

# **Toolkit for Conducting Focus Groups**



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This manual has been provided to assist you in conducting focus groups. Consider this manual a “toolkit” that will facilitate your training and enhance your facilitation skills.

This toolkit contains two sections: Research Basics and Focus Groups. The first part of the manual gives you a brief introduction to this research project, contact information for technical assistance, and information deemed essential for carrying out quality research. The second part of this manual contains information on how to facilitate focus groups, including how to plan for and conduct focus groups, how to handle difficult situations, and guidelines for effective facilitation and note taking. In addition, you are provided with the appropriate focus group forms, including the verbal consent script, which will also act as a sign-in sheet for the focus groups.

We hope that this toolkit is a useful resource for you, not only for this research project, but also for future participatory research efforts that you carry out in your communities.

We thank you for being a part of this important work!

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# Research Basics

## **Principles of Research Ethics**

### **A. Voluntary Participation**

- Individuals must agree to participate in the research of their own free will. Written consent is preferred, but verbal consent that is recorded may be done instead.
- It is essential that participants understand that their participation is voluntary and that there are no consequences for refusing to take part in the study or to answer specific questions.
- Researchers must explain the nature of the study openly and honestly and in a way that is understandable to the participant. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the participant understands the nature of the research, the purposes of the research, the potential risks and benefits to the participant of participation, and the fact that they may withdraw from participation at any time.
- It is helpful to make sure that there is adequate time to answer any questions that an individual may have before and during the focus group.
- Should individuals look confused or withdrawn, it is a good idea to ask them if they have any questions before proceeding. If an individual does not want to talk further about a topic, the researcher must respect this.
- Communicate how information obtained during the focus group/community discussion will be used.

### **B. Confidentiality**

- Researchers must agree to keep personal information that is revealed to them confidential. This means that you cannot share the specific contents with anyone except another researcher on the project. This also means that you cannot share any information that would allow another researcher or outsider to know who participated in the study.
- Researchers must explain how confidentiality will be protected. Only you will know their name and only other researchers will have access to their information. No information will be publicly reported that would identify them as a participant in the study.
- When these conditions of confidentiality cannot be met, researchers must explain this to the individual.

### **C. Professional Competence**

- Researchers must not misrepresent or misuse their expertise as researchers. You should undertake only those tasks for which you have been trained. You should not act in any capacity other than as a researcher while conducting research.
- Researchers are expected to fulfill the highest standards in their work. You should ask for help when needed to ensure quality interactions with individuals and quality information is collected.

### **D. Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity**

- Researchers and their work must respect the rights, dignity and worth of all people.
- In their work, researchers must be respectful of the rights of others to hold values, attitudes, and opinions that differ from their own.
- Researchers must strive to advance and protect the public good through their work.

## CONFIDENTIALITY

One of the most critical principals of research ethics is maintaining confidentiality of research participants. Participants of research projects share valuable and sometimes sensitive information with the researcher, and they trust that the researcher will ensure that their identity is protected. It is imperative that no one but the researchers coordinating and conducting the focus groups knows the names of participants. Furthermore, people other than the researchers should not have access to the responses from individual participants, whether accidental or intentional. Finally, it is especially critical that no one but the necessary researchers have the ability to match the names of individuals to their responses.

OMNI Research and Training, Inc. has developed guidelines that you may adapt to ensure that confidentiality is maintained. Please review these guidelines carefully and establish a procedure for following them.

- Develop a code sheet, listing the participants' names with a code next to each name, assigned by the researcher, which uniquely identifies each respondent. This code, not the respondent's name, will be written on the form for taking interview notes.
- Keep the code sheet in a secure location so that people other than the researchers do not have access to it.
- Do not write the names of respondents on the form for taking interview notes. Use the unique code assigned to the respondent to protect confidentiality.
- Keep participants' responses in a secure location, separate from the code sheet, to protect the identity of individuals participating in focus groups.
- All researchers on the project should be trained prior to conducting the focus groups to discuss confidentiality issues and review procedures for maintaining confidentiality.

