Collecting data for improvement: Focus groups

Focus groups—facilitated discussions with a group of participants—are a valuable tool to support your continuous quality improvement (CQI) efforts. They are an efficient and effective way to collect qualitative information on participants' knowledge, opinions, beliefs, or attitudes about a specific topic or concept. Focus groups can help you better understand a programmatic challenge, gather ideas for improvement strategies, or obtain feedback about your strategy during or after a road test. This resource describes key steps in planning for and conducting focus groups and includes a logistics checklist and note-taking template.

Focus group essentials

Typical size: 5-8 people

Typical length: 60-90 minutes

Recommended Materials:

- Discussion guide
- Consent process
- Note taking template/ recorder
- Incentives (if applicable)

Roles

- Facilitator
- Notetaker

Identify and recruit participants. For CQI purposes, you might be conducting focus groups with staff, clients, partners, or community members. Focus groups tend to work best when the group is small (5-8 people), so you may need to select a sample of your target participants. One way to identify a sample is to advertise the group (usually, offering a monetary or non-monetary incentive, like food) and select participants from those who volunteer. Keep in mind that you want a range of perspectives but also want to ensure group members are comfortable sharing with each other. For instance, if you're interested in understanding opinions on your parenting curriculum, you might consider holding two focus groups – one for fathers and one for mothers – to allow group members to talk openly about what resonated with them or not. You should also ensure you are gathering perspectives from everyone who is impacted by your strategy. For instance, if staff are asked to try a new facilitation approach, you should aim to gather staff perspectives, but you also might conduct a group with clients to understand their experiences. Start drafting your conversation guide before you recruit participants, to be sure you are reaching out to the range of individuals best able to answer your questions.

Develop a conversation guide. To prepare for a focus group, develop a written guide of information to share and questions to ask participants during the discussion. The learning questions you specified for your road test are a great starting point. After road testing a strategy, your goal should be to learn about challenges and successes with implementing the strategy, perceptions of the value of the strategy, and suggestions for refining it. Consider who can best answer your questions: staff, clients, partners, community members, or multiple types of participants. For example, if one of your learning questions is "Did clients find it useful to receive text reminders prior to class?" you might break this down into several questions for clients in your discussion guide, such as, "How often did you read the text messages?" "To what extent did the reminders motivate you to attend?" and "What improvements would you suggest?" When drafting questions:

- Ensure questions are open-ended rather than yes/no. Try starting with "how," "what," or "why."
- Avoid leading questions that suggest a preferred response. For example, rather than asking "Do you think consistent attendance is important?" ask, "What motivates you to attend the class consistently?"
- Use probing questions to encourage discussion. For example, if participants are not very specific in answering "What motivates you to attend the class consistently?" be ready to ask follow-up questions on whether the curriculum is engaging, if they feel connected to the group and facilitator, or other factors.
- Test out your questions with someone who has insight about your topic and intended participants. For example, if you plan to conduct a client focus group on a workshop-related strategy, you might identify an

alumnus of the program with whom you still have a relationship and get feedback about the clarity of your questions. The alum could also help flag questions that facilitators might be better able to answer.

- While testing the questions, consider whether there will be enough time for each participant to contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way. If not, revise or reorder your guide to make sure everyone can contribute on the most important questions. Depending on how the conversation goes, you still might not have time for all your questions. Highlight the most important ones to ensure you ask them.

Be sure to include an introduction to read to focus group participants that explains why you are conducting the focus group, how you will use the information, requests for participant consent and approval to record the sessions, and assurances related to confidentiality of participant responses.

Tip: Whether in person or virtual, careful planning in advance of the group can facilitate a strong session. Use the logistics checklist below to ensure you've considered key steps.

