

PAPER
46

Structured focus groups

Dick, Bob (1999) *Structured focus groups*. Chapel Hill: Interchange (mimeo).

An unpublished paper first written in 1993 and revised in 1994 and 1999. It is used as a resource document for helping people learn to facilitate focus groups.

Summary

A brief description of a variant of focus groups, described here as *structured focus group*, is given. As with conventional focus groups, a structured focus group is a facilitated group discussion in which open-ended questions are asked in a way to trigger discussion amongst a panel of participants. However, more effort is given to reducing the structure of the content so that the information is gained from the participants rather than being determined by the questions asked. At the same time, the process is more structured than is common, to increase the quality of information and the time-economy of the procedure.

Focus groups, or focussed group interviews, are facilitated group discussions in which an interviewer asks a series of questions of a group. The group members then provide a response to the question, and a discussion ensues. These groups are a method particularly suited to preliminary research where some time-economy is a need, and where a more structured approach may be premature. It is common for the group session to be audio-taped (or sometimes videotaped) for later analysis, though that is not my preferred option.

Structured focus groups share with convergent interviewing the use of a structured process and unstructured content. They start in an open-ended fashion with the minimal questions that will keep the group members participating. By starting with very general questions, and little guidance about the topic from the facilitator, they provide some protection from allowing the questions you ask to limit the answers you get. The process, on the other hand, is structured. This gives a higher quality of information and more efficient use of time. In fact, the same logic underlies much of both convergent interviewing and structured focus groups. You may therefore find it useful to peruse a description of convergent interviewing to supplement this brief document.

The process described is reasonably robust in inexperienced hands. A more skilled facilitator will get better information by asking better probe questions and by making more efficient use of time. Even in the hands of an inexperienced facilitator, however, the process will usually yield good quality information.

In the form described here, preparation is needed. However, as most of the important differences with structured focus groups are in the group session itself, that is the main emphasis of this description. Detailed descriptions of conventional focus groups are available in a number of works. In particular, Sage publishers have brought out a number of high-quality works on focus groups as a qualitative research tool. The bibliography lists three of them.

The preparation for a focus group includes ...

- design the questions to be used in the different phases of the group;
- identify the population, and draw up a sample of people from it;
in general a maximum diversity sample will usually give better information than a random sample for a particular group size;

The group session for a structured focus group can be regarded as having four phases..

- an introduction;
- a question to tap contextual information;
- questions to tap the key information required; and
- probe questions for follow-up or to elicit more specific information.

There will also be follow-up work, typically writing a report and circulating it to interested people.

The design allows for the introduction of other information for which a response is wanted. This is fed into the conversation part-way through the process. It may come, for example, from prior focus groups, or from a previous round of convergent interviews. On other occasions it may consist of plans or the like for which you would like a reaction from focus group members.

A step by step description follows ...

A. Preparation

- 1 It is a great help if, prior to the focus group, you have a chance to meet participants face-to-face. They will then be more at ease when the focus group is held. You can also explain to them the purpose of the focus group, and what will be done with any information which emerges from it.

At this stage you may or may not want to tell them what questions will be asked. Giving them prior notice allows them to think about the issues ahead

of time. It may also mean that they attend the focus group with their mind already made up; if so, you lose the benefits of cross-fertilisation between participants.

- 2 I assume that you have chosen the venue to be comfortable, and to offer visual and aural privacy. If group members do not know each other, try to create an informal atmosphere where they are encouraged to talk to each other. It can help to have coffee or orange juice available. Greet them as they arrive, and provide some introductions to get them talking.

B. Introduction

- 3 When the actual session starts, begin by introducing yourself. Let them know briefly who you are, and what your role is in this. For example, are you collecting this information on behalf of someone else, or are you the person who needs the information ...

Then provide a brief overview of the session and its purpose ...

- explain the purpose of the focus group, especially the intentions of you and the other people who will be given access to the information;
 - provide a brief overview of the process; a few sentences is enough, but allow some time for questions;
 - briefly explain what will be done with the information: how it will be analysed, and what it will be used for;
 - be clear about whether or not the participants will be identified when the information is passed on to someone else.
- 4 Have a quick round of introductions so that participants have a chance to form a beginning relationship with other participants. Time permitting, it is also helpful to ask them to spend a little time talking to one or two other people -- some relationship with at least one other person will help them to feel less anxious.

Then follow three phases which have a close resemblance. In each, nominal group technique is used to ensure that all participants have a chance to think through the issues and voice their response. A discussion then follows. Finally,

participants are asked to agree on the major opinions and themes which emerged. In this way, the information is refined during the different phases, and the participants help in interpreting the information.