## **Building Rapport**

*“Building rapport” refers to establishing a connection with participants that facilitates comfortable and open communication. Rapport is important to the facilitation process, because it can dramatically influence the willingness of participants to answer questions, and how openly and honestly they answer the questions they are asked. The purpose of focus groups is to gain information about the topic(s) of interest from the perspective of participants. Rapport helps achieve this.*

### **Participants as Experts**

Individuals are being invited to participate in focus groups because they are viewed as possessing important knowledge about particular experiences, needs, or perspectives that we hope to learn more about as a result of the needs assessment. Let participants know that you are there to learn from them. Expressing this to participants helps to establish a respectful appreciation for valuable contributions that they will make to the needs assessment.

### **Familiarity with the Community and Sensitive Topics**

First and foremost, become familiar with some of the critical issues affecting the community represented by participants. It is true that, as the facilitator, you are there to learn from participants. However, it is necessary to have a basic awareness of sensitive issues so that you do not offend or insult participants unknowingly or unintentionally.

### *Exercise*

***Brainstorm some issues that may be sensitive in the communities where you will be conducting the focus groups.***

### **Your Role as the Facilitator**

It is important to present yourself as a researcher rather than a friend. You will need to let participants know that you are part of a team that is conducting research for a community needs assessment. This formality communicates to participants that their participation is important and contributes to the community.

### **Balancing Rapport and Professionalism**

Part of your role is to achieve a balance between building rapport with participants and conveying an appropriate level of professionalism. Your role during focus groups is not that of a good conversationalist or a friend who provides feedback, but a professional. If you are too casual, participants may not see you as someone who is prepared to take what they have to say seriously.

However, if you are too formal, participants may feel intimidated by you and may not be as willing to reveal information. Strive to achieve a balance between being formal and casual during your focus groups.

### **Recognizing and Appreciating Participants for their Time and Contributions**

This is one of the most important things you can do to help create rapport. Remember to thank participants for their time and participation. Let them know that the information they have shared is valuable for this project.

#### *Exercise*

*There are different rules of rapport in relation to gender and age. What might be important in building rapport when interviewing a male community elder? Or a female homemaker?*



## Listening Skills

*Good listening is key to conducting focus groups that will result in the collection of useful information. Being a good listener means being an “interested” listener. This is done by demonstrating that you are paying attention to what participants are sharing, staying neutral or impartial, and practicing appropriate silence.*

### **Listen Carefully to Participants**

Active listening allows you to probe effectively and at appropriate points during the focus group. Active listening involves not only hearing what someone is saying, but also noticing body posture and facial gestures (i.e., any changes in nonverbal behavior) that might provide cues as to the appropriate or necessary ways to engage participants.

### **Show Participants You Are Listening**

Show participants that you are listening to what they are saying. Signs that you are paying attention may include leaning forward slightly, looking directly at participants while they are speaking, or nodding at appropriate times. Such behaviors not only indicate that you, as the facilitator, are more engaged, but also help maintain the engagement of the participants, themselves. Looking away, yawning, or frequently checking your watch will most likely make participants feel that you are not listening. If participants suspect that you are not listening to them with great care, they may take their role of sharing expert knowledge less seriously and, therefore, may not elaborate or provide much detail with their answers.

### *Exercise*

*Practice actions that signal nonverbal signs of active listening. Similarly, role play nonverbal signs that may indicate that you are not listening.*

### **The Importance of Neutrality During the Interview**

While showing participants that you are actively listening and interested in what they are sharing, you will also want to remain as neutral or impartial as possible, even if you have a strong opinion about something. Use phrases such as “Thank you. That is helpful.” Comments such as “I can’t believe it!” or “You really think that?!” are not appropriate remarks for a facilitator to make, because they infer your opinion and impose judgment on the participant, which will shut down discussion.

### *Exercise*

*Brainstorm a list of responses that should be avoided and others that would be appropriate in a circumstance in which the facilitator has a strong, opposing opinion to what a participant is sharing.*

#### **Gathering Honest Information**

You want to gather information during focus groups that is as honest as possible. If participants sense that you have an opinion, they may want to change their responses so that they will seem more socially desirable, rather than reflect what they truly believe or feel about a topic.

#### **Silence Encourages Elaboration**

Allowing silence at times encourages elaboration by participants because it gives them a chance to think about what they want to say. More often than not, participants will fill the silence with more information. However, it is important to strike a balance between keeping the conversation moving (so that you use your time well) and allowing participants adequate time to share and process what has been shared.

