

## How to Facilitate a Focus Group

### 1. Have the participants introduce themselves.

People are typically more comfortable sharing opinions if they know a little bit about the other people in the group, even if it's just their names. This is especially true for focus groups on controversial community issues.

Often an icebreaker question like, "Where does everyone come from" or "where would everyone most like to go on vacation" can make people feel at ease.

### 2. Announce the purpose of the meeting.

Prepare an introduction that concisely explains the reason for the group to meet. Don't assume people are at all familiar with the topic at hand, or how a focus group functions. Explain that this is a brainstorming session, for sharing as many detailed opinions as possible.

Remind them that the focus group will be recorded, but that there are no right answers and that the purpose is to get their opinion.

### 3. Ask questions to guide the discussion.

Use one of your prepared questions to kick off the discussion. Stick with the topic until you have achieved good responses, before moving on to the next. Use additional, unprepared questions to ask for more detail if the participants are giving brief answers.

Encourage people to expand on their responses by asking them "Can you say more about that?" Alternatively ask if they can provide an example of what they are talking about. Summarize what someone has said and ask if others feel the same way. If someone isn't talking, turn to them and inquire as to their thoughts on what has just been said.

Ideally, your questions should encourage participants to talk among themselves, so that you can withdraw from the conversation.

### 4. Stay neutral and empathetic.

Don't insert your personal opinion into questions, or let the participants know your views on the topic. Avoid leading questions like "Don't you think it would be better if...?" Participants should feel as if the moderator is legitimately interested in everyone's feelings.

To make participants comfortable it is important that the moderator is someone who they can relate to but also respect. For example, choosing someone of the same gender as the focus group can be important for making the participants feel like they have an empathetic host.

Constantly scan the group and establish eye contact, especially with those who have been speaking less frequently.

### **5. Record responses.**

The scribe should write down comments. The scribe should also, however, be attentive to things that won't be recorded. Note, for example, body language when it seems bear on how the participant feels about the topic.

### **6. Prevent any one individual from dominating the conversation.**

If one participant talks more often than the others, it's your job to politely put a stop to it. The best tactic is typically to encourage other people to speak up, with questions such as "Does anyone else have a different perspective?" After a particularly long and complicated response, it is good for the moderator to summarize what has been said. Once clarified, it will make it easier for participants to build off the comment. Also, the ability to recount such points makes the moderator appear vested in the discussion, encouraging participation.

Your goal should be solicit as many different opinions from as many participants as possible. Keeping the conversation open and easy is crucial.

### **7. Tamp down arguments.**

Explain that you're not trying to reach consensus, and that more opinions lead to more helpful data. If participants are still heated or argumentative, change topic to the next question.