FOCUS GROUPS

A Step-by-step Guide

- Using focus groups is a powerful data-collection tool that can sharpen the information gathered by human resources, production, or service departments.
- Focus groups tap invaluable data on a wide variety of topics from organizational stakeholders—including employees, clients, suppliers, and leadership.
- This book provides a practical guide for planning, conducting, and evaluating data engendered by focus groups.
- The Winners' Ink fictional example illustrates the focus group process that is explained in the text.

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THE BADER GROUP

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Meet Winners' Ink

"An utter failure!" best describes Winners' Ink's implementation of its new performance management system. Virtually every employee complained through e-mail to the Human Resources Department, letters-to-the-editor in the company newsletter, answers to a company-wide survey, and face-to-face conversations.

In response, HR staff spent hours developing new salary scales based not only on their own industry expertise but also on extensive reading about the best practices used in various other companies. Proud of their accomplishment, they enthusiastically implemented the plan. Within six months, the barrage of complaints resumed. HR staff felt defeated.

The story of how Winners' Ink used focus groups to solve this problem is used throughout the book to illustrate recommended practices.

Challenge

Why was an organizational change based on careful planning and research so ineffective? Many variables may have contributed, but lack of participation by the targets of the change certainly played a key role in the effort's demise. The Human Resources staff had relied exclusively on data gleaned from surveys, informal interactions, and external benchmarking. They ignored a rich source of detailed information within the company: *their* own employees.

Employees know what they want and need. They have keen insights into the workings of the organization's technical and social systems. They can reveal potential barriers to change. This information is crucial to developing, implementing, and evaluating change efforts.

How do professionals effectively gather and distill data critical to decisions and successful change? They use ***focus groups.***

Definition

> *"Focus group" is the label given to a special type of group interview that is structured to gather detailed opinions and knowledge about a particular topic from selected participants.*

Using techniques such as questioning and summarizing, a facilitator stimulates discussions that uncover concerns and opinions held by groups of people about particular issues. Analysis of the data synthesizes these concerns and opinions. Used alone or combined with quantitative data such as surveys, the information guides choices about the best course of action.

Focus groups were first used in the social sciences to investigate group dynamics, persuasive communication, and the effects of mass media such as the impact of World War II propaganda efforts. In the last decade, analysts molded the process into a popular marketing research tool. Conducting group interviews with consumers and clients, market researchers learned how to improve products and services and make predictions about what would sell. Today, many organizations conduct focus groups to improve member, employee, or client services and to evaluate changes.

Benefits

1. *The focus group process provides a structured, organized method to collect valuable input from organization members. It is a quick, effective way to stimulate new ideas and simultaneously build interest and commitment to change.*

2. *Focus group data reveals more information than do surveys.*

Comments

Although many organizations are changing processes and policies to meet competition, they miss opportunities to involve key stakeholders. Using focus groups increases participation without compromising data collection.

Some organizations rely solely on surveys, which are quicker to administer to large numbers of employees. Survey data identifies a problem but fails to probe its causes. Focus groups enable participants to elaborate, revealing the nature and origins of their thinking on a particular issue.

Benefits	Comments
3. Focus group discussions provide detailed qualitative data, enabling managers to understand an issue in greater depth.	Structured group discussions raise issues about organizational policies, procedures, and the change process. Participants can confirm not only that there is a problem or a success, but indicate why. Focus groups capture and clarify the information that survey participants may be thinking but cannot share within the constraints of the survey format. The more complete the data, the fewer misconceptions, and the more likely that managers will be able to make improvements.
4. The focus group process enables participants to contribute without much preparation or effort. They feel "heard."	Although generally more time-consuming to administer than surveys, the focus group process allows participants to express their opinions and concerns without much preparation or effort. Yet, their participation builds their commitment to a successful outcome. In addition, focus groups foster group discussion and may improve participants' communication skills.

Applications

Quality improvement leaders, human resources professionals, internal communication specialists, and other facilitators of organizational change must constantly assist internal clients in the collection, synthesis, and use of important data. All types of organizations—large or small, producer of products or provider of service, profit or nonprofit—benefit by using focus groups to collect data. This step-by-step guide provides

- A simple yet comprehensive outline of the focus group process
- Descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of various participants
- An overview of technology tools and Internet applications for focus groups
- Practical tips for conducting successful data collection and following through on the results

Any manager who needs information about the satisfaction and opinions of employees, members, clients, or consumers can use focus groups. For example, human resources departments use focus groups to identify employee

- *Needs,* such as day care for the children of working, single parents;
- ***Values,*** such as a preference for certain procedures; and
- Perceptions, such as employees' understanding-accurate or not—of company policies.

Similarly, quality improvement leaders conduct focus groups to diagnose problems and increase productivity. An engineering department may use focus groups to solve technical problems. The chart on the next page suggests myriad ways to use this data-gathering technique to move toward organizational excellence.

Winners' Ink chose Peter Roth as its new Director of Human Resources. He discovered that data collected in a recent organization survey revealed dissatisfaction with the Winners' Ink performance management system. Although the survey results echoed the general sentiments expressed informally by employees for several years, the sources of displeasure were unclear.

Pete decided to conduct focus groups to collect more feedback about the current performance management system and solicit suggestions for improvement. He firmly supported employee involvement and knew, through experience, the importance of early employee commitment to making successful organizational change. His first tasks were to choose the focus group project team and decide whether to use an internal or external facilitator.

Day-to-day contacts with employees led Human Resources' staff to sense a strong culture of distrust in the organization. This suspicion, and the fact that his small staff was extremely busy, led Pete to invite an external professional facilitator named Joan to assist. He scheduled a planning meeting that included two of his staff members, Bruce and Maya.

At the first planning meeting, Pete introduced Joan and reviewed the survey results. Bruce and Maya confirmed the data and agreed that the performance management system needed to be overhauled. They supported collecting more detailed employee input before trying to change the system.

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria challenge organizations to listen and learn from their stakeholders. The chart on page five illustrates how focus groups can address each criterion.

Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award

Criteria	Use focus groups to...
1. Leadership	• Consider how the senior leaders communicate values, directions, and performance expectations. • Anticipate public concerns as part of the company's social responsibility. • Evaluate/improve the extent of customer focus and alignment of company values at all levels.
2. Strategic Planning	• Gain insights from target customers. • Solicit new business opportunities from different employee groups, customers, and suppliers. • Determine the level of deployment of the strategic planning process.
3. Customer/ Market Focus	• Learn from current and potential customers and markets. • Evaluate how the company listens and leams from its customers. • Understand complaints. • Supplement customer survey data.
4. Information/ Analysis	• Understand key user requirements. • Evaluate effectiveness of data systems and their deployment.
5. Human Resource Focus	• Calibrate various human resource processes and their effectiveness, such as: communications, benefits, selection, the reward system, and performance measurement. • Supplement the annual employee opinion survey. • Seek input about training needs. • Evaluate employee support services, such as health, facilities, child care, motivational programs, and safety. • Evaluate work teams.
6. Process Management	• Improve crossdepartmental communication. • Exchange process improvement suggestions from suppliers or partners. • Evaluate supplier performance.
7. Business Results	• Improve the reporting and understanding of results

2
Key Roles

Sponsor
Financier
Facilitator
Recorder
Summarizer
Project leader

Winners' Ink HR Director, Pete Roth, introduced the external facilitator, Joan, to his project team, Bruce and Maya. Joan briefed the team on her background and experience in leading focus groups. After an overview of the basic components and procedures, she described the various roles in the process. Based on members' strengths and interests, the group prepared a chart of roles and responsibilities.

Key Roles

The focus group process requires six key roles:

- Sponsor
- Financier
- Facilitator
- Recorder
- Summarizer
- Project leader

Although there are six distinct roles, three people typically manage the process. Each person adopts more than one role. Either internal organization members or external professionals can fill the roles. An internal–external team capitalizes on the internal person's understanding of and access within the organization, and the external person's objectivity and process knowledge. Balancing participation from both yields the most effective focus groups.

Sponsor

Managers who notice a problem, recognize the need for change, and initiate a change effort are "sponsors." They have authority to make decisions and take action. The sponsor approves the use of focus groups, endorses the plans, sets a budget, and motivates others to take action.

Sponsors lay the groundwork but are not present during focus group sessions. This ensures confidentiality and open communication. Potential sponsors include

- Chief Executive Officers
- Quality improvement leaders
- Human Resources leaders
- Benefits coordinators
- Training directors
- Team leaders

Financier

Every focus group project requires a budget, which is usually approved by the sponsor. Financiers must approve all focus group projects. Not surprisingly, the sponsor often assumes this role. Typical costs include

- External facilitator fees
- Costs associated with time off the job for the participants
- Facility fees
- Refreshments
- Equipment and transportation (if necessary)
- Clerical support
- Printing and mailing

Facilitator

Generally external to the organization, facilitators hold an influential role in the process. They determine the agenda and moderate the focus group sessions. A clear agenda and effective moderating techniques are essential to obtaining good quality data in sufficient volume. If possible, use the same facilitator for all focus group sessions to ensure consistent technique and uniform handling of issues addressed. Chapter 5 elaborates on the facilitator's role and responsibilities.

