



Social and Economic  
Education for  
Development

## Getting the Most Out of Your Community Focus Groups

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### Introduction

Political and social life is about making choices, and rarely does any situation or issue involve clear-cut or simple choices. Often making choices involves working through the feelings that come from facing the costs of any decision, and working through the contradictions between what we value and the way we act. We need strategies to encourage active listening, critical thinking, empathetic understanding of others' viewpoints, and goal setting. What follows is a brief description of several strategies that can be employed by organizations, governments, or citizens to accomplish these outcomes.

### Focus groups

#### What is a Focus Group

A focus group is a semi-structured interview of a group of 8 to 15 people that allows for flexible group discussion. Focus groups are one way to help gain information from people who will be affected by a program or a change, and allows the researcher to learn a great deal about how people feel about issues or their reactions to a new program or product. Focus groups are very effective in getting participants involved in an issue and making them feel their views count. Experience has shown that the group interaction often stimulates discussion and produces data and insights which may be difficult to secure through individual interviews, surveys, or through secondary data. Something unique happens when people discuss an issue or product as a group; each person can react, contrast, or build upon what the others have said. For these reasons, focus groups are used quite often by sociologists, marketing firms, political consultants, community developers, and program managers.

Focus groups are useful in: (1) getting background information about a topic of interest; (2) getting reactions to a new idea or program; (3) stimulating new ideas; (4) diagnosing potential problems in new programs; (5) learning how different groups view an issue or problem; and, (6) stimulating thinking about future development plans. Focus groups are least effective in dealing with difficult or technical issues which require a great deal of background information in order for people to react.

#### Conducting a Focus Group

Focus group interviews are relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct. All that is required is a moderator, someone to record the discussion, a predefined set of questions, a moderate size meeting room, and some refreshments and light snacks. A focus group should run no longer than two to two and a half hours, and for some issues, more than one groups may be interviewed.

Most often, participants are selected at random or are chosen so as to represent different groups within the community. The strategy is to begin with a set of no more than five or six pre-selected questions, but allow for flexibility so that the group can expand upon ideas. Sometimes, more direct and detailed questions are presented later in the session.

### **How do you record the ideas presented in a focus group?**

There are different answers to this question depending on the purpose of the focus group. If the purpose of the focus group is to obtain background information about a topic of interest or learn how different groups view an issue or problem, it may be useful to record the focus group discussion and create transcripts. This approach requires the use of smaller focus groups (no more than 8), excellent recording equipment, and the costs of transcriptions. The general rule of thumb is that one hour of tape recorded conversations requires at least three to four hours of transcription time. Also, the more voices on the recording, the longer the transcription time.

If the purpose of the focus group is to get reactions to a new program, stimulate new ideas, or diagnose potential problems in new or existing programs, there are less costly ways to capture the ideas presented in a focus group. The facilitator will work with a scribe/recorder. The scribe may be working at a personal computer transcribing the general comments as they occur. Or, this recorder may develop a "public memory" of the discussion by having participants help them capture their ideas onto flip charts or butcher paper. This approach requires the scribe to be as active as the facilitator, checking with participants to be sure their ideas are captured accurately and concisely.

The key to the success of a focus group is a skilled moderator; he or she must have the ability to keep the discussion flowing and encourage participation without influencing or intimidating the participants. The facilitator must be able to move the discussion along, moderate any potential conflicts, make sure dominant personalities do not control the discussion, and allow shy people to feel comfortable enough to participate.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups**

These are some of the advantages of focus groups. (1) They are relatively inexpensive to conduct; (2) they provide information from a group of people in their own words; (3) they allow for probing questions, clarifications of responses, and follow-up questions; (4) they allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members; and, (5) they do not require literacy on the part of participants.

These are some of the disadvantages of focus groups. (1) The skill of the facilitator is somewhat critical; (2) unless participants are randomly selected, they may not reflect the larger community; (3) there is a potential for a few to dominate or for the shy to not participate; (4) they are not useful for assessing participants' views on technical issues; and, (5) it is sometimes difficult to capture the discussions and summarize the results.

## **Nominal Group Technique**

### **What is Nominal Group Technique?**

Nominal group technique was developed by business leaders in the 1960s after they noticed that group discussions often didn't allow for enough individual creativity. In other words they came to realize that groups can stifle individuals. Nominal group technique was seen as one way to deal with some of the problems in focus groups by providing more structure to the way in which the discussion occurs.

