What are focus groups and how can I use them to evaluate program impacts?

Focus group interviews are yet another data collection method you can employ to gather information about your program. Conducting focus groups is an efficient method to affirm the value of your program, identify improvements for the continuation of a program, and/or to identify needs for programming. As with all data collection methods, there are advantages and disadvantages to focus groups.

The focus group method allows you to gather a significant amount of qualitative data in a relatively short amount of time. One of the major benefits of focus groups is the dialogue; participants connect with each other and relate information that they may not have even touched on if they were asked a similar question in a survey or an interview. Their conversations can bring crisper details to their success stories and provide context and specific factors contributing to issues or needs that could be addressed in the program. If you have the feeling that the impact information you have gathered from participants is only the beginning of what they have to say, you may want to consider a focus group.

A focus group is often envisioned as a 90-minute facilitated discussion of six to fifteen participants. The majority of focus groups are of this formal variety. Another option, however, is an informal focus group. If you have fifteen minutes at the end of your program session, you can facilitate a discussion on a specific question. An example of a question is, “What is the one thing you learned today that you feel will have the most lasting effect on you?” As the participants discuss this question, you can record their testimonials and use them to enhance the quantitative data in your impact report.

When considering a focus group, keep your purpose in mind – Are you looking for qualitative or quantitative data? Is the topic so sensitive that people may not feel comfortable discussing it in a group? Does the topic require confidentiality? Focus groups do not provide you with hard numbers and percentages. In your impact report, you can note approximate frequency using data from focus groups, for example, “majority” or “about one-half of participants.” However, if your purpose is to gain the hard numbers (quantitative data), a survey is more appropriate. Or, if your topic is extremely sensitive or requires confidentiality, individual interviews, or in some cases a survey, would be more appropriate.

One practical consideration of focus groups is personnel resources. To conduct a formal focus group you will need at least two people: a moderator and an assistant moderator/documenter. The other roles incorporated into this method after the focus group is conducted, such as the analyzer and writer, can be carried out by these two people. One resolution to this possible constraint is to involve neighboring county KSRE professionals who have experience in conducting or are interested in learning more about focus groups. In this way, their contribution to your focus group can be an opportunity to collaborate and mentor throughout KSRE.
Focus Groups...  
- Help understand team dynamics and collaborations  
- Uncover new strategies for project improvement  
- Give insight on multiple perspectives  
- Are descriptive allowing for:
  - Context  
  - Connections  
  - Specifics

Focus Groups do not...  
- Give numerical data  
- Cater to sensitive topics  
- Cater to confidentiality

Focus groups are not ideal for quantitative analysis.

Remember:  
- Focus groups are discussions that last from 15-90 minutes  
- Focus groups include 6-15 participants  
- Focus groups are dynamic and information dense

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