Guidelines for Conducting an Employee Focus Group
*Credit: Eliot & Associates**

Focus groups can reveal a wealth of detailed information and deep insight. When well executed, a focus group creates an accepting environment that puts participants at ease allowing them to thoughtfully answer questions in their own words and add meaning to their answers.

If you've ever participated in a well-run focus group you'd probably say it felt very natural and comfortable to be talking with a group of strangers. What you didn't know perhaps were the many hidden structures behind it all.

Overall Guidance

Defining a focus group
- A focus group is a small group of six to ten people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that some participants are left out.
- The focus group moderator nurtures disclosure in an open and spontaneous format. The moderator's goal is to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions from as many different people in the time allotted.
- The ideal amount of time to set aside for a focus group is anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. Beyond that most groups are not productive and it becomes an imposition on participant time.
- Focus groups are structured around a set of carefully predetermined questions – usually no more than 10 – but the discussion is free-flowing. Ideally, participant comments will stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of others. Some people even find themselves changing their thoughts and opinions during the group.

- It takes more than one focus group on any one topic to produce valid results – usually three or four. You'll know you've conducted enough groups (with the same set of questions) when you're not hearing anything new anymore, i.e. you've reached a point of saturation.
- A focus group is not:
  - A debate
  - Group therapy
  - A conflict resolution session
  - A problem solving session
  - An opportunity to collaborate
  - A promotional opportunity
  - An educational session

Designing focus group questions
- Twelve is the maximum number of questions for any one group. Ten is better, and eight is ideal.
- Focus group participants won't have a chance to see the questions they are being asked. So, to make sure they understand and can fully respond to the questions posed, questions should be:
  - Short and to the point
  - Focused on one dimension each
  - Unambiguously worded
  - Open-ended or sentence completion types
  - Non-threatening or embarrassing
  - Worded in a way that they cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" answer (use "why" and "how" instead)
- There are three types of focus group questions:
  1. Engagement questions: introduce participants to and make them comfortable with the topic of discussion
  2. Exploration questions: get to the meat of the discussion
  3. Exit question: check to see if anything was missed in the discussion

Preparing for participants

- In an ideal focus group, all the participants are very comfortable with each other but none of them know each other.
- Homogeneity is key to maximizing disclosure among focus group participants. Consider the following in establishing selection criteria for individual groups:
    - Power – Would a teacher be likely to make candid remarks in a group where his/her principal is also a participant?
    - Cliques – How influential might three cheerleaders be in a group of high school peers?
- Once a group of viable recruits has been established, confirm interest and availability. Give them times and locations of the focus groups and secure confirmation.
- Over-invite in anticipation of a no-show rate of 10 to 20 percent. But you will never want a group of more than 10 participants.

Conducting the focus group

- Ideally, the focus group is conducted by a team consisting of a moderator and assistant moderator. The moderator facilitates the discussion; the assistant takes notes and runs the tape recorder.
- The ideal focus group moderator has the following traits:
    - Can listen attentively with sensitivity and empathy
    - Is able to listen and think at the same time
    - Believes that all group participants have something to offer no matter what their education, experience, or background
    - Has adequate knowledge of the topic
    - Can keep personal views and ego out of the facilitation
    - Is someone the group can relate to but also give authority to
    - Can appropriately manage challenging group dynamics
- The assistant moderator must be able to do the following:
    - Record the session
    - Take notes in case the recorder fails or the playback is inaudible
    - Note/record body language or other subtle but relevant clues
    - Allow the moderator to do all the talking during the group

- Both moderator and assistant moderator are expected to welcome participants, help them make their name tents, and direct them in completing pre-group paperwork.
- Name tents should identify participants with a number written largely for anonymous identification of individuals as they make comments.
- The moderator uses a prepared script to welcome participants, remind them of the purpose of the group and also sets ground rules.
- Before asking the first focus group question, an icebreaker can be inserted to increase comfort and level the playing field. Example: "If you had a limitless budget, where would you vacation?" (IF TIME ALLOWS)
- The focus group moderator has a responsibility to adequately cover all prepared questions within the time allotted. S/he also has a responsibility to get all participants to talk and fully explain their answers. Some helpful probes include:
  - "Can you talk about that more?"
  - "Help me understand what you mean"
  - "Can you give an example?"
- It is good moderator practice to paraphrase and summarize long, complex or ambiguous comments. It demonstrates active listening and clarifies the comment for everyone in the group.
- Because the moderator holds a position of authority and perceived influence, s/he must remain neutral, refraining from nodding/raising eyebrows, agreeing/disagreeing, or praising/denigrating any comment made.
- A moderator must tactfully deal with challenging participants. Here are some appropriate strategies:
  - Self-appointed experts: "Thank you. What do other people think?"
  - The dominator: "Let's have some other comments."
  - The rambler: Stop eye contact; look at your watch; jump in at their inhale.
  - The shy participant: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them.
- When the focus group is complete the moderator thanks all participants
- Immediately after all participants leave, the moderator and assistant moderator debrief while the recorder is still running and label all tapes and notes with the date, time (if more than one group per day), and name of the group.

Prep Materials, Script and Questions for Arts Organization Focus Groups

Below are sample preparation materials and questions for an arts organization focus group centered on inclusive decision-making among internal staff members.

Prep materials:
- Room with appropriate chairs
- Method to record the room (zoom call with no other participants and zoom recording? Camera off)
- Paper at each place for people to take notes/pencil
- Name tent paper with a number on each
- Maybe some snacks?

FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

WELCOME

Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. We appreciate your willingness to participate.

INTRODUCTIONS

Moderator; assistant moderator

PURPOSE OF FOCUS GROUPS

The reason we are having these focus groups is to find out_____. We need your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.

GROUND RULES

1. WE WANT YOU TO DO THE TALKING. We would like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.

2. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.

4. WE WILL BE RECORDING THE GROUP We want to capture everything you have to say. We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.

Questions:

Introductions/icebreaker
- Name/role - and if you had a limitless budget, where would you vacation?

Topic #1: inclusive decision making (20-30 minutes)

Engagement Questions (10 minutes)
- What do you think of when you think of inclusive decision making? Take a minute to write down some thoughts
    - Each share / Reply back themes
- How would you rate our organization on a scale of 1-10 in terms of inclusive decision making right now?   Again, write down your answer

Exploration questions (10 minutes):
- To what extent would you say our organization has improved on this topic, if at all? What are some examples of places we've improved?
- What are some examples of inclusive decision-making you've seen at our organization?
- What are some places where you've seen decision-making that is less inclusive?
- Which of the themes do you think is most important for our organization to make progress on right now? Why?
- Are [X activities] helping with those themes?
- What are some decisions that are -not- appropriate for us to make them more inclusive?

Exit question
- ask if we've missed anything

Topic #2: transparency (20-30 minutes)

Engagement Questions (10 minutes)

- Similar question: what does transparency mean at our organization - what do you first think of? Take a minute to write down some thoughts
    - Each share / Reply back themes
- How would you rate our organization on a scale of 1-10 in terms of transparency right now?

Exploration questions (10 minutes):

- To what extent would you say our organization has improved on this topic, if at all? What are some examples of places we've improved?
- What are some examples of great transparency you've seen at our organization?
- What are some places where you've seen us be less transparent than you might hope?
- Which of the themes do you think is most important for our organization to make progress on right now? Why?
- Are [X activities] helping with those themes?
- What are some decisions that are -not- appropriate for us to make them more transparent?

Exit question

- Ask if we've missed anything

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*The original focus group guide from Eliot & Associates can be accessed at: