

Using Focus Groups for Community Development

by Paul Lachapelle, Community Development Specialist, and Tara Mastel, Community and Economic Development Agent

Focus groups can be an effective means of involving citizens in a decision-making process. Yet, focus groups can also increase conflict and strain group dynamics if not properly executed. This publication provides information on the reasons to use a focus group, the steps involved, the types of questions that could be posed and expected outcomes.

MT200807HR New 5/2008

A FOCUS GROUP IS A STRUCTURED DISCUSSION

with pre-selected individuals intended to collect information or gauge opinion on a specific issue or idea. The group is led by an impartial facilitator in a non-threatening environment. Focus groups are traditionally used in market research to determine consumer opinions of products or services. In community development work, focus groups provide a deliberative venue for learning, trust-building, creative problem solving, and ultimately serve as a way for citizens to influence strategic community planning and development. Focus groups typically last about two hours and involve a small assembly of individuals (between five and 15) selected based on their relationship to the issue and representation of community demographic characteristics.

Why use Focus Groups?

A focus group provides insightful understanding of complex issues and situations which cannot be gathered from standard multiple choice surveys or large public meetings. Focus groups provide an opportunity for individuals to express their views in detail, to hear the opinions of others and to collectively develop resolutions to problems. Both technical and anecdotal information can be presented and debated which can lead to creative problem-solving and broad community support. Since focus groups are based on open communication and critical deliberation, they can lead to improved community relations, trust and a sense of ownership in the process and outcome.

What are the Limitations?

There are several limitations to using a focus group. First, focus groups can require a great deal of time and other resources in preparation, information processing and reporting. Second, selection of the participants,

creation of the discussion guide and choice of an effective facilitator can be significant challenges. Third, focus group findings are often difficult to capture, analyze or accurately summarize. Finally, because focus groups involve such a small number of participants, it is often difficult to generalize the findings to the larger population. Additional research techniques using multiple choice or open-ended surveys directed to a larger sample are excellent follow-up methodologies to focus groups.

What Steps are Involved in a Focus Group?

There are several steps to prepare for, conduct, evaluate and report out to your focus group. Each step is presented with a brief explanation.

Step 1: Clearly define the purpose.

One of the most important steps in conducting a focus group is having a clearly defined purpose. Often this purpose is identified as a result of previous public meetings, survey work or from a contentious issue that a community has been unable to successfully address in the past. Having clarity of purpose, goals and objectives directly affects the quality of the focus group process and outcome.

Step 2: Identify and clarify the role of the facilitator.

An effective facilitator is critical to the success of the focus group. This individual should be perceived as neutral and be able to direct the discussion without influencing participants or expressing personal views. The facilitator begins the discussion, poses appropriate follow-up questions, asks for clarification when necessary and allows the conversation to progress in new directions while ensuring the discussion is relevant to the topic. The facilitator should be able to anticipate when the conversation is becoming hostile and be skilled at resolving disputes and keep the group on-task.

Step 3: Develop the discussion guide.

Prior to convening the focus group, create a discussion guide with a specific introduction (explaining the purpose), body (main questions to be addressed) and conclusion (target date for reporting back to the group and community). The body of the discussion guide will typically consist of about three to seven questions based on the group's purpose, goals or objectives. If multiple focus groups are being conducted on the same topic, each group should follow the same general discussion guide so that information can be compared between groups. Structure the discussion guide with the least threatening questions in the beginning so that participants become comfortable with talking in the group setting. Estimate how much time each portion of the discussion will take and plan no more than two hours total for each focus group. Provide an opportunity for all involved to review and comment on the discussion guide.

How to Pose Questions

Posing effective questions in the discussion guide is a critical component of focus group work. It is important to plan different types of questions to produce varying responses depending on the goals of the group.

Questions can be framed based on the following topics:

1. *Behaviors*: Questions about behaviors focus on what a person has done or is doing. It relates to actions that have or may take place.
2. *Opinions/values*: This area of questioning addresses what a person generally or specifically thinks about a topic and how values influence opinions.
3. *Feelings*: Questions about feelings refer to specific emotional responses to topics.
4. *Knowledge*: Facts concerning a specific issue may conflict among focus group participants in terms of accuracy or interpretation. Posing questions about a participant's background knowledge can establish areas of agreement or conflict on an issue regarding the source or validity of specific information.
5. *Sensory*: Questions about what people have seen, touched, heard, tasted or smelled involve sensory topics.

Step 4: Identify and recruit participants.