## Using Probes and Asking Clarifying Questions

*Probes and clarifying questions are an important part of interviewing and have two main purposes: to help clarify what an interview respondent has said and to help get more detailed information on topics of interest. Probes allow the interview respondent to provide more than just a one-sentence answer to the questions you ask.*

### **Examples of Probes**

Some good examples of probes used to help clarify what an interview respondent has said include:

“Please tell me (more) about that...”

“Could you explain what you mean by...”

“Can you tell me something else about...”

An example of a probe that you would not want to use is:

“So you’re telling me that ..... Right?”

→ *EXERCISE: Think of some effective things you could say as a probe, and some phrases that you would want to stay away from.*

### **Keeping Them Talking**

As a general rule, you want to interrupt the interview respondent as little as possible. If you feel that you need to follow-up with something they said by using probes, make a mental note of it and ask them about it when they have finished their thought.

### **Probing in Not Finishing Their Thoughts**

Again, you want to show the interview respondent that you are there to listen to what they have to say. Interrupting the interview respondent may influence how they answer and if they answer the questions you ask. If an interview respondent strays off course, encourage them to finish their thought. After they have finished their thought, it is appropriate to bring them back to the question you asked to make sure that they have answered it completely.

### **Seeing Things From Their Perspective**

Using probes for clarification helps you to gather good information while avoiding the assumption that you understand the meaning of a key word, phrase, or perspective of the interview respondent. Probes such as the ones above help you see things from the perspective of the person being interviewed.

### **Avoid Making Assumptions**

Clarifying questions and probes gives the interview respondent clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be and asking them for clarification, details, and examples. The opinions of the respondent should not be assumed by the interviewer. To help ensure that you are not assuming,

make small steps in your questioning with simple questions, not big leaps. This way you will get more detail and elaboration from the interview respondent and will keep you from making assumptions about what they have shared.

### **The Interview Respondent Is The Expert**

Using probes to clarify what the interview respondent has said reinforces the fact that the respondent has expert knowledge, based on their direct experiences with the topic that the researcher wants to understand. Good probes let the interview respondent know that you are listening to their answers and that you would like to know more detail about where they are coming from about the topic. This also helps to establish the rapport that is so important to the interview process.

### **Good Probing is Not Leading**

It is important to avoid asking questions that are leading, meaning that they reflect your opinions or assumptions about a topic.

### **Avoid Asking Leading Questions**

An example of a leading question is “Don’t you think...” This presents to the interview respondent that you have an opinion, not that you are there to learn from them as an unbiased listener. This type of questioning may lead the interview respondent to answer questions according to what you expect to hear, rather than how they really feel. The interview respondent may also want you to look at them in a favorable way, matching your opinions rather than sharing what they truly believe or have experienced.

Related to the guidelines to interviewing, you want to stay as neutral as possible during the interview.

## **Time Management**

*Time management is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of conducting interviews. It is important that the interviewer and the interviewee have agreed upon the amount of time they will spend in the interview, and that this time is managed appropriately so that all the topics can be covered.*

### **Managing Time During the Interview**

Individuals love to talk about their experiences and may have a tendency to go on and on about them. Here is where your skills as an interviewer are put to the test. As the interviewer, your job is to structure the interview in such a way that you elicit a complete response to questions, probing insightfully so that you get the level of detail you need in order to address the issues adequately.

### **Keep the Interview Moving**

It is also your job to politely move the interview forward when what the respondent is sharing is less useful given your research questions. Sometimes, it is possible to do this by listening for a segue – something that the respondent talks about that is relevant to another question or set of questions. Other times, you may want to acknowledge that your time together is waning and there are some other aspects of their work and experience that you want to be sure you have time to learn about and explore, and, for this reason, you are going to move on.

### **Check With the Respondent**

At least once during the interview, ask the respondent how they are doing with time. Use your perceptive abilities to sense if there is a feeling of strain on the part of the respondent to participate in the interview. If he or she has had another commitment come up since you scheduled the interview with him or her, there may be a feeling of being rushed. It is polite to check in, and it also allows you to move to the most critical questions in case that you must end the interview early.

### **Efficient Use of the Interview Guide**

A well-developed interview guide will have built-in prompts that remind you, as the interviewer, to do a time check periodically to make sure that the interview is progressing appropriately. Another strategy is to listen for relevant information to questions that you have not yet asked so that you can skip these later. If you do run out of time before you have covered all the questions in the interview guide, be sure to use your remaining time asking and exploring only the most important questions remaining. The more familiar you are with the interview guide, the easier it will be for you to prioritize particular questions and to recognize when the respondent has already provided relevant information (indeed, adequately answered) questions you have not yet asked. This will ensure that your questions do not feel redundant to the respondent and that the interview, overall, flows smoothly and efficiently.