Recorder

Someone other than the facilitator takes notes during the discussions. Although the facilitators gain understanding of participants' feelings and thoughts about the issues, they can easily forget details. Recorders' notes capture the specifics needed to prepare the summary and report. Because recorders need to remain unbiased, they are usually external to the organization. Using the same recorder for multiple focus group sessions will yield a single transcription style that simplifies the task of summarizing.

Some organizations use court reporters in this role. As experienced professionals, they capture details that are easily lost by an inexperienced recorder. Chapter 8 describes recording techniques.

Summarizer

The summarizer reviews the recorder's notes, analyzes the content, and writes a focus group report. Because the facilitator and recorder have attended all the sessions and have an overall understanding of the discussion and data, one or both usually perform this role. Chapter 9 describes focus group data analysis and summary techniques.

Project leader

Typically, this role is performed by an internal person, who teams with the sponsor to manage the focus group project from start to finish. When participants come from many different departments or divisions within the organization, the project leader becomes an emissary for the project. Occasionally, before upper management will fully support the effort and the employees who participate, the project leader must thoroughly explain the purpose and value of the focus group project.

Before the focus group results are finalized, the project leader must determine the most effective method to disseminate the summary in the organization. Afterwards, the project leader coordinates this communication effort. Focus group participants, sponsors, and others affected by the topic discussed should receive information about the results and plans for future action. The project leader may communicate the results in many forms—from HR newsletters to president's reports.

Role/ Names	Responsibilities
Sponsor Pete	• *Initiates focus group project* • *Ties project to business goals and other organizational strategies* • *Contracts with external facilitator* • *Advocates for project with senior management*
Financier Pete	• *Defines HR budget for project* • *Secures departmental support for employee participation in focus groups (release time)*
Facilitator Joan (external)	• *With focus group team, develops session agenda* • *Facilitates each focus group session* • *Reviews recorder notes* • *Approves final summary*
Recorder Bruce	• *Transcribes focus group discussion* • *Organizes notes for summarizer; reviews with facilitator and makes necessary additions/changes*
Summarizer Maya	• *Combines data from all focus groups; analyzes content for themes and trends* • *Prepares report; reviews with the facilitator and the recorder*
Project leader Pete	• *Serves as a liaison with all departments; gains buy-in for employee participation* • *Arranges for administrative support* • *Arranges for facility* • *Develops and distributes participant invitations and other organizational communication* • *Presents results to organization* • *Implements recommendations*

3
Goal Setting

Guiding questions
Purpose statement

The Winners' Ink project team worked through the guiding questions delineated below to organize their thoughts and gain agreement on the purpose of the project. Based on their discussions, the project team developed a statement of purpose to govern the focus group effort.

Guiding questions

The most important step in planning a focus group is agreeing on the purpose for the session and describing it in writing. The purpose statement helps the team concentrate on the important issues and provides a strong foundation for later actions. A thoughtful purpose statement demonstrates the project's importance and encourages others to support and participate in the process.

Six questions guide development of the purpose statement. Sample responses follow each question.

1. **What is the reason behind the decision to use focus groups?**
   We are planning to improve the performance management system.

2. **What is the general issue?**
   Performance management

3. **What are the specific issues?**
   (Identify up *to three.)*
   - *Employee attitudes toward the system*
   - *Employee needs and preferences*
   - *The best methods of communicating the new system to employees*

4. **What goals do you hope to meet using a focus group?**
   Involve employees in the development stage to promote understanding of and satisfaction with the new performance management system.

5. **What purpose will the information serve?**
   - *It will guide the creation of a better training program.*
     It will indicate effective ways to communicate the changes.

6. **From whom do you want to collect information?** *(Be specific.)*
   - *Each function in the organization*
   - *New employees*
   - *Long-term employees*
   - *Management*
   - *Field staff*

Winners' Ink
answers to guiding questions

1. *We need to develop a new performance management system.*
2. *The general issue is the performance management system.*
3. *There are three specific issues:*
   a) *Employee attitudes about the current system*
   b) *Employee suggestions for improved performance management practices*
   c) *Employee input on potential system components such as peer review*
4. *Our goals are to collect employee suggestions for an improved performance management system and establish a foundation of employee commitment to the new system.*
5. *The data will be used to develop a new performance management system that meets the needs of employees and supervisors at all levels.*

We want data from a sample of employees/supervisors from all job classifications and departments.

Purpose statement

Using the answers to the guiding questions, write a brief, easily understood statement of the purpose for the focus groups. No more than three sentences are needed. For example:

A. The purpose of the focus group process is to gather employee input on the preferences and expectations of their performance reviews.

B. Employees will be asked to comment on options and provide suggestions for specific improvements.

C. Employee participation at the system's development is intended to:
   1) Improve the quality of the entire process
   2) Facilitate its communication and implementation

Investment in writing a clear, compelling purpose statement orients the project team, helps to enlist support from key organization members and participants, and saves effort during subsequent stages. The purpose statement can be repeated when

- Justifying the budget
- Planning the facilitator's agenda
- Selecting and inviting participants
- Briefing the recorder
- Summarizing the data
- Reporting the results
- Taking action

Winners' Ink purpose statement

The purpose of the focus group sessions is to collect:(1) employee and supervisor input on the strengths and weaknesses of the current performance management system, and (2) suggestions for components of a new system. The data will be used in the design and implementation of a new company-wide performance management system.

4
Participants

Who should be chosen?
How many are needed?
How are they invited?

The Winners' Ink project team wanted a representative sample of employees from all levels and departments of the organization. They decided to conduct eight focus group sessions with a total of 75 participants from the 300-employee company. Knowing that some of the invited participants would miss the focus group sessions because of their work schedules, the team invited 120 persons.

To select a representative participant group, the team identified the numbers of employees at each level and in each department. The team combined the top three levels of the organization into one focus group. In terms of department and gender, the participant list mirrored the company as closely as possible.

Who should be chosen?

The participants are the central players in the focus group session. Their input about needs, values, and perceptions delivers the end results. Although participation in the focus group requires no preparation, selection of participants does.

The participant selection process is flexible and can be adapted to meet the needs of a particular organization. Adhering to the following general rules will increase focus group productivity.

- Select only participants who are affected by the situation.
- Do not include volunteers.
- In general, select participants from a single level in the organization for each focus group.
- Select a representative sample. It need not be "random."

The key selection criterion is ***affected** by **the issue or topic.*** Such persons have the deepest understanding of the factors involved and provide the most pertinent data. Their participation will improve the quality of data collected and the success of subsequent actions. Early participation in the change process promotes an atmosphere of trust and involvement among those most affected by the change.

Focus group members who are only marginally affected by the situation tend to be less enthusiastic and knowledgeable. Of more concern, they could yield misleading data. For example, focus groups designed to collect information about a proposed change in a newspaper printing process should include people close to that process—the production staff—not reporters or receptionists.

Avoid selecting volunteers. They often have hidden agendas and may be seeking a forum. Their agenda may compete with the focus group's, which may complicate the group process and waste valuable discussion time. Not all volunteers behave this way, but it is safer to invite involvement than to rely on volunteers.

All participants in each session should be from the ***same organizational level.*** In mixed-level groups, discussion is often dominated by participants from higher organizational levels. This situation requires the facilitator to focus great energy on involving the lower level participants and balancing the discussion. When information from multiple levels within the organization is desired, conduct separate focus groups at each level.

To obtain valid data, select a fairly ***representative sample*** of those affected to participate in each session. For example, focus groups examining retirement benefits should represent the range of employee tenure. Limiting participation to those in or near retirement skews results.

To minimize the possibility of skewed data, select participant groups to reflect demographic characteristics—age, gender, ethnicity, department, etc.—of the overall target group. Key demographics often depend on the subject of the focus group. For example, if "flex" time is the issue, consider participant commute time; if day care is the issue, consider family size and economic status when selecting participants for the focus group

Identify key demographic characteristics and use an objective rather than a random method of selection to achieve fair representation within the focus group. Large organizations with many people in the target demographic groups can use random selection.

How many are needed?

A carefully selected, representative sample produces the same results as those obtained by including everyone. Using representative samples increases timeliness and efficiency by reducing the number of group sessions required without sacrificing accuracy.

The focus group project budget and timeline often determine the size of the focus group effort. The project team must realistically account for these factors, while making certain that all key factions within the target group are represented in the project. Failure to include a representative sample in the participant group can skew results and mislead action planners relying on focus group data. Carefully consider the purpose of your project, its goals, and organizational constraints when determining the size of the participant sample.

Focus groups conducted within a single department or small organization (10–100 individuals) may involve 50-100% of its members to obtain accurate results. Focus groups in mid-sized organizations (100–500) can include 20-50% of the employees, while focus groups in large organizations (1,000+) are generally limited to 10–25% of the total group.

Optimal focus group size is 10-12 participants. This relatively small group size promotes participation by each member and allows more detailed discussion. Always invite a few more participants than the number desired to allow for absences. See Chart on page 16.

How are they invited?

Send an invitation letter to each of the selected participants. Include the following:

- Date, time, and location
- Focus group purpose
- Intended use of the information
- Number of participants
- Selection procedures
- Names of facilitator and recorder
- Assurance of confidentiality
- Details about food, transportation, lodging
- Reimbursement, if applicable
- A contact for responses

When conducting focus groups with employees, distribute a list of the selected employees to managers with a copy of the generic invitation.

