



FOCUS GROUPS IN CONSULTATION PROCESSES

BENEFITS, CHALLENGES & ALTERNATIVES

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*BASED ON EXPERIENCES FACILITATING FOCUS GROUPS IN A
LOCAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROJECT*

BENEFITS

Experiences (successes and struggles) and knowledge are shared

- A chance to be heard
- Can reduce feelings of isolation
- Identification of resources and obstacles



BENEFITS (CONTINUED)

Snapshots
Patterns and commonalities
Engagement
Networking



CHALLENGES

Dealing with difficult people

- Agendas
- Interruptions
- Not listening
- Emotionality
- Dismissive

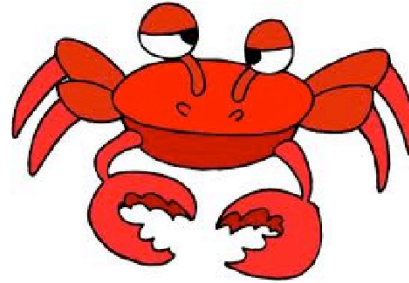


Dealing with difficult people.

- Managing peoples agendas. People come on a mission. Derails the process
- Participants often not willing to hear each other out
- Participants flat out interrupt each other and dominate (moving responsibility for group management from facilitator to participants)
- Containing and managing participants emotions (there was not a lot of space for emotion)
- Participants being very dismissive of each other (can be linked to the diversity at the table)
- Not knowing the background of those at your table can affect conversations
- Competing emotions and goals (how do you remain sensitive to that?)

CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)

- Random assignment
- Managing participation levels
- Managing Crab-fests (cynicism)
- Avoiding pigeon holes
- No authority



We have no actual authority over the focus group participants – they can plow over us and we have no recourse. Difficult to deal with stubborn, loud, dominating people that won't listen.

TIPS FOR FUTURE FOCUS GROUPS

Make questions and guidelines visible to all participants at all times

Train facilitators and note takers (emotionality is also data)

Be mindful of location of focus groups (limit distractions) and participant needs (e.g., wheelchair accessible)

Strategically assign group membership (diversity of perspective)

Recordings miss non-verbals like head nods, eye rolling, etc...verbally repeat into the mic your observations and ask the group to confirm



TIPS FOR FUTURE FOCUS GROUPS

Give people an opportunity to build rapport by sharing their background and intent.

- Helps the facilitator to leverage knowledge base at the table
- Allows for deeper conversations between participants
- Allows participants to share resources and knowledge – clears misconceptions and offers reality checks



Be aware, be prepared

- Ask for permission to interrupt and get everyone to say yes before the discussion starts
- Prepare validating statements that move conversations forward ahead of time
- Offer a sheet in the middle for thoughts they did not have a chance to share – great tool to manage those that dominate

Understanding that at public consultations, many of those attending have seen a lot, can be cynical, and distrustful of you, government, and the process. They've been polled many times, are tired of talking and not seeing changes, and often feel frustrated & disempowered

TIPS FOR FUTURE FOCUS GROUPS

Facilitator

- Bridge statements & identify tension points
- Recognize experiential differences
- Build value around participants statements
- Keeping the sentiment of multiplicity alive, there are no right answers



OFFERING SPACE FOR EMOTIONALITY

Understand that at public consultations, many of those attending have seen a lot, can be cynical, and distrustful of you, government, and the process. They've been polled many times, are tired of talking and not seeing changes, and often feel frustrated & disempowered.

People may need to release their emotions first and be heard before they can focus on the task at hand. This could be done by engaging them in a discussion, drawing/painting murals, filming videos or taking pictures.

Before moving on to the task, there could be a transition period (30 mins) that allows participants to "move down" from their minds and "into their bodies" in order to disconnect from the emotions they just purged.

Some transition suggestions are:

- A physical activity that emulates an outward movement of energy from their core out into the world
- Body sculpting & tableaux
- A meditation aimed at guiding peoples attention to the sensations in and around their bodies



ALTERNATIVES & COMPLEMENTARY DESIGN PIECES

Arts Based Research Methods

- Videography/photography
- Murals

Play-back theatre

Storytelling

Open space technology



What is the group's energy level?
Are members emotionally charged?
How might we help to release some energy before moving into discussion?



UNDERSTANDING SELF AS FACILITATOR

- Understanding what type of information you are attracted to and triggered by – this impacts what you probe and tend to ignore. Ask yourself prior to the meeting how you might answer. What's considered “off topic” for you and why?
- Dealing with answers that are outside what you expected. Do you resist? Do you accept? Do you ignore and move on? How do you remain unbiased? If these discussions lead to decisions that impact your life, how do you remain neutral?



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Do we need to have the right people at the table (random vs purposive sample)?
- How might this affect the depth of discussion? Diversity of knowledge?

QUESTIONS? CONTACT US

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