Focus group guide

Focus groups can help you identify and analyse emerging psychosocial hazards and inform future planning identified in the risk assessment process. They're ideal for consulting with workers and enable the collection of meaningful data on people's perceptions of their work environment.

Reasons for using focus groups include:

- to obtain more detailed information and insights into the importance of psychosocial hazards
- to better understand opinions and issues regarding the work environment and design of work
- to establish a safe and open environment to express views about the people at work survey results
- to provide a broad representation of diverse ideas and experiences on the topic
- to generate strategies and solutions for addressing psychosocial hazards in the future.

Preparing for a focus group

Consider the following points to ensure success as you draw out accurate and practical information from your participants.

Size

The ideal size for a focus group is six to twelve participants - ensuring the group is large enough to generate energy and diversity of ideas, but not too large that people may miss the opportunity to contribute. Large groups can make it difficult for the facilitator to manage.

Composition

Teams or workgroups are a good option if the consultation is only relevant for one area, or when a thorough consultation is required. Forming focus groups from a representative sample of workers across teams can speed up the data collection process, but may require extra facilitation skills to develop rapport between members and promote open discussions.

You can also change the group dynamic through cross-team participation, offering a variety of backgrounds and experiences. The best approach will depend on culture, team dynamics and facilitator experience.

Duration

The ideal time for a focus group is 60 to 90 minutes. Short sessions are unlikely to explore issues in a meaningful way and long sessions may lead to participants becoming fatigued or bored, withdrawing from the conversation.

Location

Whether the focus group is held on or offsite, it's important to consider participants' perception of the location. Consideration should be given to privacy, size, amenities and equipment in the room.

The ideal seating plan for a focus group is a U-shape or a circle, preferably without a table acting as a physical barrier.

Materials

The facilitator should consider supplying the following:

- name tags
- notepads/pens
- refreshments

Conducting a focus group

The following points will help manage your focus group and elicit the best possible input from participants:

Facilitator's role

The facilitator should not be a member of the team, however, it's not always necessary to invite external consultants to facilitate. In some cases a manager or senior worker from another team may be appropriate. Facilitators should refrain from influencing discussions and outcomes.

The facilitator's role is to:

- observe and listen
- set ground rules for group behaviour
- give consideration to participant availability and the importance of time management (ensure you start and finish on time)
- ensure all questions are covered
- attend to group dynamics and manage conflicts
- ensure each participant has the opportunity to speak
- keep the discussion on topic
- reassure participants their confidentiality will be maintained
- providing appropriate feedback to management.

A dedicated scribe should be present to record information in writing, allowing the facilitator to focus on questioning and group dynamics. The facilitator should take time afterwards to reflect and create their own set of written notes.

Format

The facilitator will introduce the session's purpose and expected outcomes. If a survey precedes the focus group, a brief summary of the survey results should be provided to participants both before and upon arrival at the focus group. Below is a suggested focus group format:

- introductions
- ground rules and participant guidelines (see list below)
- confidentiality
- questioning (e.g. engagement, exploration, exit questions – see examples below)
- questions to avoid (see examples below)
- summary of themes
- next steps

It is important to finish with 'next steps' as this is critical for participants to understand what happens with their comments after the focus group, how their comments will be presented and to who, and when they will hear back about a plan of action.

Participant guidelines

The facilitator should:

- ask participants to switch off or silence mobile devices
- advise participants there are no right or wrong answers, each view shared will be respected and while it is appropriate to respectfully disagree, this can also be counterproductive.
- encourage participants to rephrase statements using "I" such as "I hear what you are saying, but I think…" instead of "you're wrong".
- remind participants not interrupt others so all participants have an opportunity to contribute equally, feel heard and respected.
- remind participants the focus group's aim is to address the issue, not an individual.

Confidentiality

The facilitator is responsible for participants' privacy and maintaining confidentiality of responses and opinions expressed. Participants should be advised their responses will be documented through note-taking and names will not be recorded in relation to specific issues, direct quotes or reports produced. Explaining how the data will be used after the focus group will help alleviate concerns that input will single out individuals.