The Winners' Ink project team examined the numbers in the chart on the next page and decided to conduct eight staff-level focus groups and one focus group of supervisors, managers, and executives.

The team sent an invitation (page 17) to the selected participants. A copy of this invitation was sent with a cover letter to all management-level personnel. The cover letter requested their cooperation and offered suggestions for managing the logistics of their employees' participation.

Winners' Ink Project Team's Focus Group Participant Selection Ratios			
Category	**No. in Company (Total = 300)**	**Percent of Total (%)**	**Number of Invited Participants (Total = 120)**
Level			
• Staff	255	85.0	102
• Supervisor	10	3.3	4
• Manager	25	8.3	10
• Executive	10	3.3	4
	Total = 300	Total = 100	Total = 120
Department			
• Accounting	45	15	18
• Editing	54	18	21
• H.R.	24	8	10
• Legal	15	5	6
• Production	117	39	47
• Sales	45	15	18
	Total = 300	Total = 100	Total = 120
Gender			
• Female	165	55	66
• Male	135	45	54
	Total = 300	Total = 100	Total = 120

Participants

Letter of invitation from the Winners' Ink project team to persons selected to participate

March 1, 2002

To:
From: Pete Roth
Human Resources
Re: Performance Management Focus Groups

Employee responses to the Winners' Ink organizational survey completed in September 2001 indicate general dissatisfaction with our current performance management system. To improve this system, the Human Resources department is working with Joan Chen, a local consultant, to conduct employee focus groups aimed at gathering more detailed information about the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and suggestions for components of a more effective performance management plan.

We plan to conduct eight focus groups involving approximately 40% of our employees. This focus group is a special kind of group interview that is organized to gather opinions and knowledge about a topic. You have been selected from your department as one of the focus group participants.

Your participation in this focus group is considered part of your workday, so you will not have to make up this time.

Your focus group session will be held
Monday, March 11
8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.
Conference Room A

You do not need to make any special preparations for this meeting. You will participate in an informal discussion about performance management. All focus group discussions are *confidential*. Bruce Veritas from Human Resources will record the information without names. It will be summarized and reported to you and others in the company.

The goal of these sessions is to gather employee ideas about performance management. We look forward to your contribution to these discussions. Please call Margie in Human Resources (x3679) to confirm your participation.

5

The Facilitator

A decision: to use an internal or external facilitator?
What makes a facilitator effective?
How does a facilitator work with people?

The Winners' Ink project team selected an external consultant to help plan and facilitate their focus group sessions. The Human Resources staff agreed that an internal facilitator would find it difficult to stimulate active, honest conversation among participants. The project team felt that an outside facilitator would lend credibility and objectivity to the process.

The chosen facilitator, Joan Chen, possessed valuable skills honed in her work with many focus groups discussing performance management projects. She had never worked with a publishing firm, but the project team was comfortable with her experience and general expertise in facilitating focus groups. They briefed her thoroughly on the issues particularly relevant to the publishing industry.

A decision: to use an internal or external facilitator?

The facilitator develops a written agenda and conducts the focus group sessions. Take great care in the evaluation and selection of this individual, because the facilitator's abilities directly affect the outcome of the focus groups.

You will find effective focus group facilitators both inside and outside the organization. Whether you choose an internal facilitator or someone external to the organization depends on the skill and experience of those available and the purpose of the focus group. Generally, an outside facilitator is preferred when dealing with potentially emotional issues such as employee benefit plans and policy changes. External facilitators are contacted through human resource and training associations, college communication facilities, or management consultant firms.

Internal Facilitator	External Facilitator
Pros: • Knows company, culture, policies, procedures, and products • Probably less expensive Cons: • Often biased toward a certain outcome and may influence focus group results • Participants may believe it is their duty to provide sanctioned answers to the questions • Participants may fear internal political repercussions or lack of confidentiality	Pros: • Keeps focus on agenda; develops active discussions by all • Provides higher level of confidentiality, which comforts participants • Uninvolved in internal politics, so receives more honest comments Cons: • Knows less about organization—may be plus or minus; *i.e.*, more objectivity but less astute evaluation • Cost will be higher

What makes a facilitator effective?

The skill of the facilitator is key to the success of the focus groups. Select someone who demonstrates these skills and characteristics:

- Energetic: A high-energy facilitator keeps the discussion lively, interesting, and productive.
- Personable: The facilitator who is personable puts participants at ease early in the session, so that they can comfortably and actively participate in the discussion.
- Agile thinker: Successful facilitators can respond to rapid changes in group dynamics. No two sessions have the same participant reactions and discussions.
- Organized: The well-organized facilitator develops an effective, written agenda and produces results within the preferred time frame.
- Listener: The facilitator must attend to each participant, clarifying the participant's meaning by using techniques such as paraphrasing.
- Good memory: An effective facilitator connects a participant's current statement to a previous statement, developing a better understanding of the employee's feelings and stimulating more discussion.
- Experienced: Facilitators improve with practice. Choose one with experience.
- Knowledgeable: The facilitator possesses background knowledge on the particular industry and the organization's environment. This background comes from previous sessions in the same type of organization or a good briefing by internal sponsors.

Good facilitators follow these guidelines.

DO	DON'T
• Create an open environment. • Encourage discussion. • Follow up on topics; probe. • Clarify all meanings. • Paraphrase statements. • Connect current and earlier comments. • Involve everyone in the discussion. • Thank participants.	• Criticize any comments or participants. • Stray from the issues. • Assume the meaning of any statements. • Let one person control the discussion. • Ignore shy participants. • Interject personal opinions on the topic.

How does a facilitator work with people?

Groups vary widely, but the facilitator must ensure that all participants join the discussion and stay on topic. This is often more difficult than it sounds. Effective facilitators use multiple questioning styles to elicit input from every member of the group, including those who are difficult or shy. The following techniques help.

Asking open-ended questions leaves room for discussion. They lead participants to elaborate on insights, experiences, opinions, and observations, unlike questions that invite yes or no responses.

Example: "How do you feel about having an opportunity to review your peers?" This invites discussion. Compare with: 'Would you like the opportunity to review your peers?"

Using probing questions encourages more discussion. Probes include follow-up questions and comments like: "Why?" "Tell me more about that." "Explain what you mean."

Example: The facilitator responds to a vague statement such as "I don't like the way we hear about new information," with the question, "What don't you like?" or suggestion, "Describe an experience that causes you to say this."

Posing feeling questions requests a response about the participants' needs and values. This is sometimes the hardest question for participants to answer, especially if they are uncomfortable with the facilitator. When used correctly, however, the feeling question elicits the reasons behind a feeling, thought, or action.

Example: A participant states that she likes one benefit better than another one. The facilitator asks, "Why do you feel that way?" or "How is benefit 'A' better than 'B'?"

Employing steering questions returns the focus group to the issue if the discussion has strayed from the intended topic.

Example: In a focus group addressing employee ownership of stocks and savings, a group strays to the topic of retirement benefits. To return to the agenda without abruptly ending the discussion of the retirement plan, the facilitator asks, "How will employee-owned stocks and bonds affect employee savings before and after retirement?"

Further suggestions:

Allowing silence is sometimes the best tool. Often, silence indicates thought or consideration of a particular point or question. Sometimes, a person has developed an answer, but waits for someone else to respond first. Generally, group members will respond eventually to break the silence. Facilitators also use silence to allow responders time to elaborate on their answers.

Giving encouragement often inspires participants' to continue active discussion. Facilitators prompt engagement in the process by thanking group members for their participation, giving appropriate praise of contributions, or injecting light humor to ease tensions: "Good comment." "Good question." "Don't we all!"

Handling "difficult" people requires finesse learned with experience. Sometimes a participant will dominate the discussions, expressing personal views to the facilitator but blocking others' contributions.

"Difficult" people interrupt, endlessly talk in circles, criticize individuals involved in the issue, over-personalize the discussion, and demonstrate pessimism. The facilitator must restrain the overbearing person to prevent muting the others and to keep the discussion constructive.

The facilitator's **body** language rather than verbal criticism best achieves this goal. Criticism not only frustrates "difficult" people, but also makes others uncomfortable.

To effectively gain more speaking time for others:

- Extend a finger to mean "one moment."
- Use two hands like a "T" to mean "time out."
- Avoid eye contact.
- Turn away from the speaker.
- Move to chalkboard, overhead, etc.

Body language is subtle yet clear to people and permits personal behavior adjustment without public embarrassment.

Shy participants also present a challenge. While difficult people threaten the quality of focus-group data by preventing group input, the shy person hampers the process by withholding his or her input. Facilitators encourage response by maintaining an accepting, nonjudgmental environment. Body language, such as eye contact and gestures inviting participation, helps shy individuals overcome their fear.

6 Agenda

Reviewing the issues
Developing the agenda

Joan began working with the project team. After the invitations were distributed, she reviewed her materials on the company and her notes from team meetings, including the purpose statement.

Joan drafted an agenda for the focus group sessions and presented it to the team for review. Together they discussed the relative importance of each issue and made minor revisions.