The technique provides the facilitator with a set of tools to keep a few people from dominating the discussion by allow for silent reflection and the expression of individual ideas. The use of these tools creates a safer environment for discussion. While focus groups use open discussions of issues, nominal group technique modifies this approach by first having participants silently reflect on the questions and then write down their ideas. Participants then are called on individually in a round robin fashion to offer one of the ideas they wrote down. The facilitator proceeds around the group, until everyone has had a chance to state their ideas, and then opens the floor to further discussion. The recording of the discussions through nominal group technique can occur in any of the ways suggested for focus groups.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Nominal Group Technique**

An advantage of nominal group technique is that it encourages a group to prioritize their ideas, preferences, or needs. Participants are invited to vote for their priorities in any of a number of ways. For example, each person may be given three colored dots and asked to place them next to their top three choices. Or, they may be given three colored dots and told to vote for what is most important to them by assigning one, two, or all three dots to their priorities. Or, they may vote with a simple show of hands. Another advantage of this technique is that after the group finishes their discussions, the slips of paper may be collected and any ideas that were written down but didn't get expressed in the general discussion can be added to the pool of ideas.

A disadvantage of nominal group technique is that there is less time for general or open discussion of the questions. Like focus groups, nominal group technique should be limited to two hours. The time spent on silent reflection does reduce the time available for more open discussion, and this may be distressing to some participants who chafe at having to spend time in silent reflection and allowing everyone a chance to have a turn at expressing their ideas. However, research suggests that the quality of initial discussion is improved by having spent some time in silent reflection and furthermore, the group is less likely to focus on a single idea (often the first expressed) since everyone begins by offering the ideas they generated in silent reflection.

## **Force Field Analysis**

### **What is Force Field Analysis?**

Force field analysis was developed in the 1950s by Kurt Lewin, a noted sociologist. Lewin argued that organizations and the individuals within them operate within a psychological and social environment. But there are forces within this environment that can halt or encourage change, and the purpose of force field analysis is to assist groups in recognizing and understanding the forces driving the organization toward change and those restraining change. Lewin argued that awareness of these forces lead to more realistic goal-setting and more effective planning for change by organizations, and the process has also been used in strategic planning by local governments and state agencies.

### **How to Conduct a Force Field Analysis?**

Force field analysis begins with a clearly defined potential goal or objective. Participants identify the forces within the organization that push towards change, and then to identify forces that resist change. As these are identified, they are noted on flip chart sheets marked "driving forces" and "restraining forces." A force can be people, organizational structure or processes, resources, attitudes, traditions, or values. As these forces are listed, the facilitator asks participants not to place a value judgement on anything that is said. Rather, the participants identify as many forces as possible.

Next, the group moves toward action planning. Change occurs when there is an imbalance between the driving and restraining forces. An imbalance may occur through a change in the magnitude or direction of a force or through the addition of a new force. The group begins action planning by selecting two or three important driving forces and two or three key restraining forces that they believe may be altered. For each driving and restraining force, the group discusses what specifically can be done to reduce the effect of this force.

Finally, the group evaluates what they have done in order to decide which actions might produce the desired change or accomplish the originally stated goal. In effect, the group has moved from identifying a goal, evaluating what may help or hinder them in achieving this goal, and then considered how they may mitigate restraining forces or enhance driving forces so that the weight of the forces is shifted toward accomplishing the goal. However, the group may decide after this critical thinking that it cannot realistically pursue the goal, or it must be altered in order to emphasize driving forces.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Force Field Analysis**

Force field analysis enables an organization or agency to engage in more realistic goal-setting based on a critical analysis of potential opposition and support for the change. This approach also helps an organization identify potential problems in implementing a goal by encouraging the planners to recognize diverse perspectives within and outside the organization. Conducting a force field analysis as part of strategic planning may minimize confrontation and friction within the organization or between the organization and clientele groups.

The facilitator must encourage full participation by all group members and create an environment that encourages participants to express their concerns without fear of being perceived as disloyal or nonsupportive of the team. Moreover, unless both those setting the goals and those implementing the change are involved in the process, there is a possibility that the analysis will not lead to a recognition all potential restraining forces.

## **Community Issues Gathering**

### **What is a Community Issues Gathering?**

Community issues gatherings borrow from methodologies devised by the Study Circles Resource Network and the National Issues Forums. They are designed to help people think through the choices and to move towards "common ground," especially when the issue or problem under discussion is controversial. Controversial issues need to be discussed, but too often public discussions are not conducive to democratic problem-solving. Instead, heated discussions over a controversy become a battle between two groups that involves name-calling or bitter power contests, and leads to barriers between people and groups who are likely to have to work together to accomplish other community goals. When this happens, there is little deliberation or "thinking through" the issue to examine the various alternatives and consequences.

The process of a community issues gathering is designed to help a group understand others' perspectives and the consequences of the options before them. To make a reasoned choice about controversial issues, there must be a mutual understanding of each others' values and interests that leads to critical thinking about who might gain or lose the most if a public policy alternative is adopted. Furthermore, there develops an awareness that no policy or action choice is perfect, each involves some trade-offs.