Participants have the responsibility of respecting the privacy of other participants and should be instructed not to repeat focus group discussions, outside of the session.

Questioning

Questioning is the most important tool the facilitator will use to obtain relevant information. The facilitator should prepare a list of open-ended questions, starting generally to encourage involvement and then moving towards more specific questioning. Examples of suitable focus group questions include:

Engagement questions prompt factual responses, are non-threatening and can be good ice-breakers to encourage participants:

- Has anyone participated in a focus group before?
- How was the experience for you?
- What worked well or not so well?

Exploration questions provide an opportunity to gather more specific information, introduce dedicated questions and explore answers more thoroughly:

- Do you feel involved in how decisions about your job are made? Think about whether you feel listened to and trusted, how you are consulted and any opportunities for input.
- What is the level of support like in the organisation?
- Do you feel you understand how work is structured in your department and in the wider organisation?
- What are some of the things this organisation can do to address or help with the issues you have talked about?

Exit questions help to ensure the facilitator has not missed important issues and that all participants have had their say:

- Does anybody have anything else to add?
- Have I missed any key issues you would like to discuss?

Double-barrelled questions are best separated into two parts:

- have you ever… ?
- …and what was it like?

Questions to avoid are those that give direction to a desired answer:

- So, do you agree that…?
- How bad was it that…?
- Management did…, didn't they?
- Would you say that…?

Value-laden questions are emotionally charged and should be avoided, for example:

- Should staff be forced to…?
- Should managers demand…?
- Some examples of emotionally charged words include blame, claim, demand, fair, ignore, force, coerce, insist, unreasonable, unhelpful, and purport.

Data analysis

The entire focus group conversation does not need to be recorded verbatim.

It is critical for the scribe to transcribe the data electronically as soon as possible after each focus group to ensure accuracy. The facilitator should then record their notes into the database, and both should meet to ensure they agree on the content.

Step 1 - Organising the data

- Create an excel spreadsheet.
- Ensure participant confidentiality, allocate each participant a number (e.g. Bob Smith = P1; Sally Jones = P2; John Wilson = P3, and so on). It is very important the names of participants are not recorded in this document.
- Label four columns as (1) participant code, (2) participant comments, (3) category and (4) sub-category.
- Insert each pre-organised focus group question (and any other topics that emerged) in separate rows.
- Underneath each focus group question, write the comments or quotes received into a separate line in the order in which they were said, labelling each one with the relevant participant code.

Step 2 - Analysing the data

- Read through the entire spreadsheet to get a feel for the issues. Then, focus on each focus group question in turn. Be on the lookout for common categories, themes and patterns as well as unexpected comments or surprises.
- Decide on the common themes in the data and assign them a category name (e.g. team work). These are broad categories and a good place to start.
- Make a list of these categories at the top of the spreadsheet and allocate them a code (e.g. Tw = team work).
- Taking each comment in turn, assign it a category code.
- As you label these categories, you may start to find the categories are broad and could be broken down into further themes (e.g. the issue of team meetings could be a sub-category of the broader theme of team work).
- As these sub-categories emerge, add them to the top of the spreadsheet, assigning them a code as you go along (e.g. team work, team meetings = TwM).
- Excel allows you to sort using your categories or sub-categories to identity the most/least common issues (in terms of frequency), common expressions among themes and any patterns for each participant.

Report presentation

It is important that a summary of the focus group is developed and shared with others in the organisation. If workers do not see any findings or subsequent action from participating in a focus group then they lose meaning and are less likely to participate in the future.

The key themes identified from the focus groups can be summarised for workers at face-to-face meetings or other existing communication channels. The summary should also include actions that will be taken in response to the focus group results.

For management, the best approach is to summarise the categories and provide powerful comments as justification of the categories. Adding quotes also helps to give life and meaning to the summary report. However, ensure these comments cannot be traced back to an individual. If several focus groups are conducted across departments or workgroups, it can be worthwhile to compare the results across different focus groups to identify patterns.

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