### **Not Rushing the Interview Respondent**

Overall, you want to achieve a balance between collecting necessary information and gathering important data that have not been anticipated. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference until you ask clarifying questions or probes. Again, you want to make sure that you interrupt the interview respondent as little as possible and not rush them with their answers while keeping them on course with the interviewing guide.

# Planning and Conducting Focus Groups

## Focus Groups – An Overview

*"A focus group is a data collection procedure in the form of a carefully planned group discussion among about ten people plus a moderator and observer, in order to obtain diverse ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest in a relaxed, permissive environment that fosters the expression of different points of view, with no pressure for consensus" (Focus Groups: Background and "How To" Guidelines, 1995).*

Focus groups normally have between seven and ten participants. Groups with fewer than seven participants often result in a limited range of ideas and opinions being represented. Groups larger than ten may be hard to manage and record.

### Why are focus groups useful?

- ⇒ Group dialogue tends to generate rich information, as participants' insights tend to "trigger" the sharing of others' personal experiences and perspectives in a way that can more easily or readily tease out the nuances and tensions of complex topics and subjects – a dynamic that is not present during key informant interviews.
- ⇒ Provides information directly from individuals who are invested in the issue or hold expert knowledge about a topic of which little is known among researchers. Provides information from people who can provide insights about actual conditions and situations.
- ⇒ Provides a representation of diverse opinions and ideas.
- ⇒ Provides a relatively low cost and efficient way to generate a great deal of information.

### What are some limitations of focus groups?

- ⇒ Focus groups are susceptible to facilitator bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of findings.
- ⇒ Discussions can be sidetracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.
- ⇒ Focus groups generate important information. However, such information often has limited generalizability to a whole population.

## **Focus Groups Guiding Principles for the Group**

At the beginning of a focus group, it is helpful to let everyone know about some ways to make the group proceed smoothly and respectfully for all participants. The following are some recommended guidelines or “ground rules” that help establish the group norms:

- Only one person talks at a time.
- Confidentiality is assured. “What is shared in the room stays in the room.”
- It is important for us to hear everyone’s ideas and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers to questions – just ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.
- It is important for us to hear all sides of an issue – both the positive and the negative.
- It is important for women’s and men’s ideas to be equally represented and respected.

These ground rules may be presented to the group, and displayed throughout the discussion, on a flip chart page that is taped or hung on a wall in a clearly visible location. In addition to these ground rules, which have been established prior to the focus group, it is important to invite participants to establish their own ground rules or guiding principles for the discussion. Once the above ground rules have been presented, it will be important to ask participants if they have anything to add to the list. The note taker should add these to the flip chart page.



## Steps in Planning Focus Groups

- **Select the Team** Conducting focus groups requires a small team, comprised of a:
  1. Facilitator to guide the discussion, and
  2. Note taker who will make hand-written notes and observations during the discussion, which serves as a “back-up” in case something happens with the recording equipment or participants wish not to have their discussion tape-recorded.
  
- **Select the participants** Focus groups will be held for several different types of groups. One part of planning a focus group is to identify the most suitable individuals to participate in each group. When recruiting for focus groups, be sure that participants fit the criteria established for inclusion in a particular focus group. For example, if you want to learn about how immigrants in a certain community navigate important systems, such as the health care system, participants should be limited to immigrants in that community. It is also important to ensure that focus group participants represent the diversity of the larger group about whom you want to learn. To go back to the previous example, in order to learn about both the facilitators and barriers of getting basic needs for services met, it will be important to learn from those who have successfully navigated such systems, as well as those who have struggled to do so, although probably not in the same focus group as there may be issues of shame associated with being relatively less successful in navigating systems of care. As this example illustrates, it is very important to be sensitive to tendencies toward social comparisons when composing focus groups. Depending on the issues being explored, it may also not be appropriate to invite men and women to participate in the same focus group.