Involve all constituencies and interests in the focus group process and consider conducting several separate focus groups that represent different viewpoints. The invitation to participants should detail the purpose of the focus group and how the results will be used. Be sure to address confidentiality issues if they apply. The ideal number of participants per focus group is between five and 15 individuals.

Step 5: Prepare for the meeting.

Plan the meeting at a time that is agreeable to all at a neutral meeting place. Focus groups work particularly well when participants are seated in a circle so they can see each other. Provide resources for participants such as notepaper and pens, name tags or name tents and refreshments. The facilitator should have access to colored markers, flipchart paper and possibly an assistant to help take notes or capture information on a flip chart. Consider using audio and video equipment to aid in data collection but keep in mind that recording can change the dynamic of the group and consent should be sought before the meeting begins.

Step 6: Begin the meeting.

Introduce the facilitator and participants and agree on ground rules and an agenda. Consider including the following in your ground rules:

1. speak one at a time,
2. speak for yourself, not what you think others believe,
3. differing opinions are expected and we may not agree on everything.

Step 7: Facilitate the focus group.

Make sure that every participant has an opportunity to speak and respond. Encourage discussion among participants and do not allow one person to dominate the conversation. Consider having a note-taker sit in the room or have the facilitator write key ideas generated on a flip chart. Using the discussion guide, follow-up questions should be posed that encourage description and depth by avoiding yes/no inquiries. Be careful when asking "why" questions as they may cause participants to feel defensive. Consider probing questions that will give participants a chance to provide further detail to their ideas such as the following:

- Could you tell us more about that?
- Could you give us an example?
- What do you mean by ...?

When the meeting has ended, reflect back by giving a summary of what was said or implied. At the end of the focus group, ask if participants would like to comment on the findings or receive a copy of the report.

Step 8: Analyze the data.

Review the notes, audio, and video from the meeting. Pick out all important key words, quotes and ideas and group them into categories or central themes.

Step 9: Report the findings.

Structure the report with a background of the project or issue, a description of the process the group followed to develop the focus group and a summary of the findings. Allow participants of the focus group an opportunity to comment on the findings to ensure you captured the comments, opinions and ideas accurately. Report back to both the participants and the community about what was learned. This reassures participants that they were heard and that their views were accurately recorded. Provide both a detailed report and an executive summary so that the most vital information is easily accessible.

Additional Resources

Bader, Gloria and Catherine Rossi. (2002) *Focus Groups: A Step-By-Step Guide*. San Diego, CA: Bader Group.

Edmunds, Holly. (2000) *Focus Group Research Handbook*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Krueger, Richard A. (1997) *Moderating Focus Groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Krueger, Richard A. and Mary Anne Casey. (2000) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. (3rd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morgan, David L. and Richard A. Krueger (1997) *The Focus Group Kit*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Stewart, David W., Prem Shamdasani and Dennis W. Rook. (2006) *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Key Points and Expected Outcomes

A successful focus group can expect several distinct outcomes. The principal outcome is the gathering of detailed information on a specific topic or issue from a diverse group of community members. The following are key points of using focus groups:

- Get consensus on the focus group goals, purposes or objectives. Check with the group before you begin so that all involved are aware and comfortable with the goals.
- Develop a discussion guide. This allows for questions to be carefully considered before the group meets and for consistency and comparability between more than one focus group.
- Ensure a neutral environment; pay close attention to the location and time.
- Find an effective facilitator who is seen as neutral by all participants.
- Ensure adequate representation of all interested or affected parties.
- Clearly record, identify and summarize themes, topics, and action items and verify accuracy of the information reported.
- Report back to the group and community with an evaluation and summary that is clear and succinct.



To order additional publications, please contact your county or reservation MSU Extension office, visit our online catalog at www.msueextension.org/publications.asp or e-mail orderpubs@montana.edu

Copyright © 2008 MSU Extension

We encourage the use of this document for nonprofit educational purposes. This document may be reprinted for nonprofit educational purposes if no endorsement of a commercial product, service or company is stated or implied, and if appropriate credit is given to the author and MSU Extension. To use these documents in electronic formats, permission must be sought from the Extension Communications Coordinator, 115 Culbertson Hall, Montana State University, Bozeman MT 59717; E-mail: publications@montana.edu

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Montana State University and Montana State University Extension prohibit discrimination in all of their programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital and family status. Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Douglas L. Steele, Vice Provost and Director, Montana State University Extension, Bozeman, MT 59717.