Focus Groups 101

Why Focus Groups?

Most organizations rely on satisfaction surveys to provide much needed patient input to inform change. Unfortunately, these surveys often provide “numbers” with limited commentary, leaving hospitals to speculate at the meaning behind the numbers. Focus groups provide the opportunity to explore the meaning of these numbers.

Focus groups create a space for patients and family members to express how they feel about the organization and to share the details of their experiences, impressions and perceptions. A few specific open ended questions (meaning worded in such a way to solicit a more detailed response than “yes” or “no” or “I agree” or “I disagree.”) create an opportunity for participants to explain in their own words what is important to them. Focus groups are interactive. This interaction creates a synergistic effect where ideas, opinions and experiences generate useful information.¹

Focus groups are much more than a chat session. Too often, we think that just by gathering a group of individuals and allowing conversation to happen that somehow, organically, meaningful data will present itself. Group dynamics suggest otherwise.² If not carefully planned, the focus group will not yield useful information.

Planning for Focus Groups?

- Defining the purpose of the focus group is the first step. What information are you hoping to gather from this group? The participants will want to know how this information will be used.

- Technology has provided options for how focus groups may be conducted. Will your focus groups be in person? Online with video conferencing? Phone conference call? What’s App? While many prefer in-person focus groups, time, distance and cost can often limit participation. If not done thoughtfully, virtual groups may, however, compromise the group dynamics that occurs in a room of live participants.

Asking the Right Questions

Thought and care must be put into developing the questions to stimulate conversation in the focus group. When done well, the questions seem simple and unrehearsed. Yet, the organic nature of the

² How to Conduct an Employee Focus Group. Society for Human Resource Management. 6/19/2015.
discussion depends heavily on predetermined, intentionally sequenced, open-ended sets of questions. Some guidelines for developing effective focus group questions include:

- Use open ended questions that start with What? How? Where?
- Avoid questions that can be answered yes or no.
- Use words that encourage explanation, “Tell me about...”, “Can you give me an example?”
- Prompt participants to an experience, “Think back to...”
- 10-12 questions per group is optimal.
- There are three types of question:
  1. **Engagement questions**: Used to introduce a topic and engage participants in the discussion, i.e. “What do you notice when you first arrive at Our Lady of the Snow Hospital?”
  2. **Exploration questions**: Used to prompt discussion about the topic, i.e. “Who in particular influenced your experience when you first arrived at the hospital?”
  3. **Exit questions**: Used to identify any thoughts related to the topic and to move on to the next question, i.e. “What else did you notice when you first arrived?”

Participant Inclusion/exclusion criteria should be established well in advance. Criteria can be based on services received, geographic location, provider, homogeneity vs. heterogeneity or time since service.

**Recruiting Participants**

- The optimal size is 6-12 participants.
- Recruit widely to populate the group with individuals with diverse experiences and perspectives, keeping the inclusion/exclusion criteria in mind.
- Popular methods of recruitment include:
  - **Nomination**: Ask others in the organization who would make a good participant.

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Random Selection: Run a report of recently discharged patients and invite every third person.

Already Existing Group: A group is already established and meets at a specific time. i.e. Post op ortho surgery patients meet on the first Monday night of the month

Community Outreach: Place an ad in the local newspaper soliciting input from individuals to participate in focus groups.

In the hospital: Obtain lists of patients that will be at the hospital for appointments on that day. This saves participants from making a special trip to the hospital.

- To achieve the desired participation level, you will likely need to invite up to five times as many people. Reach out to potential participants through a variety of modalities (email, phone, letter).
- Let participants know that the focus group will last from 45-60 minutes.
- Ask participants to RSVP in advance and make personal reminder calls the day before. Plan for no shows.
- Offer an incentive. Coupons, gift certificates, free parking, big ticket drawings encourage people to participate.

Creating a Relaxing Atmosphere

- Focus groups should be held in a comfortable room with access to restrooms and easy to find. Make sure there are greeters at the entrance to accompany participants to the correct location.
- Reduce barriers to attend the focus group by offering:
  - Convenient times- evenings and weekends
  - Off-campus locations- conducting focus groups in the community (library, church, coffee shop)
  - Childcare options
  - Provide healthy refreshments that are not too distracting to the discussion. Situate chairs around a table to promote conversation.

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Ensure participants have clear directions to the venue. If parking is problematic, be proactive about resolving potential parking challenges, e.g. offer a parking voucher or invite participants to use valet parking.

**Conducting Focus Groups**

- Focus groups conducted by trained, independent facilitators ensure open, honest communication with conclusions that are unbiased.

- Ideally, each focus group would be guided by a moderator who asks questions and a scribe responsible for taking notes and/or recording the session.

- Moderating focus groups require special skills, including:
  - **Extraordinary listening skills**: the ability to listen to the participant without judgement in a caring compassionate manner.
  
  1. **Controlled reactions to participants**: avoid “that’s good.” “excellent”
  
  2. **Can manage challenging participants**, i.e. the expert, dominant talkers, shy participants, ramblers.
  
  3. **The ability to listen and probe at the same time**: keeping with the intent of the focus group.
  
  4. **Is an expert on the topic**
  
  5. **Is accepting of all participants regardless of background, economic status, and personality**
  
  6. **Understands the importance of both process and content.**
  
  7. **Uses pauses and probes**, i.e. five second pause to allow participants to consider their responses, probing questions like “would you explain further?”
  
  8. **Identifies and responds appropriately when the group has become unproductive.**
  
  9. **Uses the 3-step conclusion.**

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2. Review the purpose and ask if anything has been missed.

3. Thanks, and dismissal.
   - **Builds feedback into every session.** Ask participants what went well and what could be done better.

**Sample Outline for Focus Group**

1. Introductions and roles of the moderators.

2. Explain the purpose of the focus group, time allotted and general group guidelines.

3. Address confidentiality and differing opinions.

4. Begin by asking pre-planned questions.

5. Conclusion with incentive distribution.

**Analyzing the Data**

Key things to look for when analyzing focus group data:

1. **What common themes emerge in responses about specific topics?** How do these patterns (or lack thereof) help to illuminate the broader central question(s)?

2. **Are there deviations from these patterns?** If so, are there any factors that might explain these deviations?

3. **What interesting stories emerge from the responses?** How do they help illuminate the central question(s)?

4. **Do any of these patterns suggest that additional data may be needed?** Do any of the central questions need to be revised?

5. **Are the patterns that emerge like the findings of other focus groups on the same topic?** If not, what might explain these discrepancies?

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