Conducting the group. If feasible, use two staff to conduct the focus group; one to serve as primary facilitator and the other to take comprehensive notes. If you are planning a virtual focus group, consider including a third staff person who can address any technology issues that might come up during the call. Give some thought about who should play each role. For instance, if you are collecting feedback from staff about a programmatic change, avoid having supervisors or leadership conduct the group, as you want staff to feel comfortable providing honest feedback. If you plan to record, ensure you obtain permission from everyone in the group. In every group, some participants might be quieter than others. To create a safe environment from the start, you should set ground rules for the conversation (for example, don't interrupt others; allow everyone to speak; don't share information outside of the group; if you don't feel comfortable answering a question, you don't have to). To ensure you're hearing from everyone, you can use strategies such as asking round robin questions (during which the facilitator goes around the group to allow everyone to respond). You can also enhance participation by providing a variety of ways to contribute. For example, if you hold the group in person, you might ask participants to respond to one or two questions using sticky notes on a wall, and then facilitate a discussion about their responses. Be sure to pay attention to non-verbal responses and call on people as you see them reacting (for example, "Alex, I see you're nodding your head. Can you tell me more about your thoughts?").

Analyzing your data. High quality notes support strong analysis. To ensure you're capturing good information, consider using the notetaking template below. It is important to capture takeaways, context, and direct quotes, if possible. Reviewing and cleaning notes soon after the group concludes will help you to recall context, ensure accuracy, and facilitate analysis. To analyze the data, highlight key themes across participants and questions. Use quotes to support the themes but be sure the quotes can't be used to identify individual participants. Once you have completed analysis, review your findings with your CQI team.

Example: Using focus groups for road testing

The challenge and strategy: In order to incentivize attendance and promote group cohesion, your program decides to implement group dinners prior to your couples workshops. Program staff see the dinners as an opportunity for facilitators to get to know clients and for clients to talk with each other in an informal way outside of the classroom environment. The free dinners are also intended to promote attendance at workshops. The program road tests the dinner strategy with a new group of clients.

Data collection: To learn how clients felt about the dinners, you might conduct a focus group, asking whether clients enjoyed the dinners, had the opportunity to get to know others in the program as well as the facilitators, and have any suggestions for improving the dinners.

Using your insights: Use what you learn to determine how to refine the strategy or whether it's worth refining. For example, if the clients felt dinners were hard to attend or didn't use them to socialize with other group members or facilitators, you might try a different strategy.

Focus group logistics checklist

A successful focus group depends on good planning. Consider the key steps in this table when planning in-person or virtual focus groups.

	In-person	Virtual
Planning ahead	✓ Determine whether your team will need to obtain participant consent and how you will administer that for an in-person group. Follow your agency's requirements and, if applicable, guidance from your IRB. If your focus group includes youth, you may need to collect parent consent forms, in addition to youth assent. Anticipate and build in time for follow-up with parents to obtain forms. ✓ Reserve a space that is convenient, comfortable, and accessible. If people are driving, ensure there is ample parking. ✓ Think about potential barriers participants might have to attending and determine if your program can provide support. Consider the feasibility of providing childcare, transportation vouchers, and/or accommodations for people with specific assistive needs during the group. ✓ Prepare any incentives that you promised when recruiting participants. This could include non-monetary incentives, such as food during the session, or monetary incentives such as gift cards for groceries, popular retail stores, or general Visa gift cards.	✓ Determine whether your team will need to obtain participant consent and how you will administer that for a virtual group. Just as for in-person consent, plan well ahead and consult with your agency and IRB. ✓ Develop plans for incorporating videoconferencing features, including polls and a chat box. For example, determine who will monitor the chat throughout the focus group, who will launch polls, etc. ✓ Conduct a test run at least a few days in advance to ensure everyone is aware of their roles and the team is clear on timing (for example, when to screen share vs. show participants on camera). ✓ Consider limitations to joining a videoconference. If some can only join by phone, consider how you will obtain their perspectives (e.g., if someone cannot add to the chat or polls, they can share responses verbally). ✓ If you offer incentives, obtain online gift codes that can be emailed to participants right after the group. Also, be sure to gather email addresses for all participants (or mailing addresses, if you plan to mail gift cards).
At least two weeks in advance	✓ Send an invitation to ensure participants save the time on their calendars. Be sure to include details on where and when the group will take place, the purpose of the group, how you will use the information collected, and any incentives and/or accommodations you will provide.	✓ Send an invitation to ensure participants save the time on their calendars. Include details about how to join the meeting and any technology requirements. Clarify participation expectations, such as limiting background distractions and/or using video. As with in-person, include information about the purpose of the group, how you will use the information, and any incentives you will provide.
Reminders	✓ Send a reminder to participants 2 or 3 days prior to the focus group that includes directions to the site and any instructions about transportation, parking, and checking in. Include the consent form for advance review.	✓ Email a reminder to participants 2 or 3 days ahead and include the consent form for their review. Include instructions for accessing and using your virtual platform and a reminder to join from a quiet space. Encourage participants to join using video cameras.
Day of	✓ Arrive early to set up the room ahead of time. Set up the room so that participants are sitting in a circle. ✓ Before starting the discussion, distribute applicable consent/assent forms. Provide time for participants to review, sign, and return forms. ✓ Ask participants for permission to record the group. Be sure to have a notetaker in case anyone is uncomfortable being recorded. See the notetaking template below for further notetaking recommendations. ✓ Thank participants and distribute gift cards, if applicable.	✓ Arrive early to test technology. If possible, identify someone on your team who can assist with technology challenges as they arise. ✓ Before starting the discussion, read the consent statement and ask participants to agree by adding their name and a yes/no in the chat. ✓ Ask if it is OK to record the session. Again, participants can type yes/no into the chat. Be sure to assign someone as a notetaker if anyone does not wish to be recorded and use the notetaking template below. ✓ Thank participants and let them know you will send gift codes after the group, if applicable.
After the group	✓ Save your focus group notes and/or any transcripts or recordings in a secure space that can be accessed only by members of your program team.	