Joan distributed copies of the revised agenda to each team member. Then she scheduled a meeting with Bruce, the recorder, to review the agenda in detail and plan an effective method for recording the data. Their agenda document concludes this chapter.

Reviewing the issues

Focus groups are structured discussions of predetermined issues—not open forums for participants to raise any issue or complaint. The session's agenda provides the necessary structure. The facilitator develops an agenda for the focus group sessions that supports the purpose statement. If well organized in terms of format and questions (for example, from general to specific questions), the agenda keeps discussion targeted on the issues. It specifies the facilitator's actions and questions for the session.

Prior to developing the agenda, an effective facilitator meets with key internal personnel to:

- ***Review the purpose statement*** developed earlier. This concise statement is an effective aid to defining the facilitator's job. It frames development of the agenda.
- ***Identify general and specific issues,*** assigning priority to each.
- ***Clarify the intended use of focus group data.*** This information engenders specific, useful discussion questions.

- ***Define the organizational context in which the focus groups will occur.*** Facilitators glean information from publications, policies, and discussions with key members of the organization.

- ***Clarify how and with whom the data will be shared.*** For example, participants need to know that they will receive a summary of the information gained from the focus group discussions, not a complete set of comments.

Developing the agenda

The facilitator decides on the format and questions to use while preparing the initial outline of an agenda for the sessions. The ***format*** of a focus group agenda includes:

1. Introductions
2. Warm-up period
3. Writing option
4. Question period
5. Summary

1. In the Introduction:

- ***Introduce yourself briefly to instill the group's confidence*** in your experience and leadership. Introduce the recorder and ask participants to introduce themselves, if appropriate. Sometimes, if there are fears of reprisals, it is safer not to ask for introductions.
- ***Relax the participants.*** Often the introductions are enough to relax participants, but some facilitators use humorous anecdotes about focus groups.
- ***Describe the session's general purpose*** with a review of the purpose statement and two to three general issues.
- ***Identify, in general terms, the intended use of focus group data*** and assure participants of anonymity in the recording, analysis, and reporting of the results.
- ***Explain when and in what format they will receive a summary.***

2. Warm-up period: Discuss the general issue identified in the purpose statement. Include background information on organizational history relevant to the topic to help participants start thinking about it before considering more difficult, specific questions.

Review the agenda with its timeframes. Chart the key questions for all to see.

3. Writing option: Often is it valuable to request that participants write down their personal experience of the topic. In a discussion about rewards and recognition, for example, have each participant answer the question, "What rewards or recognition have you received in the last six months?"

   This allows everyone to focus on the topic and express his or her feelings about it. Use index cards, do not ask for names, and collect the cards afterwards. This information will supplement the discussion data.

4. Question period: Ask two to three questions ***in order of importance.*** Give each question a predetermined, appropriate amount of discussion time. More important issues and those that involve sensitive topics require more discussion time.

   These general tips will help you develop effective questions:

   - Normal sessions run for 1–2 hours, allowing 3–4 broad questions with 2–3 follow-up questions each.
   - For each issue, start with general questions and move to more detailed questions (probes).
   - Rank questions in order of importance, and start with the most important.
   - Use an open-ended format such as:

     "What do you like about. . .?"
     "How do you feel about. . .?"
     "Tell me about. . .?"
     "Give me an example of...?"

   Outlining thorough questions for each specific issue keeps the facilitator focused on the purpose of the session and helps maintain that focus in the face of any unplanned events.

   Facilitators must demonstrate flexibility in allowing participants to express themselves but must also address each important specific issue in order to derive useful information from the group.

5. **Summary:** At the end, briefly summarize the main points of the session's discussion. Be certain that all comments were correctly understood, and give the participants an opportunity to make final statements. People often have valuable after-thoughts; final statements give them a chance to share those insights.

Before conducting a session, the facilitator reviews the proposed agenda with everyone involved in the focus group effort. The reviewers make certain that the purpose and issues are properly captured and assist with finalizing the questions. The project team approves the final draft for use during the sessions.

The Winners' Ink Focus Group Agenda

Est. Time **Agenda items**

0:00-0:08 **Introduction**

- ☐ Joan's introduction: background and experience.
- ☐ General purpose: *To collect employee and supervisor input on the strengths and weaknesses of the current performance management system and suggestions for components of a new system.*
- ☐ "Float" idea of peer review / 360° feedback.
- ☐ Use of data: *This data will be used in the design and implementation of a new company-wide performance management system.*
- ☐ Anonymity: Participant identities will not be shared. Information will be summarized and reported.

0:15-20 **Warm-up period**

- ☐ Survey Results
- ☐ 80% indicated "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied."
- ☐ Individual employee discussions with HR personnel support this finding.
- ☐ Some employees reported strong satisfaction—what are we doing right?

0:20-25 **Writing period**

"On the index cards, tell us what your last performance review was like, both positives and negatives."

0:25-1:45 **Question period**

- ☐ What are your impressions of the company's performance management system?
  - a) What are the system's *strengths?*
  - b) What are the system's *weaknesses?*
- ☐ What do you suggest to improve the procedures or system?
  - a) *Performance Assessment:* Who best understands your work? How do you feel about peer review?
  - b) *Coaching:* What are the characteristics of effective coaching?
  - c) *Career Development:* What kind of career development assistance would you like?

1:45-1:55 **Summary**

- ☐ Clarify and summarize.
- ☐ Strengths of current system
- ☐ Weaknesses of current system
- ☐ Reactions to a peer / 360 review
- ☐ Recommendations for change

1:55-2:00 **Thank you / wrap-up**

- ☐ Thank you; data will be valuable to tailor program.
- ☐ Summary report of focus group results within two weeks
- ☐ Anonymity reminder

Bruce, the recorder, discussed the focus group agenda with Joan to decide what method of recording would work best for collecting data on each question. Although comfortable with computers, Bruce felt he could keep pace with the conversation more easily by using both chart paper with markers and pencil and paper.

The first agenda question asked responders to discuss the company's performance management system in terms of strengths and weaknesses. Bruce formatted chart paper with two columns headed "Strengths" and "Weaknesses" so that he could quickly list comments in the appropriate category.

The second question about "suggestions for improving the system" invited such a range of potential responses that Bruce decided to record this information on a writing tablet in a running commentary style.

Bruce knew from experience that he should schedule time after each session to complete his recording notes; otherwise, he forgot important details. After each session, Bruce used a word processor to transcribe the data. As he transcribed, he clarified notes and filled in details of the discussion. He reviewed the transcripts with Joan before delivering them to Maya, the summarizer. The notes for each session filled five to six pages. An excerpt from one of these sessions appears at the end of the chapter.

Preparation

The recorder reviews the same information thaf fhe facilitator studies as described on page 22, Reviewing the issues.

The recorder collects the data during each session and makes thorough notes. The recorder must also ***understand*** the discussion. Such insight is requisite to organizing and simplifying the notes for others to follow.

Pre-categorizing data by formatting the recording document in advance saves time and effort in the analysis. The simple two-column format shown below is an example. Close coordination between the facilitator and the recorder enables successful formatting and categorizing.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current performance management system?	
Strengths:	Weaknesses:

If the range of responses is open-ended, the recorder will find it easier to use a running commentary style. The summarizer will categorize those answers.

Most recorders find it difficult to pre-categorize data while using a word processor. Moving back and forth between categories is much more difficult with a computer than with pencil and paper. Recorders using computers tend to transcribe all discussion as running commentary.

Review

Recorders take abbreviated notes and must fill in details from memory to clarify information and capture its expression. He will probably also use abbreviations for frequently used terms, like "Boss" or "Feedback." After each session, the recorder immediately reviews and transcribes his notes more fully to prevent loss of detail. The facilitator then reviews the recorder's revised transcript and adds relevant information that may have been missed. These review steps facilitate data summary and ensure more accurate results.

Remember: accurate focus group results depend on reliable, valid data.

Reliability means that if one conducted the focus groups again given the same conditions, the results would be similar.

Excerpts from Bruce's Transcription

Focus Group Data: Session #1

Participants:

Accounting - 2 *Editing - 1*	*Legal -1* *Sales - 1*	*Production - 3* *HR - 2*

QUESTION: What are your impressions of the company's performance management system?

Strengths	***Weaknesses***
• *Get informal praise on a regular basis. It really keeps me going.* • *Good to not have your b. breathing down your neck all of the time.* • *Don't need that much FB, I guess. I just know what I'm supposed to do.* • *Got a pretty thorough orientation when I started. b. spelled things out very clearly. My particular job isn't that complicated.*	• *Rarely get FB of any kind—positive, negative, formal, informal.* • *No formal system of performance management in my department.* • *No one tells you your job, they just give you work to do and tell you to do it.* • *Mostly you just get FB on what you do wrong.* • *There needs to be more specific FB.* • *Only get feedback once a year around here.* *Key: FB = feedback; b = boss*

Continued on page 29

Excerpts from Bruce's transcription, continued

QUESTION: What are your suggestions for improving the procedures and the system?

You can't wait until the end of the year to give FB. Ongoing dialogue is necessary not only for the ee's, but also for the b. The b can learn some things too.

