Introduction to Focus Groups

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Goals for this Lecture

• Introduce focus group methodology
  – Describe uses in survey development process
• Characteristics of a focus group
• Describe moderator and assistant moderator duties
• Discuss question guidelines
• Assess focus group data and limitations
Focus Groups

• **Focus group** is a structured discussion with a small group
  – Topics and questions defined ahead of time
  – Discussion moderated and recorded

• For survey development, they’re conducted prior to developing survey instrument
  – Help to define issues, learn terminology and/or subject matter, likely responses, etc.

• Useful for
  – Exploring unknown/ill-defined research questions
  – Examining rich data not suited to surveys

6/25/12
A focus group is **not** a…

- Problem solving session
- Collaboration session
- Debate
- Group therapy session
- Conflict resolution session
- Promotional opportunity
- Educational session
Characteristics of Focus Group

• Participants
  – Carefully recruited
  – 6 -10 people/group
  – Similar types of people
  – Repeated groups

• Environment
  – Comfortable
  – Circle seating (if possible)
  – If possible, tape record the session
  – Two-hours/session (approximately)

For additional information about the environment: *Focus Group Kit*, vol.2, chpt. 10.
A Bit About Ethics

• Focus group participants should be:
  – Guaranteed confidentiality
  – Free from influence
    • Rank, seniors present, etc.
  – Able to withdraw at any time
    • Including choosing not to participate at all

• Ensure confidentiality is upheld!

• Goal is to get participant’s honest, uninhibited thoughts and comments
Group Composition

• Productive conversation is the key
  – Participants must be comfortable talking to each other (and to the moderator)

• Homogeneous groups usually best:
  – IT skills, needs, and experience
  – Seniority
  – Education level
  – Occupation

• For this purpose, likely comes down to defining ITACS’ various customer bases
  – I.e., those with similar IT needs

For additional information, see: *Focus Group Kit*, vol.2, chpt. 6.
Recruiting Participants

• Can select by randomly sampling from various customer bases
  – May be hard to get engagement
  – Some may not be able to participate
• Perhaps better to recruit via referral
  – Use personal contacts or chain of command
• Best approach will vary by type of customer
  – E.g., faculty vs. staff vs. students
• Consider starting with groups easiest to recruit
Moderator Duties

• Manage and focus discussion
  – Use pre-determined questions
    • Purposeful small talk
    • Pauses and probes

• Moderator must:
  – Be skillful in group discussion
  – Establish permissive environment
  – Use subtle group control
    • Set ground rules at outset
    • Appropriately deal with shy & dominant talkers

For additional information, see: *Focus Group Kit*, vol.4, chpts. 2-4.
Assistant Moderator Duties

- Arranges the environment
- Takes notes / records discussion
  - If possible, audiotape recording
  - Set-up and testing of recording devices
- Facilitation aids – wall charts, paper and pencils, props, video

Figure 10.1. Setup for a focus group in a public meeting room.

For additional information, see: *Focus Group Kit*, vol.4, chpts. 10-11.
Question Flow

- Opening/Intro
  - 2 to 3 questions
  - 15 minutes

- Key questions
  - 6 to 12 questions
  - 90 minutes

- Closing
  - 2 to 3 questions
  - 15 minutes

- 120 minutes total
Question Guidelines

• Use questions that:
  – Are open-ended
  – Get participants involved
  – Are of different types (keep it interesting)

• Be sure to focus the questions (and discussion)
  – It’s not a rambling bull session

• Think back questions can be useful

• Avoid dichotomous and “why” questions

• Be cautious of serendipitous questions

For additional information, see: Focus Group Kit, vol.3, chpts. 1, 3, 4-5.
Opening Questions

• Initial question(s): Help participants see what they have in common and should put them at ease
  – Introductory question: Introduces the topic of discussion and allows them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with the topic
  – Transition question: Moves the conversation into the key questions
Possible Opening Questions for ITACS Focus Groups