**Decide on the time and location** Focus groups normally last about an hour and a half, though they may be longer in some cases. Plan a time of day that is convenient for the participants and responsive to their life circumstances. Groups should be conducted in locations that are also convenient and comfortable for participants, are quiet, and have some degree of privacy. Depending on the community, it may be necessary (and reflect a greater degree of cultural sensitivity) if the group met in a public space, such as a church or community center. It is up to you to judge the situation and decide on the best, most appropriate location. Set a date, reserve a space, and arrange for food and drink.

- **Invite the participants** Before the date of the focus group, invite appropriate participants to take part in a particular focus group, using established selection criteria as your guide. It is often helpful to contact confirmed participants the day before the group to remind them of the time and location of the focus group and to confirm, once again, their participation.
  
- **Prepare the focus group guide** *(This will be provided to you by OMNI)* The discussion guide is an outline, prepared in advance for a specific set of respondents, that covers the topics and issues to be explored. The guide is designed with the overall research questions in mind and is constructed to ensure that topics covered in the focus groups relate to these research objectives.

## Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

### ✓ Obtain verbal consent

Read the verbal consent script provided in this training manual. Make sure participants understand their rights, and ensure them that their identities will not be revealed in any publications/reports.

### ✓ Establish rapport

Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is helpful for the facilitator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session and set the group at ease. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome.

### ✓ Follow the Focus Group Guide

The focus group guide provides a framework for the facilitator to explore, probe, and ask questions. Initiating each topic with a carefully crafted question will help participants share their experiences but in a focused and meaningful manner. It is helpful to follow the focus group guide as much as possible when facilitating a focus group, to increase the credibility of the research results. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient. If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the facilitator can probe for fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques are:

- *Repeat the question* – repetition gives more time to think.
- *Pause for the answer* – a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
- *Repeat the reply* – hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation
- *Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions* – they provoke more detailed information
- *Use neutral comments* – “Anything else?”

### ✓ Revising Focus Group Questions

Straying from the focus group guide is *strongly discouraged* because the questions on the guide are essential in order to gather the data that is needed for the needs assessment. However, if you should have to revise a question or two in order to be enhance the cultural sensitivity or responsiveness of the guide, please make sure this is done in collaboration with OMNI. Also, please be aware that certain types of questions impede group discussions. For example, yes-or-no questions are one-dimensional and do not stimulate discussion. “Why” questions put people on the defensive and cause them to take “politically correct” sides on controversial issues.

### ✓ Other Tips for Guiding the Discussion

In focus groups, it is not uncommon for a few individuals to dominate the discussion. Sometimes in mixed gender groups, one gender may tend to speak more than the other. To balance participation, and ensure that every participant has an opportunity to contribute to the discussion, you might consider the following strategies:

- Address questions to individuals who are reluctant to talk
- Give nonverbal cues (look in another direction or stop taking notes when an individual talks for an extended period)
- Intervene, politely summarize the point, then refocus the discussion

✓ **Minimize Pressure to Conform to a Dominant View Point**

When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a dominant viewpoint has occurred. To minimize this group dynamic, the facilitator should probe for alternative views. For example, the facilitator can raise another issue, or say, “We have had an interesting discussion, but let’s explore other ideas or points of view. Has anyone had a different experience that they wish to share?”

✓ **Record the discussion**

Ideally, focus group discussions will be recorded using both tape recording equipment, and the hand-written notes of a note taker. Hand-written notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any salient observations of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions, hand movements, group dynamics, etc. The note taker should monitor tape recording equipment and may also play a key role in keeping track of time.

## Difficult Situations

*Difficult situations may arise during your focus group. The following are some examples of common situations that can occur and what you can do in each of these situations.*

### **What do I do if someone is dominating the conversation?**

Focus groups, ideally, allow researchers to collect the opinions and ideas of a variety of people. If someone is doing a lot of the talking, however, this may prevent others from contributing their thoughts, and limits the usefulness of the focus group. It is important to notice when this is happening and do what you can to try to make sure that other people have the opportunity to say things, even if they seem reluctant at first or insist that what is being said by others reflects what they would have said. It is important to have people say things in their own words as much as possible. If someone is dominating the conversation, you might want to respectfully acknowledge their contribution, and thank them, saying something like, “I really appreciate your comments.” Then make direct eye contact with other people and ask something like, “I’m very interested in hearing how other people are feeling about this issue” or “It’s very interesting to get a variety of perspectives, and I would like to hear from other people as well.”