System should have more than one review period—especially if someone is working on something that they got poor marks in. They need to know how they're doing. Are they improving?

I would like to be acknowledged when I go above and beyond the call of duty.

Everyone, including the s's, should set g's and get FB on how well they are doing on those g's.

The employees should have a "say" in what the g's are. Sometimes the b really doesn't know how hard something is, so they think that your goal isn't that big a deal. Should have a chance to set some of our own g.

Like that peer review idea. My b has no idea what I really do daily. But the people I work with know everything. Some of the people in Sales know what I do better than my b does.

Maybe your b needs some cross-training in his own department!

It sounds like a good idea, but what about people who hold grudges? They could really ruin your review.

People would need to have some training. Maybe the system shouldn't depend on peer review 100%.

It shouldn't depend on your b 100% either.

I'd like to see a system that emphasizes career growth. My s knows a lot and could really help me. I'm thinking about getting a certificate in Human Relations, but I don't know if it's worth it. I want to know about my chances for promotion, but we never talk about that.

Key: FB = feedback; s = supervisor; b = boss; w = with; g = goals; ee = employees.

8

Facility

Location
Setting
Equipment

Joan, the facilitator, explained to the Winners' Ink project team that the physical setting for the meetings is a key component to success. People react, often at a subconscious level, to their surroundings and the status cues inherent in seating arrangements. "Reserve an appropriate location well in advance of the sessions, so that you can include the date, time, and place in the invitation," she counseled. "Also reserve any necessary equipment such as an overhead projector and screen and/or a chart pad and markers."

The project team reserved a conference room in the main building of the company's small campus. It was equipped with a round conference table capable of seating 12 people. It had a wall-hung screen, and the window treatment allowed darkening the room as needed. The indirect lighting eliminated glare. Restrooms were conveniently nearby.

Location

Choose a facility that is conveniently located for all of the people involved in a focus group session. On-site locations are ideal for employee focus groups. If participants work in several locations in the area--employees of chain stores, services, and government offices—the main headquarters is suitable. Consider travel time and make certain that the facility is available during business hours.

Setting

Effective use of space enhances the session. The seating arrangement sends subtle cues about status in the focus group and can facilitate or dampen discussion. Round tables are most egalitarian and give all participants a good view of each other. Tables arranged in a square—either solidly together or with a space in the middle—can work well, but views are not as clear. Arranging small tables in a U-shape is another possibility. There is less feeling of "closeness" in tackling the issues, but this configuration may work best when plans call for overhead projections or videos. The U-shape may require courtesy panels or table cloths.

In choosing a room, consider the ease of reaching each seat, traffic flow, need for personal space, noise level, lighting, and ventilation. Crowding may invade personal space, often causing discomfort or, in some cases, a response marked by crossed arms and subdued participation. The fewer distractions and discomforts, the more likely that participants will fully engage.

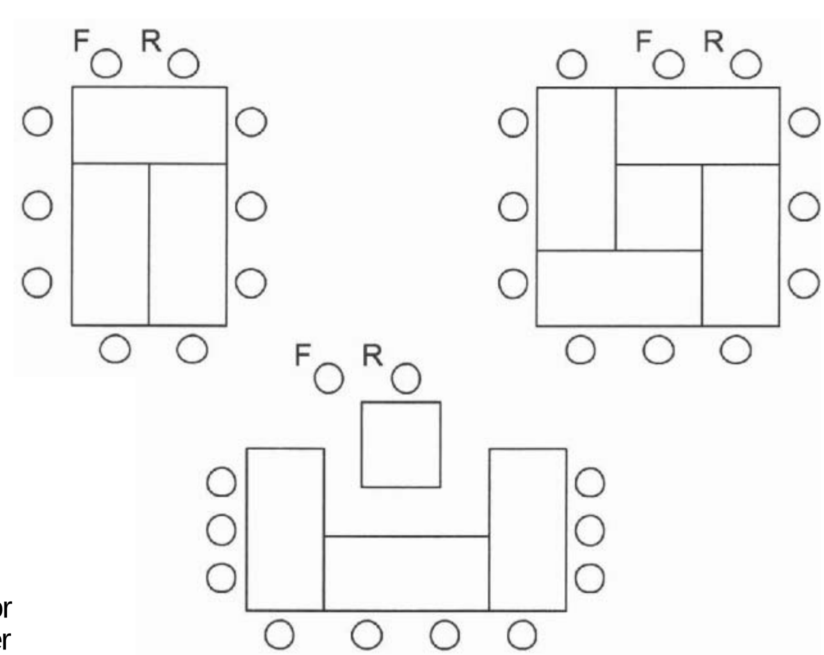
Equipment

Carefully consider the focus group agenda to determine the appropriate equipment. Do you need any of the following?

- An overhead or computer and screen for displays, such as a current company policy or survey data chart
- A chart stand with paper to display the purpose and agenda to the participants and to outline parts of the discussion such as strengths and weaknesses, process steps, etc.
- A computer, pen and paper, or other recording system for the recorder
- Paper and pencils for participants to make notes about their thoughts
- Refreshment table
- Extra chairs for facilitator and recorder

The facilitator and recorder determine what equipment and materials are needed for each session and assign the duty of securing and placing all the equipment at the focus group site to one person.

Some seating arrangement suggestions



F = Facilitator
R = Recorder

9
Data Analysis

Process
Reports

Maya, the Winners' Ink summarizer, collected the data transcript for each of the focus group sessions. Having been part of the project team from the beginning, she clearly understood the background and purpose of the project. After reading each set of data once, she met with Bruce to clarify a few minor points.

Copying the transcripts and storing the originals, Maya used the copies to code individual parts of the focus group discussion according to themes with key words. Bruce had used a word processing program to produce the transcripts, making her task relatively easy. She used the "cut and paste" computer command to separate the themes and paste them together to create one document.

After reviewing and summarizing the notes on each theme, she enlivened the report with direct quotes. To clarify one theme that turned out to be rather large and convoluted, she broke it down into three simpler themes.

Maya distributed copies of the summarized data to Joan and Bruce for their review and comments. She presented her revised summary to the project team at its next meeting.

After discussion, the project team decided to distribute a formal report with an executive summary to all company executives and a memorandum based on the executive summary to everyone else. They made copies of the full report available to those who were interested. Pete wrote cover letters for both documents.

Process

The role of the summarizer is to analyze the data collected from the focus groups, based on the transcripts. Sometimes the recorder takes the role of summarizer.

The process is not an exact science. Some subjective judgment is necessary. Characteristics of the organization and its members' perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and emotions are all factors that define the context of a focus group. The summarizer captures both the context and content in the analysis and subsequent report of the results.

The process of analyzing focus group data consists of three steps:

Step One:	Background briefing
Step Two:	Content analysis
Step Three:	Finalization of report

Step One: Background briefing

Prior to the sessions, the summarizer consults with others involved to determine the general purpose, issues, and focus group agenda. An understanding of the background and context of this data collection effort is key to accurate data reporting.

Step Two: Content analysis

Unlike typical survey data, focus group data is qualitative in nature. It provides investigators with detailed information about a particular topic. Rather than tallying the number of favorable or unfavorable responses, the summarizer evaluates the data on a macro level, looking for participant consensus, patterns, and general themes. This process is called ***content analysis.***

Individuals who regularly perform content analyses develop specific habits and techniques that work best for them, but the general steps of the analysis are consistent.

a. Read through the data (the transcripts) once to get a broad picture of the sentiments expressed across all sessions. Eliminate irrelevant data, such as discussions that strayed from the topic.

b. Identify broad themes in the data during a second, more thorough reading of the transcripts. "Themes" are categories such as the role of the supervisor, timelines, or goal setting. Themes tend to follow the pattern of the focus group agenda and questions. Code themes as they appear in the transcript. For instance, the first theme may be coded with a number, letter, or one word descriptor. Label each subsequent statement addressing this theme with the same code. After the first review, additional codes can be designated for special areas of interest. Review transcripts several times to ensure a thorough analysis.

c. When coding is finished, group together all references to a particular theme. Summarize each group of data and examine the theme for clarity. Divide major or complicated themes into several themes.

d. Aim for a succinct summary that reflects the major areas of consensus and any areas of particular interest to the sponsor group—such as comparisons between departments, age groups, or locations.

e. Never reveal any details that may compromise confidentiality.

Step Three: Finalization of report

Present a draft report to the facilitator and recorder for their review. Their feedback verifies the thematic groupings and alerts the summarizer to any major omissions or misrepresentations.

Reports

After making the necessary revisions, the summarizer completes the report. All individuals affected by the focus group results —participants, decision-makers, stakeholder groups, etc.— should receive some form of the results.

- Decision-makers generally prefer detailed reports that directly link to decisions they need to make.
- Focus group participants usually appreciate a summary and acknowledgment in the form of a memo or e-mail message.
- Regardless of the specificity, a report should include a restatement of the purpose of the focus groups, general issues addressed, summary of major themes, and the proposed use of the information.
- To write an effective report, follow these tips: Carefully consider how to communicate the results. What is the organizational environment? Is there an "accepted" protocol? Are memos and e-mail messages so numerous that they are annoying or disregarded? In such a case, reporting the results during a staff meeting might be best.
- Whatever medium you choose for presentation, target your audience and its needs. Adjust the level of detail to meet the needs of various groups. Executives, managers, and other decision-makers may need briefing but not detailed discussion. The general stakeholder population may also require only this level of detail. Sponsors and financiers, in contrast, want a complete report on which to base their work and future decisions.
- Communication options include:
    - Hard copy memo
    - E-mail
    - Newsletter
    - Intranet
    - Presentations to executives, departments, staff, all employees, or advisory council.