• Opening Question:  
  *Please tell us your name, which NPS organization your work in, a bit about your duties, and what you like to do in your spare time.*

• Introductory Question:  
  *When you hear the words ‘customer satisfaction,’ what comes to mind?*

• Transition Question:  
  *Now, when you think about ITACS in the context of customer satisfaction, what comes to mind?*
Key Questions

• This is the whole point of the focus group
• Here:
  – Minimize your input (only talk 10% of the time)
  – Don’t be afraid of silence; ask a question and wait
  – Encourage discussion and avoid judgments (negative or positive)
  – Manage the group
    • Dampen the verbose
    • Encourage the meek
  – Cross-talk is okay
• Don’t forget question probes
Some Possible Key Questions for ITACS Focus Groups

• Please think back to the last time you called the TAC – that’s the ITACS Technology Assistance Center – for an IT problem. Could you describe the interaction, how the problem was resolved, and whether it was resolved to your satisfaction?

• If you had one minute to talk to the NPS CIO, Christine Haska, about how to improve customer satisfaction with ITACS, what would you say?

• Thinking about all the ways you use IT here at NPS, what single improvement in ITACS infrastructure, operations, or policy would most increase your effectiveness?
Ending Questions

- Review purpose and see if anything has been missed
- Summarize with confirmation
- Appreciation and dismissal
Some Possible Ending Questions for ITACS Focus Groups

- *As we work to improve ITACS customer satisfaction, what advice do you have for us?*
- After verbally summarizing what the respondents have said back to them: *Have we missed anything?*
- *Is there anything else we should have talked about but didn’t?*
- Be sure and close by thanking the participants for their time and assistance

For script examples, see: *Focus Group Kit, vol.3, appendix.*
Transcribing Notes

• If session recorded, transcribe comments word for word
  – If tape-recording sessions:
    • Use quality play-back equipment
    • Note special or unusual sounds that could help analysis
• If not recorded, summarize interaction as completely as possible
  – Identify moderator statements separately
• Capture non-verbal as well as verbal
Data Analysis & Reporting

• **Timing**
  – Start immediately after the focus group
  • When doing multiple groups, things can blur
  – Soon after the focus - within hours, while your memory is fresh - analyze each focus group

• **Focus on:**
  – Words, ideas and their context
  – Frequency and/or extensiveness
  – Intensity, specificity
  – Finding common/big ideas

For additional information, see: *Focus Group Kit*, vol.6, chpts. 4, 8, & 9.
Limitations of Focus Groups

• Participants are not necessarily representative of survey population
  – Generalization not appropriate
• Not a good venue for evaluating specific question wording or how respondents arrive at answers to questions
• Results generally not quantitative and subject to judgments of those conducting the groups
Focus Groups as a Compliment to Surveys

• This discussion about using focus groups to help develop survey
• Sometimes its useful to employ both surveys and focus groups for research
• Focus groups can be useful for
  – Explaining survey results
  – Exploring a topic or issue identified by the survey in more detail
  – Complimenting quantitative survey results with qualitative information
Planning Timeline

For additional information, see: Focus Group Kit, vol.1, chpt. 8.
Good References

• The “Focus Group Kit” published by SAGE:
  – *The Focus Group Guidebook* by David L. Morgan
  – *Planning Focus Groups* by David L. Morgan
  – *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* by Richard A. Krueger
  – *Moderating Focus Groups* by Richard A. Krueger
  – *Analyzing & Reporting Focus Group Results* by Richard A. Krueger

• Library has copies
  – All the handouts are taken from the above
"The focus group destroyed the computers and burned down the computer room. We now know how they feel about pop-ups."
What We Have Covered

• Introduced focus group methodology
  – Described its uses in survey development process
• Discussed the characteristics of a focus group
• Described moderator and assistant moderator duties
• Discussed question guidelines
• Reviewed focus group data and limitations