chaining:

Conflict/Secondary Tension:

Memorable Quotes:

GROUP FINDINGS

Make brief notes (phrases, sentence fragments, any memorable quotes) about the key points indicated below:

SETTING THE STAGE:

Major changes, last five years:

Community work, assets:

Changes for next five years:

FOCUS ON XXX:

Role of XXX, last five years:

Knowledge of XXX services, programs, activities:

Use of XXX services, programs, activities:

Quality of XXX services, etc.,:

Role of XXX, next five years:

Partnerships, alliances:

WRAPUP AND CLOSURE:

Most important thing XXX does now:

What one thing XXX should do in future:

EXAMPLE 2:
BATTERED WOMEN'S SHELTER

- **Identifying Stakeholders**
- **Focus Group Questions**
 - **Debrief Form**

Shelter: Focusing the List of Stakeholders

REFINING LISTS OF PEOPLE TO INTERVIEW (present lists of people and work with group to trim down the list, identify/Assign interviewers, Make sure to have people's names, addresses, phone numbers, etc.)

People Who Have Been Directly Involved With the Shelter

- Staff - current
- Board of Directors - current and former
- Volunteers -- current and former
- Clients - current and former:
 - * Shelter clients
 - * Support group clients

The Community

- Civic Organizations/Associations
 - * Churches/Synagogues
 - * Family Resource Centers
 - * Community Center
- City Council/Mayor/Other Public Officials
- Other Battered Women's Programs/Shelters
 - * Other Shelters
 - * Other B.W. Programs
 - * Other organizations working with B.W. programs/issues"
- Public education clients/beneficiaries

Schools

- School that shelter kids attend
- Local public and private schools

Community Service Providers/ "Helpers"

- Police:
- Criminal Justice System:
 - * Prosecutors
 - * Judges
 - * Probation Officers
- Social service referrals/social service agencies
 - * Housing providers
 - * Shelter/battered women's programs
 - * Other Social Services (welfare, child care, social workers)

Donors/Financial Sources

- DOC and other public funders
- Foundations and other not-for-profit funders
- Private Donors/Sources

Focus Group Questions

Information staff can provide:

- Agency dynamics and relationships
- What contributes to the agency's effectiveness?
- What are we doing well?
- What are we not doing that we should?
- Are staff supported in their job?
- Does the agency's structure make sense? Does it work?
- Where should the agency be geographically and philosophically?
- Is the organization diverse? What can be done to increase contact with diverse groups?

Information Board can provide:

- Where should the organization be?
- What is there sense of the agency's effectiveness?
- How do we involve diverse groups?
- Historical perspective: what did/didn't work? what fell by the way side?
- Who should we contact? Are we tapping into community resources?
- If you are not still a member of the board, why did you discontinue?

Information Volunteers can provide:

- Is the agency effective?
- Is the volunteer program used to its full potential?
- Do you feel included, or rewarded?
- Were your expectations met?
- What client needs are not being met?
- If you are not still volunteering, why did you discontinue?

Information Clients can provide:

- How were you treated?
- What more could have been done? What could have been done differently?
- What was the most and least effective about the services at Sojourner?
- Were services accessible? Was it comfortable?
- Was your culture respected?
- Does the geographic location make sense?
- Did/do you understand the philosophy... was your experience related to the philosophy?
- Were you able to get what you needed when you needed it?

Information the community(ies) can provide:

The following questions will be asked at all community focus groups:

- How can we end violence in the lives of women and children?
- Who is affected by domestic violence?
- Does domestic violence occur in your community?
- Is there a need for services in your community? If yes, what kind?
- What are the needs in your community?
- How can we collaborate to address domestic violence?
- Were you aware this shelter existed? If so, what do you know about it?
- Do you think this shelter is effective?

Information schools can provide:

- How do the children from this shelter impact your school day?
- What is your impression of kids from this shelter?
- What kind of curriculum/learning opportunities does your school utilize re: domestic violence and abuse?
- How prevalent is domestic violence in your school?
- What kind of training do faculty and staff receive re: domestic violence?
- What are your concerns re: the safety, confidentiality and security for these children?

Information for Education and Outreach:

- How do you see this shelter's education program?
- What are your perceptions/concerns of kids receiving this information?
- Do you have a sense of the student's needs?
- How can we continue to serve your needs?
- What are other things you could utilize Sojourner for?
- How does the education program work to end violence in the lives of women and children?
- What are resources that others have used?
- What is special about our program that other's don't have?
- What can you bring to this shelter for mutual benefit?

Information referrals and/or Social Service Agencies can provide:

- Are we culturally sensitive?
- Would/have they referred to us?
- How did the shelter respond to the referral?
- This is our mission...do you think we are effective? To what extent?
- Are there service gaps?
- Are our referrals to them appropriate?
- What do they know about this shelter?

Information city and public officials can provide:

- How do you value this shelter?
- What is this shelter's reputation?
- What is your experience with this shelter?
- Should we be doing more?
- How can we work with them?
- What are the barriers to working with them?
- What could be gained by working together?
- What is your perception of domestic violence? Is there a need for services in your community?
- Who can help us become involved?
- Who should we connect with? How do we do it?

Information Law Enforcement/Criminal Justice stakeholders can provide:

- How does domestic violence impact your jobs?
- What do you think of this shelter? Are we effective?
- What can we offer them?
- What are your views of domestic violence?
- Mission...how effective are we in that context?
- Are you comfortable with training on domestic violence?
- Are you as effective as you'd like to be with domestic violence? If not what could help?
- How can this shelter help make your job easier?
- What are the trends and demographics regarding domestic violence?
- What role can this shelter's staff play in criminal justice system?
- What is your understanding of the intervention project?