Tips for effective reports

- Review the purpose and issues.
- Describe your participant group: basic demographics, department level, gender, etc.
- Write to your target audience––reports for employees differ from those for executives.
- Include an executive summary if the report is extensive.
- Use a balance of direct quotations and summaries.
- Do not make personal recommendations.
- Include a few simple charts, if appropriate.

Sample summary cover letter

MEMORANDUM
Date:
To: Focus Group Participants
From: Project Leader's Name
Re: Focus Group Data Summary

The attached document summarizes results of the ***internal communications*** focus groups conducted during the last two months. This summary reviews the most significant themes and findings from the discussions without reference to individual participants.

Thank you for your valuable contributions to this effort. Your input and that of others representing all levels and departments has contributed to a better understanding of the issues. Action planning based on these results has begun. The Communications Department will share the plans and developments with employees via the newsletter, department managers, and other key resources.

We look forward to your future input as we implement new communication policies and procedures.

Feel free to call me if you want to discuss the results in more detail.

Sample summary memo

November 2,2001

TO: All focus group participants

From: Dr. Gloria Bader and Lisa Hart of The Bader Group

Thank you for your time, openness, honesty, energy, and contributions to the goal of improving your plant's coordination and communication. As we agreed, all personal references are confidential, and we are reporting information in the aggregate form (combining the four focus groups).

Key findings:

What People Like About Their Jobs

- Employees like their cc-workers.
- Employees feel benefits are good.
- The little "feel-goods" (e.g., picnics and other social activities) are good.
- The work we do is important.
  People like the "family" atmosphere.
- Others like the autonomy given, flexibility of schedule, the challenges, opportunities to learn, grow, and help others.
- Although improvements need to be made, many said the plant is better than other companies in which they have worked.

Areas for Improvement:

1. Communication
   - The employees believe that better communication can contribute to the future success of the organization.
   - Some suggestions to improve communication include scheduling weekly supervisory meetings, interdepartmental meetings, short "standing" meetings, and sending fewer e-mails.

2. Topics suggested by employees to discuss during meetings:
   - Staffing
   - Career development
   - Job posting
   - Eliminating perception of favoritism
   - Building trust and confidence among employees

We plan to return to your plant to assist the managers and task force in taking actions to help improve communication.

Thank you for your warm, Southern welcome.

Sample executive summary

Participants

Employees from five locations (listed below) participated in six different focus groups conducted by The Bader Group consultants: Gloria Bader, Lisa Hart, and Cathy Rossi.

Volterra – Managers	***Cortona*** – Employees
Volterra – Employees	***Casciana*** Terme – Managers
Siena – Employees	Lucca - Employees

Sample Selection

Human Resource managers selected the managers and employees who participated in the focus group interviews. The samples were representative of the salaried exempt as well as non-exempt employees at each site. They were inclusive of both genders, different tenure with the company, and different departments within each location.

Focus Group Results

The following results summarize the data collected from all locations participating in the focus group interviews. The Current System column presents current performance systems as described by employees and managers in the various sites, and the Recommendations column reflects participants' ideas for an improved, more effective system.

Focus Group Summary – Company Wide

Current System	Recommendations
A COMMUNICATION OF BUSINESS GOALS	
• Company goals and business plan are not clearly communicated.	• Distribute a summary of business plan and goals that will be readable and clear to managers, to help them set employees goals.
• No consistency in communication of company goals. Communication varies by manager.	
• Only financial goals are communicated and they are not linked to individual performance.	• Link company's goals to employee performance and measure performance against goals.

continued..

Current System	Recommendations
B. THE SYSTEM • Time consuming Extensive paper work • Inconsistent implementation of system by managers who were not trained on utilization of the system • New managers have no orientation or coaching on performance management system. • Some managers are easy graders and some are tough; no consistency in grading.	• HR needs to provide management training on utilization of the system. • Shorten the appraisal forms. • HR needs to send reminders to managers re: mid-year review and year-end review, and send packages on time.
C. MANAGEMENT DISCIPLINE • Some managers believe in, support, and effectively administer the performance management system. Others do not support the system, and therefore administration is not successful. • The constantly changing business environment causes managers to focus on fire fighting rather than proactive performance management. • Inadequate time is spent on reviews. They are put off to the last minute, completed late, and viewed as just another task. • Managers do not seem to understand the importance of performance reviews to employees.	• Provide training for managers in how to manage employee performance and how to effectively administer the formal system. • Implement a system that will allow for bottom-up feedback (employees' input about managers' performance). • Both managers and employees should be proactive in soliciting and providing feedback. • Solicit peer input, to achieve more objectivity.

continued...

Current System	Recommendations
D. MERIT LINK	
• There is no connection between performance evaluation and pay raise. • Raise occurs on anniversary date; sometimes the raise comes almost a year after the performance evaluation. • Employees at the top of their grade levels do not get merit increase. • Merit increase ranging from 3–5% does not differentiate between poor performers and high performers. • The merit increase drives performance evaluation rather than the other way around.	• Implement gainshare programs at the individual plants to compensate for plant level performance. • Have performance planning on the same date as merit increase. • Link merit to goal achievement.
E. COACHING AND DEVELOPMENT	
• The frequency and effectiveness of coaching and development varies by managers. • Goal setting is difficult for jobs that don't change much from year to year. • Employee participation in goal setting varies. • Resources allocated to develop salaried exempt are different from what's allocated to develop salaried non-exempt.	• Managers should provide regular ongoing feedback. • Regularly recognize employee goal achievement and exemplary performance. • Solicit employee input in developmental goal setting.

10
Taking Action

Guidelines
Planning matrix

As the Winners' Ink project leader, Pete called a planning meeting to launch the final step in the focus group process: taking action. He included his teammates and several other HR staff members who had collected other relevant data. Together they reviewed everything, discussed the major topics that had emerged, and completed a planning matrix.

While working on the matrix, team members shared information and insights about the political realities and relationships within the organization, potential internal and external resources, and ideas for specific action. Pete produced a master copy of the matrix, noting special resources and ideas that would help everyone to achieve their tasks.

The team designated responsibility for each item and set target dates for completion. Before adjourning, they set the time and date for the first follow-up meeting. Pete's assistant prepared copies of the matrix for each member, highlighting the target dates relevant to each person.

At the follow-up meeting, all team members gave a progress report on their assigned action items. They made revisions—mostly additions—to their original planning matrix.

Guidelines

Working through the steps outlined in the preceding chapters of this book is a big accomplishment, but the job isn't finished. You and your project team are to be congratulated for doing quite a lot, but don't stop! Remember that the purpose of any focus group project is to collect detailed information to use in decision-making and action planning.

Many well-intentioned focus group project teams fail at this point. Collecting vast amounts of data without using them defeats the purpose of the focus group process. Furthermore, wasting the time and efforts of all those involved engenders great dissatisfaction among the participants, who "had their say" to no avail.

The challenge of how to use the focus group data begins with the first action planning meeting. Now that the data is collected and summarized, team members must present the results and initiate action planning leading to change.

Consider using these steps:

1. Combine focus group results with other relevant information such as financial data, other internal data such as surveys and statistics, and benchmarking data from other organizations.

2. Discuss the focus group report. Look for clarification and understanding of the information. What surprises does the data contain? What are the key topics?

3. Examine each topic and plan action around the key issue(s) within that topic. What needs to be done and by whom?

   - Allocate resources.
   - Collect more data on a very specific process.
   - Locate a variety of service providers.
   - Establish a task force to plan a particular system.
   - Identify a menu of choices.
   - Plan for communication.

4. Assign responsibility for these actions to specific individuals.
5. Set the date for the first follow-up meeting to review progress.

Planning Matrix

Use a planning matrix to organize action. In the first column, list the major topics and any subtopics or related concerns requiring action under each topic. In the second column, list necessary action(s) that address each subtopic. In some instances, an issue requires several actions, so expand the action column accordingly.

At the planning stage, it is important to note whether an action requires resources and approval prior to implementation. The parties responsible for these actions need to gain this approval from project sponsors and financiers.

Don't leave the planning session without assigning responsibility for proposed actions on each topic. Lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities is a hallmark of poor meetings and often results in a loss of momentum and the potential death of a change project.

Measures and outcomes add objective targets. Listing dates for each action further bolsters the action effort.

Sample planning matrix

Topic/Issue	Action(s)	Approval Yes/No	Person(s) Responsible	Outcome Measure	Date Due
I__________					
A__________	A1__________	_______	___________	_______	____
	A2__________	_______	___________	_______	____
B__________	B1__________	_______	___________	_______	____
	B2__________	_______	___________	_______	____
C__________	C1__________	_______	___________	_______	____
	C2__________	_______	___________	_______	____
II__________	____________	_______	___________	_______	____
A__________	A1__________	_______	___________	_______	____
B__________	B1__________	_______	___________	_______	____
etc.					

