Using Focus Groups in Program Evaluation

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Part I

Using Focus Groups

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What Is a Focus Group?

An excellent way to discuss topics of interest, interactively, in-depth, with a small number of carefully selected people

- About 2 hours long
- About 6 – 10 participants
- Common experience or characteristic
- Explore experiences and attitudes

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What a Focus Group Is Not

- An interview
- A poll
- A survey

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Satisfaction Surveys vs. Focus Groups

- How do you know what questions to ask?
- How do you know if you have the wrong questions?

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What Are Your Questions?

Neighborhood Legal Services of LA, 2005
- Why did you come to the center?
- Was it hard to locate?

Alaska Legal Services Corporation, 2004
- To what extent do users find the self-paced presentations/modules easy to use?

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How Can YOU Use Feedback?

- Assessment and improvement
- Grant proposal
- Fulfill grant requirement

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Part II

Research Plan

Getting Started

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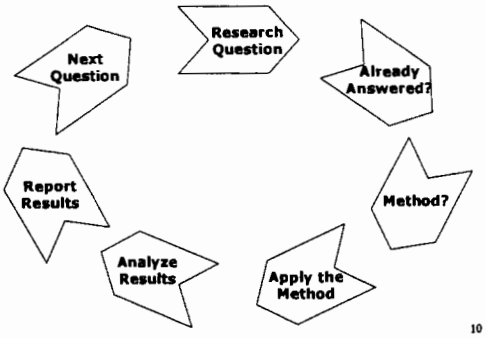
Research Cycle



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Research Questions

Your research question dictates many of your research decisions

- Topics (3 – 5)
- Follow-up questions

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Participants/Focus Groups

Your participants should be the best qualified to get at your research questions

- Who?
- How many?

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Recruiting Participants

Intensive, Not Passive

- Intercept
- Telephone
- Mail
- Email

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Research Plan (Cont'd)

- Incentives
- Informed consent
- Staff
- Taping
- Group location
- Analysis
- Timeline
- Budget

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Record Keeping

Keep meticulous notes!

- Reason behind research
- Development of research plan
- Participants vs. recruitments
- Demographic data
- Recruitment process
- Obstacles

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Part III

Logistics

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Staff Roles

- Facilitator
- Note-taker
- Timekeeper
- Partners

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Supplies

What you need at every focus group:

- Informed consent/confidentiality statement
- Focus group guide
- Tape recorder, tapes, batteries
- Notepaper, pens, tablet/butcher paper, markers
- Snacks for participants

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Focus Group Starts at 6pm

5:30—You arrive
5:50—Set out food
6:00—People start arriving
6:00-6:15—Small talk, eating
6:15—Formal introductions
6:20—Start the discussion
7:40—Final comments or questions
7:50—Wrap up

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Part IV

Facilitating Focus Groups

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Facilitators

- Style—more or less involved
- Same style—if you have more than one facilitator
- Neutral/unbiased/ non-judgmental

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Facilitator Tips

- Let participants know they are the experts
- Avoid leading participants—be warm, but value-neutral
- Be careful with empathetic responses that might lead them to believe there are right and wrong answers
- Ask only one question at a time, even if other questions are related
- Let people follow a full train of thought, even if they are answering several questions

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Facilitator Tips (Cont'd)

- Keep track of questions that have been answered out of order, so that you are not redundant
- Frequently repeat key phrases, since participants may lose track after 2 or 3 others have responded
- Summarize a participant's response and use a vocal inflection that signifies closure
- Be comfortable with silence—count to 10 before you jump in
- If all else fails, use the "magic wand" question

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Probing Questions

- Would you give me an example?
- Can you elaborate on that idea?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- Would you explain that further?
- I'm not sure I understand what you're saying...
- Is there anything else?
- That's really interesting, have other people had that experience?
- Is that the way it usually is?

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Common Characters

As a facilitator, what might you expect walking in to a group

- Silence
- The Opinionator
- The Angry One(s)
- The Quiet One(s)

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References/Resources

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