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## **Getting the most out of focus groups**

Preparation and facilitation skills can make or break the process

### **Inviting selected participants**

I generally recommend selecting participants at random from the subgroups you have identified as requiring their own focus groups. (This ensures an accurate reflection of the variety of opinions.) For example, let's say you will have a focus group of manufacturing employees working third shift in a particular location. If you have 100 employees who fit that description, you would select every sixth name on an alphabetical listing, which would provide a list of about 16 names. Generally, at least four will not be able to attend for various reasons, leaving you with about eight to 12 actual participants. Also be sure to keep employees of different managerial levels in separate focus groups to encourage open discussion of supervisor-employee communication issues.

You'll want to invite participants in writing, after notifying their managers in advance (also in writing). The invitations should cover the purpose of the focus group, how participants were selected, logistics of where and when they will be held, how to confirm participation and the importance of not sending replacements for the original invitees. The day before the focus groups, confirm attendance by phone. Afterwards, send thank-you notes to participants, perhaps with a very high-level summary of the issues identified through the focus groups.

### **Scheduling 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.

### **Selecting 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 begin expecting 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, when discovering that participants don't understand a key point, or aren't aware of some communication channel, 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 for the entire audience the focus group represents.

### **Conducting 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:

- 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.
- 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..."
- 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.