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While the focus group process is robust, there are several situations where additional attention is needed. One area is with existing groups, especially workers within an organization. In these environments participants not only know each other, but they are often familiar with the values, habits and interests of their colleagues. It may be a challenge to create an environment where employees are willing to openly and honestly share their concerns, anxieties and suggestions. The organizational climate may restrict open communication and discourage or even punish alternative points of view. Also, while knowing one another may promote sharing with one group, it may inhibit sharing in another group.

In spite of these difficulties, focus groups can be used effectively within organizations and even in work groups. Here are suggestions to consider:

Control the Sampling Strategy

Perhaps the foremost problem facing the researcher is the manner in which participants are selected to participate in the focus group. Convenience samples—that is, selecting people because they are easy to recruit—are risky with internal groups. In the same vein, another risky practice is relying on insiders to select people by memory, past experiences or other criteria. Memories are faulty and bias can easily creep into the selection. The researcher should develop a sampling plan specifying the screens or criteria for participation in the focus group and follow it carefully. We suggest using the old standby process of developing a “pool” of people who meet screening requirements and then randomly selecting from this pool. Often the researcher is unfamiliar with the organization and must rely on insiders to provide advice on sample selection.

Avoid Power Differentials

Avoid power differentials. This can vary by organization and tradition, but the participants should feel that they are in a group with people of equivalent position. Avoid situations where supervisors and subordinates are in the same focus group. Sometimes those differences are not obvious. When doing focus groups with support staff within an organization, we assumed we could put all secretaries in the same groups. Only later did we realize that the secretaries had a hierarchy and lower-ranking secretaries were deferring to higher-ranking secretaries.

Avoid Preestablished Small Groups

Discussions among members of preestablished small groups are difficult to analyze. Communication is exceedingly complex. Therefore, avoid doing focus groups with these small work groups, and instead, if possible, place people with other colleagues. This forces participants to explain their comments more fully and completely and to rely less on the cryptic communication.

Be Aware of the Environment and Recent History

Discover the organizational environment and recent history. Outside researchers are often unfamiliar with the culture, traditions and communication styles within organizations. To what extent is this an organization where people openly share ideas? Do they value the insight of others and are they respectful of divergent views? Interestingly, sometimes even internal staff may not be aware of these messages (regarding respect, tolerance, valuing opinions of others, listening, openness to new ideas) that are informally communicated within the organization. Here are some views that we've found within organizations that limit focus group usage.

"If you see the problem and say something about it, then you are expected to find the solution. Therefore, don't mention the problem."

"Management says they want advice, but they've already made the decision."

"It's okay to be critical, but only with certain other insiders. Certain topics are so sacred that they are talked about with only the closest of friends."

"If you say anything negative about the organization they assume you're not engaged."

Perhaps the most effective way to become grounded in the organizational climate is to conduct individual, informal interviews with a variety of staff as the study is being designed. By chatting with employees, the researcher can get advice about a number of logistical aspects of the study, test potential questions and generally discover what is needed to make the study a success.

It regularly takes extra effort to create a nonthreatening, permissive environment in internal groups. Employees need to feel comfortable with the study. We go to extra lengths to let people know "who asked for the information," "what prompted the study," "what kind of decisions are going to be made based on the information" and "who is going to listen to the tapes." Avoid creating the impression that the organization will do what one group suggests. Participants are reminded that information is being gathered from a number of groups of employees and then these aggregated perceptions will be shared with those who will be making decisions.

Know the limits of focus group research. In these organizational environments it may be impossible to create the necessary focus group conditions, and in these situations the researcher should know when to avoid focus group research. If participants don't trust the sponsor or their colleagues, see the study as a threat, are unwilling to share their views or are unwilling to listen to views of others, then focus groups won't work.

Select the Right Moderator

Who should moderate? Moderators from outside the organization have the advantage of being neutral, but they may be unfamiliar with the organizational culture. External moderators may see things internal moderators wouldn't because they have a chance to compare this environment with others. Internal moderators are more familiar with the organization but need to be viewed as someone who can listen, who can be trusted, and that it makes sense they would be asking about the topic. For example, it would make sense for someone from the human resources department to be asking about morale or benefits. When selecting a moderator, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of internal and external moderators.

