

# Conducting Focus Group Discussions

The purpose of focus group discussions is to gain knowledge about a particular topic or need by interviewing a group of people directly affected by the issue. Focus group data can be used to collect information for many purposes, such as conducting a needs assessment or evaluating a program. Below are brief pointers regarding the “why” and “how” of focus groups.

## When Are Focus Groups Appropriate?

### **Focus Groups are appropriate when you want to:**

- Explore the depth and nuances of opinions regarding an issue
- Understand differences in perspectives
- Understand what factors influence opinions or behavior
- Test materials or products
- Test reactions to actual or proposed services
- Design a large study or understand its results
- Capture opinions and perspectives of a program’s target audience
- Learn about participants by observing their interactions

### **Focus Groups are not appropriate when you:**

- Need to ask participants sensitive information
- Need statistical information about an entire population
- Are working with emotionally or politically charged groups
- Can’t ensure confidentiality
- Want people to come to a consensus
- Do not have the skills to analyze the data

## What are the differences between Focus Groups and Surveys?

<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Surveys</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Provide depth over breadth</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Provide breadth over depth</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Use small samples and the findings cannot be generalized</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Require large samples and are more readily generalized</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Enable the agency to ask a variety of questions and explore the answers as they arise</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Are standardized but do not allow the exploration of answers in depth</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Generate rich, complex ideas and are difficult to analyze</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Can be relatively simple to analyze but yield less rich data</li></ul>

# Focus Group Facilitation Tips

Below is a list of facilitation tips that will help you in conducting focus groups for your HIV prevention program. Please note that conducting effective focus groups requires training in specific approaches and skills. Details about these approaches and skills can be found in *Krueger, R.A. (1994). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage*. In addition, the Tabono Project can provide technical assistance on conducting focus groups. For assistance, contact Orin Johnson at 1-888-CBA-2580 or at [orinj@etr.org](mailto:orinj@etr.org).

## Approaching Focus Group Facilitation

- + For each group, you should have a moderator and an assistant moderator. The moderator leads the discussion, keeps the conversation flowing and takes a few notes to remember comments that s/he may want to use later. The assistant moderator takes comprehensive notes, operates the tape recorder, handles the environmental conditions and logistics, responds to unexpected interruptions and keeps track of time.
- + Two approaches are essential to facilitating focus groups.
  - o The first is being a “blank slate.” This means approaching the focus group with an open mind and as few preconceptions as possible about what participants are likely to say or not say.
  - o The other essential approach is to be aware of potential biases as a moderator. Differences in race/ethnicity, class/SES and education levels between the moderator and participants can bring unforeseen biases to how a facilitator runs a focus group.
- + Practice questions out loud, know why you are asking each question, and know how much time you plan to spend on each question.
- + Stick to the facilitation guide that you develop beforehand.
- + In addition to taking notes, tape record the discussion and transcribe it.
- + Check the tape recorder before and immediately after each session—if it did not work, do an immediate debrief.
- + Be ready for unexpected problems, such as bad weather, fewer participants than expected, poor meeting space, field coordinator did not make adequate preparations, participants bring other adults, other uninvited people show up, or the group doesn’t want to talk.
- + Anticipate running out of time—think about what you would do to modify the agenda.

## The Physical Environment

- + It is important to choose or set up a physical space for the focus group that is going to feel welcoming and comfortable to the participants. It should be neutral, private, free from distractions and easily accessible.
- + Arrange participants in a circle.
- + Tell participants where the bathrooms are.
- + Provide refreshments and place them away from the circle to avoid distractions.

### **Tell Participants “They’re the Experts”**

- + It is important to convey to participants that you value their opinions, that they are the experts, and that the focus group facilitator and other staff have come to learn from them. This empowers participants, helps them feel a sense of purpose and helps eliminate any barriers that may arise as a result of differences between participants and focus group staff.

### **Facilitator Affect: Warm But Neutral**

- + In order to avoid “leading” participants with any reaction to their comments, we suggest that reactions should be warm but value-neutral. Ways to be value-neutral are: *information-seeking* (e.g. “tell me more about that...”), *clarifying* (e.g. “Can you explain what you mean?”) and *acknowledging* (“I hear what you are saying...”).

### **Ask Only One Question at a Time**

- + Don’t ask more than one question at a time, even if the questions go together. Participants usually cannot remember several questions at one time, and asking multiple questions makes it hard for them to know where to start.

### **Frequently Repeat Key Phrases from the Question**

- + Participants tend to lose focus on the question after 2-3 other participants have responded to it. Repeating key phrases from the question at strategic times, or asking participants to link their response to key terms in the question will help participants stay focused.

### **Be Comfortable with Silence**

- + It is also important that moderators be comfortable with silence and “pregnant pauses.” Some participants may participate more if they have more time to consider the question before they speak.

### **Use Probes When You Need More Information**

- + When participants are not providing enough information, try the following probes:
  - a. Would you explain further?
  - b. Would you give me an example of what you mean?
  - c. Would you say more?
  - d. Tell us more.
  - e. Is there anything else?
  - f. Please describe what you mean.
  - g. I don’t understand.
  - h. Does anyone see it differently?
  - i. Has anyone had a different experience?

This and other information about conducting focus groups is available in an online course developed by ETR Associates at <http://www.etr.org/FFN/FGcourse/focusGroupCourse.html>