C. Contextual information

The key question or questions are intended to elicit the information that you think you want or need. However, if you focus in too closely you may miss out on something by inadvertently excluding it with your question. The first round of discussion can be set a little broader to ensure that you collect enough contextual information for the more specific information to be interpretable.

So, for example, if your interest is in training programs your contextual questions might address job performance generally. The aim is to trap information which will provide a context for the later phases.

- 5 Announce that in this and subsequent phases, you are interested in knowing the range of opinion held by participants. You therefore hope that they will express their own views even when they are not in agreement with other speakers. Say also that this is not intended to be an exercise where they try to persuade others to their own point of view. They will be most help to you if they note the span of opinion, and if they try to ensure that all views are expressed and recorded.

When they have factual information which is relevant to other people's opinions they will be given a chance to offer this. But, again, this is to be offered as information and not persuasion.

- 6 After announcing that people will be given a few minutes to think about the issue, ask your contextual question. Encourage people to take brief notes as an aid to memory. This increases the likelihood that they will speak their own mind and not be unduly directed by the first speaker they hear.
 - 7 Announce that everyone in turn will be given a chance to speak. Ask participants to take notes on the variety of opinions offered. Say that they will also
-

be given a chance to ask questions for clarification before an open discussion proceeds.

Then invite each person in turn to offer two or three sentences.

After everyone who wishes to speak has said something, allow a few minutes for questions for clarification. No debate is allowed: this is merely to give people a better chance to understand each other before the discussion begins. Supportively and gently correct anyone who either speaks for too long, or tries to debate an issue. As this is the first information collection, what happens here will do much to set the style of the later phases. You have a better chance of collecting good information enjoyably if you can discourage bad habits at this point.

- 8 Ask people during the discussion which follows to try to note down the opinions and information which are important. Remind them that you are interested in the *range* of views, and that you don't expect them to reach agreement.

An open discussion is held. As facilitator, concentrate on keeping the discussion going while discouraging people who might otherwise talk too much or debate issues.

If this first discussion is slow starting, try asking people to talk briefly in pairs about their views, and then return to the large-group discussion.

The next step assumes that you will ask the participants to help you interpret the information. It is more usual in conventional focus groups to record the information on tape and analyse it later. I prefer to include the interpretation in the session itself: it is much more time efficient; you have access to more help from the participants in interpreting the information; it helps to make them partners in the activity instead of just informants.

- 9 If you are a skilled facilitator, ask people to summarise for you the main ideas to emerge from the discussion. If you are less skilled, you may prefer to write up your own summary and ask people to suggest amendments or additions. Then invite them to help you interpret the information by dis-
-

cussing what it means. In any event, the summary and interpretation is captured on newsprint.

At this point you may sometimes have to reiterate that it is not a debate, and you are interested in knowing the range of opinions and information.

D. Key information

This is the heart of the structured focus group, for it is here that you are most likely to collect the most valuable information. Therefore, in your planning, allow the most time for this phase.

The process is almost identical to that for the previous phases. The opening question is different. If you have multiple questions, repeat the process for each of them. You will have planned the question(s) beforehand to ensure that you tap all of the relevant information. However, in the light of the contextual discussion which precedes, you may occasionally find it desirable to reword the question(s) in this phase.

There may also be an extra step during which you feed in results from prior focus groups or other information-collection processes.

- 10 Ask the question.
- 11 Allow individual thinking time, then encourage each participant to give a brief response.
- 12 Open the discussion.
- 13 Capture the summary and interpretation on newsprint.

Then repeat the sequence if you have multiple key questions.

This next step is used only if the structured focus group is part of a larger exercise, and you wish to integrate the information from the other parts. I describe here a brief version. If this is an important part of the process for you then it can be expanded into a complete phase. It is then similar in style to the other information collection phases.

- 14 If you have information from prior activities, this is an opportune moment to feed it into the discussion. First announce the information, preferably supported by a brief list of key points on overhead transparency or the like. (Alternatively you can provide everyone with a single sheet summary of the information.)

Then ask people to provide their response, and discuss how this information affects their interpretation. Collect this on newsprint.

E. Probe questions

Use the same sequence as before for each probe question. On some occasions you may decide that it is more useful to ask several related probe questions at once, and then move into the discussion.

- 15 Ask the question.
- 16 Allow individual thinking time, then encourage each participant to give a brief response.
- 17 Open the discussion.
- 18 Capture the summary and interpretation on newsprint.

Finally, thank the participants for their information. If appropriate you may also want to offer them copies of any subsequent report.

Bibliography

- Dick, B. (1990), *Convergent interviewing*, version 3. Brisbane: Interchange.
- Krueger, R.A. (1988), *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Morgan, D.L. (1988), *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Stewart, D.W. and Shamdasani, P.N. (1990), *Focus groups: theory and practice*. Newbury Park: Sage.
-