Information Funders can provide:

- Based on our mission...how effective are we?
- How do you perceive this shelter?
- What can we do together in the future?

Information other Domestic Violence Programs can provide:

- How do you perceive this shelter?
- How can we help each other?
- What specific role or piece does this shelter do? What are the gaps?
- Is this shelter culturally sensitive?
- What are the turf issues?
- What are the geographic limitations of our work?
- How can this shelter fill the gaps?
- Are there communities we can serve with you?

Example 2: Shelter Focus Group Debrief Template

After the focus group (FG) is completed, please fill out this form to capture your key impressions and data from this group. It is helpful if you can do this as soon as possible after the conclusion of the group session. It will work best if you and your co-facilitator complete this form right after the focus group.

What **stakeholder group** did the FG participants represent? _____

Group Demographics: (please fill in the appropriate number of FG participants that fit into the categories below for this specific focus group:)

_____ Total number of FG Participants

_____ Elders/Seniors

_____ People with disabilities

_____ Male

_____ Persons of Color

_____ Suburban

_____ Female

_____ European-Americans

_____ Inner City

_____ Gay,
Lesbian, Bisexual
or Transgender

Co-Facilitators:

FG Facilitator: _____ Phone: _____

FG Facilitator: _____ Phone: _____

Group Process:

Common Themes:

Divergent Themes:

Memorable Quotes: (Use additional sheets if necessary)

Findings: *(Please tell us what the participants said and use direct quotes as much as possible)*

What did they say about the organization's mission?

To what extent did they know about the shelter's activities and programs?

What did they say about the shelter's clients--(e.g., Who are they? Who should the clients be?)

What did they say about the shelter's physical location? Service area?

What did they say about the shelter's effectiveness?

What did they say about the shelter's troubles?

What specific suggestions for improvement did they have?

What were their comments about the diversity of this shelter? What were their suggestions for improvement?

How does this shelter include and reward them as (volunteers, board members, staff, clients, etc.)

What is the most important thing that the shelter does now (according to FG participants)?

What “one thing” should the shelter do in the future (according to FG participants)?

Reflections: (Please answer these questions from your own perspective as facilitator)

What did you find surprising?

What was not so surprising?

What was new information to you?

What were the two or three most valuable things you’ve learned through this focus group?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following are recommended resources for those interested in further reading about conducting focus groups.

Cragan, J.F. and Shields, D.C. (1995). *Symbolic Approaches to Applied Communication Research*. Washington, DC: Speech Communication Association.

An approach to using focus groups based on communication patterns in small group communication. Includes simulated juries and marketing research examples.

Greenbaum, T.L. (1993). *The handbook for focus group research*. New York: Lexington Books.

A guide to conducting litigation and marketing focus groups. Practical advice on convening and conducting groups and information about new technology and other relevant trends. Provides advice for those seeking a career as a focus group moderator.

Krueger, R.A. (1988). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

A clear and comprehensive guide to use of focus groups for a variety of purposes, including program evaluation. Krueger has extensive experience with use of focus groups in education and the nonprofit sector.

Morgan, D.L. (1988) *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

A detailed explanation of the methods and issues involved in use of focus groups as qualitative research for academic, scholarly purposes.

Templeton, J.F. (1994). *The focus group: A strategic guide to organizing, conducting and analyzing the focus group interview*. Chicago, IL: Probus Publishing Company.

A detailed guide to use of focus groups for marketing research. Detailed appendices and pragmatic advice for sales and marketing management research project for cocktail mixers.

Taufmann, M. (1995). Consider qualitative research to evaluate the effectiveness of your programs. *Illinois Nonprofit Chronicle*. Chicago, IL: Illinois Association of Nonprofit Associations.

An article encouraging nonprofit groups to consider using focus groups as a way to evaluate program effectiveness and impact.

Our mission is to help increase the effectiveness and impact of socially concerned organizations in responding to social problems. We work in support of organizations and communities to help them achieve their goals.

Your organization and community can experience these results from participation in Rainbow Research activities – tailored studies, workshops, and partnerships – and use of our tools and publications.

We can help you to:

Improve your understanding of key program elements that contribute to program effectiveness.

Improve program impact through integrating principles of program effectiveness into day-to-day operations.

Improve management of resources to achieve program purposes.

Improve the fit between your organization's activities and your community's needs and opportunities.

Improve commitment of staff and Board to your organization's mission.

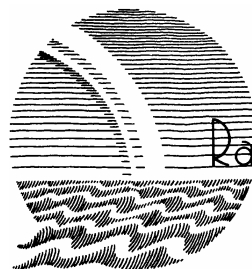
Improve communication between your organization and its various stakeholders and publics.

Improve linkages between your organization and other like-minded organizations.

Improve access to tools and support services that strengthen program performance.

Related Rainbow Research Publications:

- **Common Barriers to Effectiveness in the Independent Sector;** by Steven E. Mayer. *6 pages (1992); #308 - \$5.00*
- **New Genres for Communicating Evaluation Findings;** by Rainbow Research Inc.; *9 pages (1991); #302 - \$2.50*
- **Growth Factors in the Development of Community Foundation: A Study Guide for Technical Assistance;** by Steven E. Mayer; *53 pages (1988); #082 – \$15.00*
- **The Assets Model of Community Development;** by Steven E. Mayer; *9 pages (1992); #301 - \$5.00*



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