### **What do I do if women and men are participating at different levels, i.e., men are speaking up more than women or vice versa?**

This situation is very similar to the one highlighted above, in which a few people are dominating the conversation to the exclusion of others. So, you may be able to apply many of the same strategies. Often, if there is inequality in how much men or women are participating, it is the women who speak up less and the men who speak more, though it is possible for the opposite to occur, as well. It is vitally important that both men’s and women’s voices be heard, and there are two sets of strategies for trying to deal with this situation. One set of strategies focuses on encouraging men to participate less and the other focuses on encouraging women to participate more. If men are dominating the conversation, respectfully thank a man who has just spoken, then suggest that it would be great to hear from some of the women present, as well. If women seem to be participating less, try to make a lot of eye with women, and even ask individual women direct questions.

### **What do I do if no one responds to a question?**

In this kind of situation, it is helpful to try to understand why people aren’t responding.

- ***Did you ask a question that was difficult for the participants to understand?***  
If you think this might be the case, you might try asking the question in a different way. The more familiar you are with the research objectives of a particular focus group, the more successful you will be in rephrasing or rewording a question in an appropriate way that ensures that salient issues are explored and the research integrity of the group discussion is maintained.
- ***Do you think you might have asked a politically sensitive question (i.e., something that people are afraid to answer honestly because it might make other people angry)?***

If you think this might be the problem, you might move to a different question or topic that is less sensitive, and try coming back to the topic later, or use probes, during a different line of questioning, that might get at aspects of the sensitive topic but more subtly.

Here, again, it might be helpful simply to rephrase the question or ask a slightly different question. Either approach may make it possible to pose a less controversial question to the group

***Are people tired of talking about the topic and/or do they have no more to say about a topic?***

In this case, it may be important to simply state, “Is there anything else that you would like to share? [pause] If not, we can move on to our next question.” This communicates to participants that this is their opportunity to contribute any additional thoughts and allows you to move on to the next topic more naturally and politely. If you, as the facilitator, think you haven’t gotten all of the information you want on that topic, rather than trying to force things, just be aware that there may be an opportunity to elicit salient information in probing that occurs with respect to other questions. In other words, there may be important linkages and connections to explore throughout the focus group that emerge through subsequent discussion.

***Are people feeling uncomfortable about talking?***

This typically occurs at the beginning of a focus group and is less likely to occur when focus groups start with an icebreaker or the facilitator is able to set a comfortable tone and put people at ease in the beginning. If, however, this continues to be an issue during the focus group, you may need to back up and do a little work to make people feel more comfortable. Talk about easier topics, things that you think participants may be more familiar with or comfortable talking about, or, perhaps, things that you know are particularly interesting to them. This may help the participants begin to feel more comfortable talking in a group setting.

If no one responds to a question, and you aren’t sure exactly what the problem is, it’s okay sometimes to just wait it out. Be quiet for a moment and allow people time to think. Often, someone will speak up, either to answer the question or to ask a question that allows you to have a better understanding of the silence.

**What do I do if the group begins to talk about topics that are not relevant to the research?**

Sometimes the conversation will start to stray away from the topics of the focus group. When this happens, you might take advantage of a pause and say, “Thank you for that interesting idea. Perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session. For the purposes of exploring further the specific topics that are the focus of this discussion, with your consent, I would like to move on to another item.” Another strategy is to orient the group to the time you have remaining for your discussion. You do not want the duration of the focus group to extend beyond the amount of time you communicated to participants. You may want to mention this when discussion strays from the intended focus, and then refocus the discussion accordingly or use this as an opportunity to indicate that you want to be sure that you hear from others.

### **What do I do if people are having side conversations (i.e., conversations among themselves)?**

If people are having conversations among themselves, it can disrupt the focus group by making the other participants feel uncomfortable, making it hard for people to hear what others are saying, and making it hard for the facilitator to focus on what is being said. One of the best ways to handle this situation is to address it before the focus group begins, when you tell the participants about focus group ground rules. Stress that it is *very* important not to have side conversations because it interferes with individual's full participation in the group discussion and also poses challenges for recording the discussion. If side conversations do occur during a focus group, do not stop the conversation abruptly. You might respectfully remind people of the ground rules and ask that people finish their conversations and rejoin the larger group discussion taking place. This kind of disruption may also signal that it is time to take a break, and you may want to suggest no more than a five minute break (so that people can use the restroom – make sure people know where to go – or to stretch). It will be important to make sure people know at one time the focus group will continue and be proactive about bringing people back together so that the focus group can re-convene.