Focus group notetaking template

Focus groups are only as valuable as the insights that you're able to distill from them. To ensure that you document useful information, consider using the template below, which has space to note key points, direct quotes, and contextual information/observations that will help you make the most of the data you gather when you begin analysis. Modify this template to create a separate row for each question in your discussion guide. Include the full question to the right of the question number to help with notetaking and analysis. The EXAMPLE row in the template provides an example of the kinds of information you might include in your notes.

Recording focus groups is a recommended practice; however, it may not always be an option. Even when recording is an option, detailed notes can be a useful supplement to help you determine which parts of the interview you need to listen to again and to remember important context.

Keep in mind that you should avoid using any personally identifiable information in your notes (for example, first names; instead, refer to participants by 'participant 1,' etc.). The focus group facilitator can use a separate list of participants to greet and prompt individuals by name, but that list should be destroyed as soon as the group is over.

Notes

Date: __________________ Time: ______________

Focus group facilitator: ____

Number of participants: ____

☐In person or ☐virtual

Group description (example: fathers from couples' class participants; workshop facilitators): ____

Question #__:

Key points or takeaways	Direct quotes	Contextual information

Question #EXAMPLE: Did clients think integrating new energizers/short breaks helped them to stay engaged with classes?

Key points or takeaways	Direct quotes	Contextual information
Clients thought the new energizers were fun but sometimes found it hard to refocus after taking breaks Connecting energizers to the topic of the day or making the energizers shorter might help them to maintain focus	"It can be hard to sit for 90 minutes straight, so having short activity breaks made a big difference. … On the flip side, coming back to the lesson after a game or activity is kind of hard." – Participant 1	Two participants dominated the conversation, so it was difficult to get thoughts from everyone related to this question. One participant didn't feel comfortable responding to this question because he only participated in one class that used new energizers.

Source: Data Innovation Project. "Tips & Tools," accessed on March 8, 2022. [*https://datainnovationproject.org/tip-tools/*](https://datainnovationproject.org/tip-tools/)

Sources: Lewis, Faith, and Seth Muzzy. 2020. "Conducting Virtual Focus Groups." Implementation Research Incubator (blog), April. [*https://www.mdrc.org/publication/conducting-virtual-focus-groups*](https://www.mdrc.org/publication/conducting-virtual-focus-groups)

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