## **How to Conduct a Community Issues Gathering**

Because a community issues gathering typically involves public discussion of controversial issues, it is recommended that some rules for healthy discussions be posted on flip chart paper and agreed to by the participants. When participants agree to abide by the following rules, there is less likelihood of angry words, personal attacks, or rude interruptions.

1. Facilitators guide the discussion but facilitators and scribes remain neutral.
2. Everyone is encouraged to participate, but no one should dominate.
3. The discussion should focus on the issues and choices that brought everyone here, we can talk about other issues afterwards.
4. We agree to disagree with ideas, not each other.
5. We listen to each other and respect each other.

It is also useful to post some suggested goals for the gathering to encourage participants to work toward some common goals. The approach suggested is the following: "After the meeting is completed, we should be able to:"

1. Identify the range of public policy choices for dealing with this issue and recognize any common ground on which we may agree.
2. Make a good case for positions we agree with; be able to critique our favorite choices, and consider new choices we haven't thought of before.
3. Understand that other people have reasons for their choices and their reasons are not dumb, immoral or unreasonable.
4. Understand that our own understanding of an issue is not complete until we understand why others feel the way they do.
5. Recognize the values and beliefs that underlie the issue and choices.

Community issues gatherings begin with a small group of participants sharing a common reading (an issues brief) that introduces the issue and then describes at least three action or policy choices for addressing the issue. Each choice is briefly explained and then the arguments of proponents and opponents of that choice are presented. After each choice is presented, the facilitator asks some key questions about each choice:

1. What would the proponents of this choice say? Why would they choose this alternative? You may not believe in this choice, but if you had to walk in the shoes of the defenders of this choice, what would you say?
2. What would opponents of this choice say? Why would they choose this alternative?
3. Who might gain or profit the most if this choice were selected? Who would lose the most if the choice were implemented?
4. What are the values that defenders of this choice hold? Are their values different from people who would oppose this choice?

A scribe records the comments on flip chart sheets marked "Choice #1 - Defenders" or "Choice #1 - Critics" and so on for subsequent choices. These recorded comments become the group's public memory of the discussion. After each of the original choices have been examined, the facilitator asks if there are others that have not yet been considered. If so, each is analyzed as were the original choices.

After all the choices have been considered, the facilitator moves the discussion to a final set of questions designed to summarize the key points and determine if the group has reached common ground. The following questions may be used:

1. Now that we've considered this issue, how do we see the problem that brought us here? Are there four or five statements that summarize our discussion?

2. What are the concerns we have about resolving this issue one way or another? Have we considered the downside of each choice?
3. Given that each of us is motivated by beliefs and values that are important to us, how can we redefine the issue in a way that highlights our values? Are there values that we feel any public policy on this issue must respect?
4. Are there ways of resolving the issue that we can reject because the consequences are unacceptable?
5. Is there a general way of proceeding that would address everyone's most serious concerns and protect the things we care about deeply?
6. What would we want to tell policy-makers about our discussion today? Do we want to act on this issue now? If so, how?

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Community Issues Gatherings**

The process underlying a community issues gathering can be used in a variety of settings for both controversial and non-controversial issues. It encourages both understanding of different sides of a controversial issue and more creative thinking about action or policy choices. This process can help defuse tensions in a community by helping groups explore deeper dimensions of an issue, such as trade-offs or how people in different situations might feel about the issue or the choices. It can also be used as part of a strategic planning process, since it helps groups weigh the costs and benefits of action or policy choices in a broader community context.

Literacy is not a requirement for participation since a video can be used to describe the issue and each choice. But the use of the flip chart to maintain the "public memory" of the group's evaluation of each choice does make it more difficult for those with limited reading skills to fully participate. Moreover, this approach is not as useful as the others in diagnosing problems with current programs or getting reactions to a new idea or program.

### **Summary**

The strategies presented are variations on focus groups, but each offers unique tools for accomplishing a different kind of objective or purpose or overcoming some of the limitations of focus groups. Nominal group technique encourages more personal reflection than focus groups, and is a tool for discouraging dominant personalities. Force field analysis strengthens the strategic planning process by encouraging a recognition that within organizations or agencies, there are forces working for and against change. Community issues gatherings are a tool for enabling the public to discuss controversial issues or to evaluate controversial proposals in an environment that encourages identifying common ground.

All these strategies share a common reliance on an effective facilitator who is skilled at maintaining their neutrality and creating a safe environment for diverse opinions to be expressed. The construction of the stimulus questions is also critical to the success of each of these techniques, because the questions help establish the neutrality of the discussion by avoiding phrasing that implies particular positions.

The strategies presented are simply tools for more effective decision-making. The success of any tool depends on putting it into the right hands for the right job. Hopefully this overview provides a basis for deciding on the right tool for the right situation.