Excerpts from the Winners' Ink Plan

PLANNING MATRIX
Performance Management System

Topic/Issue	Action(s)	Approval Yes/No	Person(s) Responsible	Outcome Measures	Date Due
I. Frequent Feedback					
A. Initial understanding of responsibilities	*A1 Do job analyses*				
	A2 Write job descriptions				
B. Management raining	*B1 Investigate off-the- shelf*				
	B2 Purchase or develop				
C. Documentation of work/results	*C1 Design tools to assist employees in tracking & documenting work/results*				
	C2 Train/implement				
II. Goal Setting					
A. Management & training	*A1 Investigate off-the-shelf*				
	A2 Purchase or develop				
B. Tools	*B1 Design or purchase tools*				
III. Peer Review					
A. Review and feedback training	*A1 Call local consultants*				
	A2 Investigate off-the-shelf				
B. Instruments	*B1 Investigate available review forms*				

11
Technology Tools
By Lisa Hart

Online focus groups
Teleconferencing
Videoconferencing

The project team was inspired by their success with the focus groups, and they decided that this approach could be used more broadly within Winners' Ink. They had thought about using focus groups to collect data for a project encompassing three United States regions. They did not have the budget to bring people together from different sites across the country or to pay for a consultant to travel. While they were talking with Joan about this dilemma, she shared with them the burgeoning use of the Internet, teleconferencing, and videoconferencing to address this very issue—allowing people to stay within their own offices while interacting with others across the country or even the globe.

The application of technology to focus groups has created countless new possibilities. Generally, the technology has been applied in market research settings or for business meetings, yet it is worthwhile to explore the possible applications to focus group projects.

There are now several different ways to conduct focus groups using technologies unavailable even a few years ago, and several companies offer services such as:

1. Online focus groups
   - Real time (almost)
   - Bulletin boards
2. Teleconferencing or telephone focus groups
3. Videoconferencing
   - Videoconferencing (VC)
   - Desktop videoconferencing (DTVC)

It is important to fully understand and appreciate both the advantages and disadvantages of these applications to focus groups. While they may be beneficial in some circumstances, know the pros and cons of each method before choosing one.

Method One: Online focus groups

There are two types of online "focus groups" currently in use, ***real time*** or ***bulletin boards.***

How it works

Focus group participants can log onto a Web site using a password. Just as in a traditional focus group, a facilitator guides the discussion. The focus group is conducted in writing, although other stimuli (e.g., graphics) can be presented. The real time version is most like a traditional focus group, except that people are not in one place and their contributions are limited to written comments. Essentially, it is a chat room designed for a focus group.

The bulletin boards work like other bulletin boards online. There is a still a facilitator, but the focus group may take place over days, and all participants are not necessarily online together at the same time.

Advantages of online focus groups

I. Speed and time saved	Online focus groups are easier to coordinate, because people do not need to be brought together in the same facility. With no plane reservations or facility reservations, they require less effort to attend and organize. With better geographical representation, fewer groups are necessary. Consequently, an organization obtains information more quickly. The organization may receive a transcript of the focus group within minutes after it has ended, although when confidentiality is guaranteed, this is not ethical nor appropriate without consent of the participants.
2. Cost Savings	Online focus group costs are similar to traditional focus groups. One pays for the convenience and technology: Even a basic service costs several thousand dollars. The savings are in the hidden expenses of logistics and travel. For example, the costs of renting a facility, bringing people to the site, meals, and some transcription fees are eliminated.
3. Broader participation	Because of the time, effort, and money saved on logistics, an organization can expand the number of participants. For example, international participants, unless there is a language barrier, will add to the richness of the information.

Advantages of online focus groups (continued)

4. Other advantages because of technology	The technology of online focus groups offers a few options that are not available in traditional focus groups. • The moderator can poll group members and present tabulated results to the organization. • Graphics, audio, photography, and video can be utilized.
5. Communication of emotional content	Although the emotional expression is much more constrained in online focus groups, there are ways to convey feelings. Anyone familiar with e-mail or chat rooms (or—remember?—snail mail letters) understands this dilemma.
6. Different group dynamics	Some argue that the dynamics of an online focus group are better than traditional ones. For example, some say that because all participants write at the same time, it is more difficult for one person to dominate. Shy participants who would tend to blend into the background in a traditional focus group are more likely to contribute in this forum. Since participants are limited to written words and cannot use gestures and facial expressions to communicate, the facilitator must work harder to draw out participants. Because no body language or gestures are communicated, there is less risk that the facilitator or other participants will misinterpret these actions. Richer information may result.

Advantages of online focus groups (continued)

7. Open and frank discussion, valuable data	In brick-and-mortar focus groups, establishing trust among the participants is necessary for people to feel comfortable. Without this freedom to be forthcoming, the quality and quantity of information generated is compromised. In online focus groups, however, the participants do not need to know who else is participating. This anonymity allows people to be much more honest and open and to share more information than they would in a traditional focus group. It is possible that because people are not anticipating negative nonverbal communication in reaction to their responses, they feel more free to interact and disagree. The results of one study indicated that computer-mediated discussion leads to more equal participation, more outspoken expression of opinions, and bolder decisions. Consider the cultural background of the participants. Some cultures value the restraint of expression of thoughts and feelings more than mainstream United States culture does. These individuals would not necessarily contribute in a traditional focus group versus an online one. Heterogeneous groups online offer another way to encourage participation from varied cultures as people are less intimidated by those who are different from themselves. The novelty effect of the new internet methods might make people more interested and therefore more curious and participative. Proponents of bulletin board focus groups argue that more information is generated using this method as people are not limited to specific time periods. Creative and in-depth responses are submitted around the clock. Many potential focus group participants are more at ease in front of their computers than in a traditional focus group. They are in their own environment and know that escape is easy. Participants of online focus groups may have no sense of the number of people participating. This may make some less inhibited and others more inhibited.

Disadvantages of online focus groups

1. Technological difficulties	Technological requirements are ever changing, and now a 56K modem is too slow for Internet use. A DSL or cable online connection is necessary. Technological difficulties may make the process anything but smooth. At this time, experimenting with the online focus group feels like talking under water or in slow motion.
2. Some information is lost	The fact that people are limited to writing does mean that some information is lost: • The in-depth emotional information that is gained in a face-to-face contact (e.g., nonverbal communication—body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice) is lost in an online focus group. • While it is true that participants in online focus groups use emotional cues such as emoticons or capital letters, participants must make the effort to include them, so it is artificial. In conversation, this is spontaneous and natural. • People who are not very comfortable expressing themselves in writing or who do not type very well will likely contribute less, and their information is likely to be suppressed.
3. Different dynamic	Online focus groups are not likely to generate the same intensity and energy of faceto-face focus groups. Clarity about what you want from your focus group is important. You may want the energy of a faceto-face experience. Although some organizations might find this threatening, it is the dynamic conversation that arises that helps generate the information and even the commitment that you want. People stimulate each other, and healthy conflict results. Does this happen in online groups? It is hard to say at this point. Many believe that in order to generate intense conversation, the face-to-face approach is irreplaceable.

Disadvantages of online focus groups (continued)

4. Security, confidentiality, and trust	Probably the most important issue regarding security is the uncertainty about who is actually participating or reviewing the comments. Is the person behind that computer screen really who he or she purports to be? When people talk about sensitive issues, confidentiality is paramount. Consequently, this obstacle seems insurmountable. In market research focus groups, the equivalent of the observer behind the one-way mirror exists (someone who observes the online group and sends messages to the moderator) without the participants' knowledge. This possibility may not rest easily with those who are discussing sensitive issues that they want to keep confidential. Another concern is security breaches—although security is good and a password is required to enter the focus group, there is always the threat of the presence of an uninvited person. As mentioned earlier, while the fact that everything is recorded verbatim allows for quick and efficient data gathering, this may work against the development of rapport and trust. Traditionally in focus groups, data is recorded in the aggregate and not tied to specific individuals, which alleviates concern about confidentiality.
5. Attenuated role of facilitator	The role of the moderator in an online focus group and the techniques available to him or her are limited. A good facilitator in a live focus group uses nonverbal cues from participants to direct the discussion in the room. For example, if someone is not participating but has a facial expression that indicates a reaction to the conversation, the facilitator encourages him to say what is on his mind. In an online focus group, however, the moderator cannot use nonverbal cues to gauge reactions, facilitate the group dynamics, or direct the conversation. One of the most significant benefits of traditional focus groups is the interaction among participants. Online, this interaction is different. A good facilitator establishes a sense of authority in order to ensure that the discussion remains on topic and that everyone participates. This authority is more difficult to establish online. A moderator of an online focus group cannot guarantee or encourage everyone's involvement. For example, participants might be watching TV while online.

Advantage or disadvantage?

As indicated earlier, participants in online focus groups are limited to the written word and emoticons to express themselves. What is the effect of having fewer modes of communication? Some argue that without nonverbal cues, words are subject to different interpretations. For example, conveying humor and sarcasm is difficult in writing, and jokes are subject to misinterpretation. Lost are the nuances of communication.