### **What happens if an interview respondent skips ahead, providing information relevant to, or even completely answering, a question that I haven't gotten to yet?**

At times participants may skip topics or move ahead of where you are in the focus group guide. You will want to use probes to get detailed information from them on the topic at-hand, and then gently return the person to the topic of interest, falling back on the focus group guide. You do not want to interrupt them; rather, let them finish their thought and remain an interested listener. If they have already answered a question on the focus group guide you will still want to ask the question when you get to it, acknowledging that relevant information may have already been shared, but you want to make sure that the group has an opportunity to explore the issue more fully, if need be. You will want to make sure that all of the topics in the focus group guide are discussed as completely as possible during the discussion.

### **What do I do if I ask a question and the interview respondent says that they do not feel comfortable answering it?**

An interview respondent may not feel comfortable answering a question from the interview guide. Or, it may be an issue of permission from a spouse to discuss the topic. This must be honored- according to research ethics and informed consent, a respondent may elect to not answer any question at any time. At the beginning of the interview make it clear that they may decline to answer a question(s) or choose to stop the interview at any time. If this happens, say "thank you" and that you acknowledge and appreciate their honesty. Then, ask them if it would be okay to move on to the next question in the interviewing guide.

### **What do I do if people begin leaving?**

It is very important to try and keep people as fully engaged in the discussion as possible and for the entire focus group. You can try to mitigate this problem in advance by letting people know how long the focus group will take and emphasize that it is important for individuals to stay for the entire discussion. You may also ask the group at the beginning of the meeting if anyone has to leave early

so that you can change the order of the questions to ask the most important questions before the first people leave.

### ***EXERCISE***

- *Discuss some of the most difficult situations you've experienced or anticipate experiencing. Explore other ways these situations might be handled.*
- *Think of other difficult situations that are not listed here and come up with ideas of how to address them.*

## Qualities of an Effective Focus Group Facilitator

*What are the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator?*

*What qualities does the facilitator need to possess to conduct a quality focus group?*

### **Roles and Responsibilities:**

- Keep participants focused, engaged, attentive and interested
- Monitor time and use limited time effectively
- Use prompts and probes to stimulate discussion
- Use the focus group guide effectively to ensure all topics are covered
- Politely and diplomatically enforce ground rules:
  - Make sure everyone participates and at a level that is comfortable
  - Limit side conversations
  - Encourage one person to speak at a time
- Be prepared to explain or restate questions
- Diffuse and pre-empt arguments
- After the focus group, work with the note taker to complete the Debrief Discussion Tool immediately after each focus group. To facilitate the debriefing discussion, review the notes of the discussion, discussing areas that seemed particularly important or salient given your knowledge of the research questions. Capture these insights using the Debrief Discussion Tool.
- [Need to determine who will take responsibility for these notes, as well as the consent forms, Debriefing Discussion Tool and tapes of the focus group discussion.]

### **Effective Facilitators:**

- Have good listening skills
- Have good observation skills
- Have good speaking skills
- Can foster open and honest dialogue among diverse groups and individuals
- Can remain impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)
- Can encourage participation when someone is reluctant to speak up
- Can manage participants who dominate the conversation
- Are sensitive to gender and cultural issues
- Are sensitive to differences in power among and within groups



## Roles and Responsibilities of Note Takers

*What are the roles and responsibilities of note takers?*

*What qualities do note takers need to possess to record a focus group effectively?*

### **Roles and Responsibilities:**

- Bring the following materials for the focus group:
  - Materials to record the focus group, including writing utensils (more than one, in case a pencil breaks or a pen runs out of ink) and **a lot of paper**
  - Bring a flip chart as well as markers of different colors for recording information (as needed) on a flip chart or dry erase board. NOTE: if a dry erase board will be used in place of a flip chart, be sure that dry erase markers are available or that you bring this type of marker.
  - Tape for affixing flip chart pages to the wall, as needed.
  - Recording equipment: a tape recorder, extension cord, extra tapes, and extra batteries
- Ensure that ground rules for the focus group are written clearly and neatly on a flip chart (it may be helpful to do this beforehand)
- Assist the facilitator in arranging the room (e.g., seating, flip chart stand and paper, placement of the ground rules, etc.)
- Record major themes, ideas, comments and observations regarding group dynamics in hand-written notes using the Focus Group Note Taking Form
- Complete the Debrief Discussion Tool with the focus group facilitator immediately after each focus group. To facilitate the debriefing discussion, review your notes with the focus group facilitator. Capture any new insights that emerged as a result of this discussion with the facilitator.
- Do not throw away any papers with notes of the focus group discussion. These will be stored with other data collected through the needs assessment.
- [Need to determine who will take responsibility for these notes, as well as the consent forms, Debriefing Discussion Tool and tapes of the focus group discussion.]