Provide Adequate Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a sensitive issue with internal focus groups. Once again, the concern over confidentiality will likely be triggered by the topic, the organizational culture and traditions. Does the organization welcome divergent and different ideas? Do employees trust their colleagues? In the past, what has happened to people who have been critical? No promise from the moderator will be trusted if past promises haven't been kept. The moderator should be clear, precise and open about the nature of the promise. It often begins at the planning stage with decision makers who are requesting the study. Be absolutely clear about who has access to participant names. This usually means that those requesting the study will not know names of focus group participants.

Confidentiality also needs to be respected by others in the focus group. The moderator must be clear about what behaviors are expected in the group. It defeats the purpose when the moderator promises confidentiality, but then a focus group participant later tells everyone they know what others have said

in the group. Consider including these things in your introduction to the focus group:

- Describe the study. Include who asked for it and why.
- Tell who has access to the results.
- Describe how results will benefit participants or the organization.
- Promise of confidentiality by the researchers, which means no names are attached.
- Tell how audio recordings will be used. Who will have access to them?
- Request that the group also maintain confidentiality for each other.
- Explain that the moderator's role is to guide the discussion, keep it on track and on some topics talk to participants individually after the group.
- Explain that no names are wanted—so please don't mention names of colleagues.
- Tell them that you will summarize key points of the discussion at the end and then ask for their help to ensure that you've captured the most important points.

Consider the Appropriateness of Focus Groups

Give thought to whether focus groups are appropriate for your particular situation. The organizational environment presents special concerns and pressures that are not evident in other focus group environments. You cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality because what is said in organizational focus groups might be repeated in the hallways or at the water cooler after the focus group. Certain topics will be delicate, such as illegal behavior at the worksite, sexual harassment at work or detailed examples of employee nonengagement. These topics may be more appropriate for individual interviews where confidentiality can be assured. And then later you might use focus groups to test out solution strategies but not get into the details of the specific behaviors.

Provide Benefit to Participants

Be able to describe the benefit of the study. In particular, describe how the participants and their colleagues will benefit directly or indirectly. In many cases the benefit is for colleagues, neighbors and friends. "What is learned from the study will improve services to other veterans," "This study will help top management make decisions about merit pay and employee benefits" or "This study will help us better serve our patients." The promise must be reasonable and sufficiently specific to be credible. Keep in mind that at the end of the study the researchers should deliver on this promise by describing the results and showing how it is linked to the goals.

Do a Reality Check After Each Group

At the end of the focus group add a few questions about the study. In our experience we've found it helpful to ask the ending questions, provide a brief summary, ask for verification, and then turn off the audio recorder. But don't excuse the participants just yet. Tell them that you are finished with the more formal part of the discussion and now you would like their advice on the process. Indicate that this is just to help the research team improve later discussions. Then, ask a few questions about the process. It could be as simple as, "Well, what did you think of the discussion?" or "What can I do to improve the discussion?" or "What can I do to make people more comfortable?" If you suspect they may have held back, you might ask, "Do you think people will hold back and not tell us what they are really thinking?"

Analyze With Group Dynamics in Mind

When doing the analysis keep in mind that certain discussion patterns are common to existing groups. Veteran analysts have noticed that when all participants are members of the group, there is a tendency to be overly harsh on the sponsoring organization or institution. If participants feel there is a mix of insiders and outsiders they may be more restrained in their criticism. In addition, insiders know more about how the organization works, what has been promised and what promises haven't been met. All of this can fuel cynicism, provoke anger and make participants skeptical of the study's intent. Participants may have another agenda that they wish to follow in the focus groups, such as persuasion, blocking or promotion. Because participants know each other and have developed relationships with other participants, the discussion can be affected in a variety of ways. In effect the focus group participants are reacting to both the ideas expressed as well as to the people expressing those ideas. It may be difficult or impossible to determine if the reaction is to the other person or the idea of that person. Be watchful and alert.

Summary

Focus groups within organizations have been exceedingly valuable, but they must be done carefully. Be particularly concerned about how employees are placed in focus groups and avoid power differentials. Remember that a core principle of focus groups is to have a homogeneous group in a permissive and nonthreatening environment.