10 questions to ask when creating your focus group

What better way to inform your Internal Communication strategy than by talking directly to a selection of your internal stakeholders and gathering priceless qualitative feedback? Angela Sinickas, President of Sinickas Communications, Inc., addresses 10 common questions that arise when conducting an employee focus group.

1. How many focus groups should I hold?

Unfortunately, there is no magic number. Your goal should simply be to conduct the fewest number of focus groups that will provide the widest range of input – that will use time and money the most wisely.

2. Should I also have a survey?

If you conduct focus groups before a survey, you don't need to conduct them for each demographic subgroup – the survey will capture that data for you. Just be sure to pick representative groups that will provide insights into a wide range of perspectives to make sure that all the right issues are addressed on the survey.

For focus groups probing issues after a survey, the results can identify subgroups (for example, those with average, negative or positive results) to probe the differences in those groups. However, if the focus group research will stand alone without a companion survey, you may need to conduct more focus groups because you will have no other way of identifying variations by subgroup.

3. How should I schedule the sessions?

Depending on the complexity of the topic and the number of questions, each session should last about one to two hours. Schedule sessions to allow for time in between to review and clean up the notes from each session. Spacing the sessions also helps prevent congestion near the doors as one group is leaving and another is gathering.

Select a room that is private, with a round or rectangular table so all participants can face each other. Provide appropriate beverages and snacks for the time of day. Make sure any visual aids you'll need are available, such as flipchart pads or overhead projectors. Videotaping or audiotaping is recommended only for consumer focus groups; employees have too much to lose to be candid when they know their comments could be attributed to them individually.

4. How do I select the facilitator?

Selecting the right facilitator is critical for the success of the focus groups. Ideally, this person should not only be skilled in facilitation techniques, but also be free of any vested interest in the topic being discussed, for several reasons. For example, if the topic is employee communication and the facilitator is the company's long-time internal communication manager, any or all of the following could occur:

- Participants may not be as candid knowing that any problems they may want to discuss are the "fault" of the person asking them questions.
- The facilitator may become defensive when hearing bad news and reduce the level of rapport needed.
- The facilitator may make assumptions about what participants are trying to say and may not probe comments deeply enough to understand the real issues.
- Participants may expect answers or a commitment for change from the facilitator since that person is in charge of the issues being discussed. An objective facilitator can legitimately sidestep any commitments or answers, focusing instead on the participants' opinions.
- The facilitator may fall into the role of "teacher" and begin explaining too much, or correcting participants. Either situation is counter-productive. A more objective facilitator would instead take the time to understand why the information gaps exist and brainstorm ways to solve the problem.

5. How do I choose participants?

Select at random from each of the subgroups you have identified. For example, let's say you have a focus group of employees working the third shift in a particular location. If you have 100 employees who fit that description, select every sixth name on an alphabetical listing, which provides a list of about 16 names – you now have a truly random and representative set of focus groups.

6. How should I conduct the sessions?

Good facilitation involves far more than reading a list of questions and waiting for answers. The best facilitators have an excellent "ear" for listening and know when to pursue deeper a potentially productive line of questioning and when to move on to another topic.

Key steps facilitators need to cover at the beginning of each session:

- Develop rapport with the group quickly.
- Explain the purpose of the sessions and participants' role.
- Establish ground rules for confidentiality.
- Set expectations for what will happen during and after the sessions.
- Ask for each person's participation to ensure all opinions are heard.
- A major role the facilitator plays is "conducting" the ebb and flow of input, ensuring that all participants speak up and that no one person ends up dominating the group. Some tips:
    1. Set expectations at the beginning that you will look for input from everyone and not just a few people who are most comfortable sharing their opinions.
    2. For some questions, go around the table asking for an answer from each person. This works best for questions like "Give me an example of…" or "Which one thing would be most important to you…."
    3. Use eye contact to encourage quiet participants, especially in response to a question where their body language indicates they may have an opinion. Similarly, avoid giving eye contact to domineering participants.

7. How might results vary by types of people?

Depending on the topic you're probing, different types of people will probably have different experiences. Brainstorm with colleagues what those differences might be to make sure you conduct at least one focus group where that characteristic is represented. For example, for employee groups, results might vary by job type (either nature of job or union status); job level (hourly, salaried, or supervisory); full-time *versus* part-time hours or shift work; length of service; and access to online communication at work.

8. How might results vary by location?

Many issues are experienced differently because of where the participants are, just as much as who they are:

- business unit;
- size of location;

- distance from headquarters;
- profitability/productivity levels;
- how long the location has been in operation;
- how long the same executive has been in charge of the location; and
- previous survey results.

9. What about online focus groups?

While online techniques have their uses, it's important to consider the trade-offs from not having face-to-face contact:

- People have too much time to think of politically correct answers to questions, instead of responding instantly with their first reactions. Plus, they often carefully edit their words on threaded discussion forum postings.
- If lack of trust is a concern in your corporate culture, participants might be less candid knowing that their views are being recorded in writing and can be traced back to their user IDs. In a traditional focus group, as long as the session is not tape recorded, participants have a much greater level of confidence in confidentiality.
- People will type fewer words than they would have spoken, so you'll get less depth and detail than you would within the same time period in person. This is especially true for those who have trouble typing quickly.
- It's harder to encourage participation from those who are shy. In person, eye contact is a subtle way of getting quieter employees to speak up. Online, you'd put them on the spot too directly, which could make them even more nervous about speaking up.
- Employees are usually participating from their own work computers, so they are likely to be interrupted by colleagues dropping into their cubicles or calling them on the phone. These distractions will affect their level of involvement in the discussion. Depending on whether the interruption is good or bad news, it can also affect their attitudes toward the questions you're asking.

10. Where can I go wrong with focus groups?

It’s also worth knowing what not to do with focus groups. Many people go wrong in the execution or analysis of focus groups, drawing false conclusions and leading to faulty data. For example:

1. Communicators who can’t get budget or approval for a survey often try to “prove” that communication has improved by conducting focus groups before and after some communication change. Unfortunately, these results will not stand up to management scrutiny for several reasons:

- Not enough people are involved in the focus groups to be able to project the results to the entire audience.
- The participants are not selected randomly, so they can't accurately represent the full group.
- Facilitators of the focus groups, being human, cannot repeat the exact same way of asking questions, pursuing unscripted follow-up questions, monitoring the length of time for each question from session to session, let alone sessions separated by a year or more.

2. Some communicators try to re-use the exact same group of people as a focus group over time to track change. In addition to the problems already mentioned, participants can become sensitized to the topic being researched and are no longer similar to the average people in the population.

3. Sometimes, communicators will purposely select focus group participants because they are considered to be vocal or opinion leaders. This is a mistake because you'll tend to hear what you've already heard from these people before. Listen to a cross-section of your audience to hear what you haven't heard from the people who don't usually cross your path. Similarly, letting people volunteer to participate in focus groups will generally result in bias.

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