### ***Effective Note Takers:***

- Have good listening skills
- Have good observation skills
- Have good writing skills
- Are able to take notes that are comprehensive but not word-for-word
- Use the note taking form provided

- Act as an observer, not as a participant
- Can remain impartial (i.e., do not give her/his opinions about topics, because this can influence what people say)

# Instruments

## ✓ Focus Group Checklist

### **Remember to *bring* the following:**

- Two writing utensils (in case the lead in a pencil breaks/ a pen runs out of ink)
- A notepad with sufficient paper for taking notes during the entire focus group
- A flip chart
- Dry Erase and/or regular markers of different colors
- Name tags or badges
- Tape for affixing flip chart pages to the wall, as needed.
- Recording equipment:
  - a tape recorder
  - extension cord
  - extra tapes
  - extra batteries
- Consent forms (enough copies for all participants)
- Extra pens for participants to sign consent forms
- Focus group guide
- Note taking form
- Debrief Discussion Tool

## ✓ Focus Group Checklist

### **Remember to do the following...**

- Become very familiar with the primary research objectives of the study
- Become very familiar with the focus group guide
- Review this checklist
- Arrive at the focus group location a few minutes before participants to organize the room and your materials
- Welcome focus group participants, inviting them to get something to eat
- Explain, in a general and brief way, the purpose of the focus group and how information collected during focus groups will be used and toward what goal
- Introduce yourself, the note taker and other observer (if present)
- Explain participants' rights and what participating in the focus group will entail
  - Remind participants of the duration of the focus group, emphasizing the importance of their participation during the entire discussion
  - Let people know where the closest restroom facilities are located
- Obtain written consent to participate and have the focus group recorded
- At the end of the focus group, give the participants the contact information of **[whom]** should they have any questions
- Complete the Debrief Discussion Tool with the note taker
- Ensure that tapes are labeled appropriately (see labeling instructions, below)
- Ensure that hand-written notes, tapes, the Debrief summary form, and consent forms are returned to the designated person at OMNI Research and Training, Inc.

## FOCUS GROUP NOTE TAKING FORM

**THIS FORM IS A DRAFT INTENDED FOR TRAINING PURPOSES ONLY. THE ACTUAL NOTE TAKING FORM WILL BE PROVIDED SEPARATELY.**

**Instructions:** Please use this form to record the proceedings of the focus group. Notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any salient observations of nonverbal behavior, such as facial expressions, hand movements, group dynamics, etc.

Please specify which focus group you are recording (please check one):

- Parental Involvement in Education
- Access to Services
- Community Involvement

Date of Focus Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Focus Group: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Note Taker: \_\_\_\_\_

**[This template will guide the note taker in capturing the key areas that the researchers seek to understand- OMNI to complete the yellow areas below]**

**KEY AREA/Question 1**

**KEY AREA/Question 2**

KEY AREA/Question 3

KEY AREA/Question 4

KEY AREA/Question 5

KEY AREA/Question 6

KEY AREA/Question 7

**Consent to Participate in Focus Group Study  
as part of the Latino Community Needs Assessment**

The purpose of the group discussion and the nature of the questions have been explained to me.

I consent to take part in a focus group about my experiences, including some ways to improve the services and resources available for Latinos in Summit County. I also consent to be tape-recorded during this focus group discussion.

My participation is voluntary. I understand that I am free to leave the group at any time. If I decide not to participate at any time during the discussion, my decision will in no way affect the services that I receive in Summit County.

None of my experiences or thoughts will be shared anyone outside of OMNI Research and Training, Inc. unless all identifying information is removed first. The information that I provide during the focus group will be grouped with answers from other people so that I cannot be identified.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Please Print Your Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Please Sign Your Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date