Using Focus Groups for Operational Improvements

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Slides and resources available at: http://works.bepress.com/ldlong
Learning Outcomes

As a result of this program, participants will be able to:
- explain when to use focus groups as an assessment approach
- describe the focus group process
- apply the concepts to their own residence life/housing program
Overview

- Focus Group Basics
- Focus Group Design
- Selecting Participants
- Analyzing Qualitative Data
- Example: MSU Housing Sign-Up
- Lessons Learned
Focus Group Basics
Focus Group Basics

- When Planning a Focus Group study, consider:
  - Purpose
  - Group size
  - Number of sessions
  - Site selection
  - Equipment needs
  - How to capture the conversation
Purpose

Use focus groups when:
- Your goal is to listen to and learn from other people
- You can explore the topics that interest you through conversations among the participants
- You can obtain in-depth knowledge through sharing of experiences, feelings, and opinions
- Your purpose is to identify problems that you need to address
- Your purpose is to plan for programs, survey questionnaires, quality initiatives, etc.
- You want honest opinions from a key public about products, services, or public issues
Purpose

Avoid focus groups when:
- Your goals are something other than research, such as selling, educating, or negotiating
- Your driving motivation is to save time and money
- You need statistical data
- Your topic will create serious invasions of privacy
- You need strong predictions about how people will behave
Group Size

Differences of opinion on best group size, ranging from low of 5 to high of 12. Some things to consider when determining group size:

- Contentiousness or complexity
- How in-depth do you want to go?
- Levels of interaction
- Participants’ knowledge/experience
**Number of Sessions**

Most common to have 3 – 4 groups, however:
- Is there a large variation in group types?
- Have your questions been answered?
- Most important – when is redundancy reached?
Site Selection

Room selection a key component of a successful focus group study:
- Easily accessible location
- Good lighting
- Comfortable seating
- Round, oval, or U-shaped seating
- Privacy/freedom from distractions
- Refreshments available
- Meets your technology needs
Equipment Needs

- Determine your needs (e.g., Internet access, enough electric outlets)
- Arrange for set-up in advance
- Arrive early to set up equipment
- Make sure equipment does not overshadow the conversation
- Possible needs: Name tents, laptop, projector, extra batteries, extension cord. Others?
Data Collection

Need to determine ahead of time how you will record responses:
  - Audio or video recording
  - Notebook
  - Laptop/iPad
  - Flip chart
  - Memory – least desirable!

Share collected information – to make sure participants agree with summary
Effective Moderation

Possibly the most important aspect of a focus group. Key factors:

- Welcome will set the tone
- Be clear with group what will happen
- Show genuine interest in what is said
- Encourage everyone to participate
- Remain objective – no defensiveness
- Maintain positive body language
- Do not react – no matter what is said
Effective Moderation

- Guide conversation, don’t participate
- Keep your personal views to yourself
- Do not respond in manner that may give impression of right answer(s)
- Don’t answer questions for the group
- Use pause and probe techniques
- ‘Why’ and ‘How’ can be your best friends
- Take advantage of inherent flexibility
Effective Moderation

- Expect the unexpected – late arrivals, emotions, arguments
- Respect your participants

*Geez, you're the worst focus group I've ever seen.*
Effective Moderation

Working with difficult participants
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c03Spcq6Uzs
Focus Group Design
## Focus Group Design

- **Single category**
  - One kind of participant (e.g., only students)
  - Can compare within categories or participants

- **Multiple category**
  - Multiple kinds of participants (e.g., students, staff)
  - Can compare within and between categories

- **Double layer**
  - Participants within clusters (e.g., students by residence hall or staff by department)
  - Can compare between categories and layers

- **Broad involvement**
  - Multiple kinds of participants in a focus group
Selecting Participants
Selecting Participants

- The list
- Piggyback focus groups
- On location
- Nominations
- Screening/selection services
- Ads/announcements
Analyzing Qualitative Data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyzing Qualitative Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify themes (coding)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oranges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennis balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pineapples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Could group by roundness — not practical and has little meaning
Analyzing Qualitative Data

Identify themes (coding)

What can we provide to help you improve your performance?

Fruit (3):
- Apples
- Oranges
- Pine apples

Athletic equipment (2):
- Cleats
- Soccer balls

Context matters. The question can aid you in categorizing the responses. The implication would be to provide some type of fruit and athletic equipment to improve athletic performance.
Analyzing Qualitative Data

How can we support you in using Restorative Justice tools and applying the Restorative Justice philosophy in your work?

1. Better examples of how it applies to everyday situations.
2. I don't think it works.
3. Make a website about the information.
4. I would like pre-made kit or bulletin board would be helpful.
5. Find ways to make it meanwhile for residents.
6. Help me define what the program and process is to my residents.
7. Give us examples for when we would actually use it

Activity: Identify themes and then place the statements within the categories.
Analyzing Qualitative Data

How can we support you in using Restorative Justice tools and applying the Restorative Justice philosophy in your work?

**Doesn’t work:** I don’t think it works.

**Resource Idea:**
Make a website about the information.
I would like pre-made kit or bulletin board would be helpful.

**Clarify use of RJ:**
Better examples of how it applies to everyday situations.
Find ways to make it meanwhile for residents.
Help me define what the program and process is to my residents.
Give us examples for when we would actually use it

Sample coding structure
**Example**

Reviewing the Housing Sign-Up Process at MSU
Example: Housing Sign-up Review

- **Purpose:** Understand students’ experience with the housing sign-up process. Learn about web technologies that would improve the sign-up process.
- **Design:** Single category with 3 groups
- **Participant selection:** Used nominations
- **Incentives:** Pizza
- **Data collection:** Two notetakers and iPads
- **Analysis:** Coded responses and compared themes between the focus groups
Lessons Learned
Lessons Learned: Before the FG

Environment:
- Make sure the location of the focus group is scheduled in a neutral place.
- Arrive early to the site where the focus group will take place. Check for proper set up, temperature, etc. Eliminate things that cause excessive noise or distractions.
- Make sure the seating set up is effective for hearing and observing the focus group participants.
Lessons Learned: Before the FG

Note Taking:
- Ask the note taker to organize the data by categories before sending it back to the person analyzing the data.
- The note taker should spend time looking at the questions and determine how notes will be taken. Make sure you can read your notes and ask participants to repeat an answer if needed.
Lessons Learned: During the FG

- Disregard and don’t react to negative comments about your product/service or a person. Continue taking notes and address the negative action as needed at an appropriate time after the focus group.
- If a participant veers off the subject when answering a question, acknowledge what is being said, but steer them back to the topic, don’t let them go on too long.
- Even if a participant says things not related to the subject, write some of these things down. This will build trust and make all participants feel like what they are talking about is meaningful, thus encouraging participation.
Lessons Learned: After the FG

- The note taker should type up the notes as soon as possible so that the information is fresh in their mind.
- Group data together into categories and organize in a manner that makes sense for the analyst to interpret and understand.
- Type your notes and make sure the data included is pertinent to the questions asked. Eliminate items not useful and add any comments you noted that may be of interest to the analyzer or pertinent to the project.
Questions, Comments, Thoughts?

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