On the other hand, some argue that participants will translate their nonverbal communication into words. When people write their thoughts, they often articulate more clearly. When we write, we choose our words more carefully than when we talk. We talk at 250 words a minute, but type an average of 100 words a minute. Generally, written responses are most thoughtful.

Unanswered questions

Online focus groups are still new and unexplored. In addition to the pros and cons discussed, questions and cautions include:

- How can we elicit replies longer than 1–2 sentences?
- Different measurement methods yield different results. This possibility must preclude one from direct comparisons between the results of different methods (i.e., online versus traditional focus groups).
- Inviting people to online focus groups does not guarantee that those scheduled to participate will in fact attend.
- The challenge to ensure confidence in the security of one's name and confidentiality of one's opinions is unresolved.

Method Two: Teleconferencing or telephone focus groups

Telephone focus groups bring people together in different locations. As in traditional face-to-face focus groups, there is a facilitator. To minimize confusion, participants identify themselves (e.g., "This is Lisa.") before they speak. Many of the pros and cons discussed regarding online focus groups apply to telephone focus groups as well. Specific advantages follow.

Advantages of telephone focus groups

1. Claims of richer and more open communication	As with online focus groups, proponents of telephone focus groups claim that people are more open than in faceto-face groups. These groups are focused and intense. People are less comfortable with silence on the phone than in person, so they are more likely to talk.
2. Quantitative data	As with the online groups, the facilitator can poll the participants and ask them to key in numerical responses using the dialpad, so some quantitative data is easily collected.
3. Cost	Telephone focus groups cost less than faceto-face ones. And of course, as with online focus groups, many hidden costs (e.g., for travel and additional focus groups) are avoided.

Method Three: Videoconferencing...*What is it?*

Videoconferencing is a blend of computer, telecommunication, and video technology that allows people in different locations to see each other while speaking, using digital telephone lines. People meet in a secured virtual conference room. There are two types of videoconferencing—videoconferencing and desktop videoconferencing.

Videoconferencing (VC)

In the most common form of videoconferencing, the participants and facilitator are together in one room and the focus group is conducted as usual, but an observer can watch from another location. The other form, less commonly used at this point, involves groups of people in different locations joined, or "bridged," together. In this way, a group in Cincinnati could participate in a focus group with people in San Diego. Or perhaps a facilitator might conduct a focus group in Atlanta while staying at his home base in Chicago, dramatically reducing the costs of consulting.

Desktop videoconferencing (DTVC)

With desktop videoconferencing, individuals sit at desktop computers outfitted with audio and video equipment, bringing together many individuals in various locations.

Cost of VC and DTVC

Purchasing videoconferencing equipment is a significant investment, but it usually pays off with time. Renting the equipment and a facility are possible, and several companies offer this service, but this requires transportation to the facility.

The cost of desktop videoconferencing is lower than that of videoconferencing and continues to decline in cost.

Technological difficulties of VC

Technological glitches are fraught with annoyance and distract participants. TV quality is lacking, and delays or frozen frames exist.

Potential advantages and disadvantages of VC and DTVC applied to internal company focus groups

Many issues discussed earlier apply to these applications. Specific videoconferencing challenges include:

- ***Confidentiality***
  Anonymity cannot be guaranteed. People will worry about unknown observers. Similar to the transcripts from online focus groups, facilitators can obtain a CD of the videoconference focus group. Observers can mark the CD and clip the highlights as they occur. Once again, these possibilities reduce security.

- ***Trust***
  Will people connected via videoconferencing develop the necessary rapport and trust to generate valid and rich data? For example, if a facilitator is not physically present with the attendees, will they still trust her sufficiently to share their thoughts about the organization? Time and experience will guide us about this.

- Quality of communication
  Research has indicated that people using videoconferencing have shorter, more focused, and decisive meetings. Brevity is not usually the goal of focus groups.

Other Methods: Other applications and merging technologies

- Moderated e-mail groups (a method of conducting interviews and allowing for some participant interaction online)

- Teleweb (the use of teleconferencing and the Web to allow people to both write and talk, and write while someone else is talking)

As technologies merge, we will see limitations disappear. For example, online focus groups are currently limited to text, but in the future a computer-mounted camera will show participants seated at their computers, allowing for nonverbal gestures.

Conclusion

At this point, market research professionals use these high-tech "focus groups," and the methods continue to improve. Few companies have experimented with gathering input through bulletin boards. The little research on the subject and much of this chapter are based on anecdotal evidence—on people's own experiences or biases. To the extent that promoting support for change is as important as learning specific facts, the traditional focus group still has a long life ahead.

12
Summary Tips

Several months after the Winners' Ink focus group process culminated in the adoption of a new performance management system that was widely supported, Pete invited his teammates, Bruce and Maya, to a celebratory lunch. As they recalled their experience, they agreed that six factors contributed to their success.

- Identify a committed sponsor and financier.

  The focus group process yields detailed, highly useful data, but it requires time, dedication, and resources. Only embark on supported efforts.

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities.

  Avoid confusion and oversight during the focus group process. Project team members perform successfully only if they know what is expected of them.

- Develop a concise and compelling purpose statement.

  A clear purpose will keep choices and communications on target.

- Enlist the support of key organization members.

  Clearly communicate the nature, purpose, and benefits of the project to all stakeholders. Broad support can overcome apathy or the detractions of non-supporters.

- Listen to participant comments.

  Do not use the process as a formality to give employees "their say" about decisions that have already been made. Truly listen to employees and plan action based on various data sources, including focus groups.

- Take action.

  Embark on the focus group project only if the organization intends to take action. Conducting focus groups without follow-through hurts morale more than not conducting them at all. Well-conducted focus groups engender useful data that lead to better and broadly supported decisions and actions.

13
Materials and Samples

This chapter offers templates of instruments easily adapted to fit the needs of any focus group team. The books and articles referenced at the end of the chapter will supplement your knowledge of this useful process.

A. Guide questions to define purpose

Planning questions	**Response**
What is the reason behind your decision to use focus groups?	
What is the general issue?	
What are the specific issues? (three maximum)	**1.** **2.** **3.**
What goals do you hope to meet using focus groups?	
For what purpose will the data be used?	
From whom do you want to collect information? Be specific.	

Purpose statement (**1–3** sentences)

B. Focus group roles and responsibilities

Role	Team member	Responsibilities
Sponsor		
Financier		
Facilitator		
Recorder		
Summarizer		
Project leader		

C. Invitation to selected participants

Date
To: Name of selected participant
From: Name (usually project leader)
Title
Department
Re: (Topic) Focus Groups

Background of issue (what was the impetus for focus groups?)
Employees' answers to the Winners' Ink organizational survey completed in September 1997 indicated general dissatisfaction with our current performance management system.

Focus group purpose and facilitator
To improve this system, the Human Resources department is working with Joan Chen, a local consultant, to conduct employee focus groups aimed at gathering more detailed information about the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and suggestions for components of a more effective performance management plan.

Focus group numbers and selection criteria
We plan to conduct eight focus groups with approximately 25% of our employees representing all levels and departments in the company. You have been selected from your department as one of the focus group participants.

Specific details: date, time, place
Date: Monday, February 9
Time: 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.
Location: Conference Room A

Special considerations for participants
Your participation in this focus group is considered part of your workday, so you will not have to make up this time.

Preparation, confidentiality, and recorder
You do not need to make any special preparations for this meeting. You will participate in an informal discussion about performance management. All focus group discussions are confidential. Bruce Veritas from Human Resources will record the information, which will be summarized and reported (without names) to you and others in the company.

Use of data
The goal of these sessions is to gather employee ideas about performance management. We look forward to your contribution to these discussions.

RSVP contact
Please call Margie in Human Resources (x3679) to confirm your participation.

D. Focus group agenda planner

Estimated time	Agenda item
	Introduction
	Warm-up
	Writing option
	Question period
	Summary

E. Focus group planning checklist

_______ 1. Identify the focus group project team, and assign roles and responsibilities. Select external professionals, if necessary.

_______ 2. Develop the focus group purpose statement. Clearly define the purpose of the focus group project. Use guiding questions to focus team thinking and develop the purpose statement.

_______ 3. Distribute a copy of the final purpose statement to all team members for future reference.

_______ 4. Select focus group participants. Clearly identify the target group of participants using key demographic and organizational characteristics. Use your criteria to select a representative sample. Identify more than the target number of participants to accommodate absences.

_______ 5. **Reserve** focus group **location(s)**.

_______ 6. Draft the participant invitation, including date, time, and place.

_______ 7. Distribute a copy of the invitation and a cover letter reviewing the project purpose and logistics to managers.

_______ 8. Establish a method for participants to respond to the invitations. Enlist someone to track responses.

_______ 9. Distribute participant invitations.

_______ 10. Develop the focus group agenda. Review draft agenda with project team and revise as necessary.

_______ 11. **Gather/reserve** necessary materials for the focus group. Assign responsibility for getting them to the focus group location(s).

_______ 12. Facilitator and recorder review agenda

_______ 13. Recorder prepares effective transcription method and arranges for necessary toolslmaterials.

_______ 14. Conduct focus **group(s)**.

_______ 15. Recorder reviews notes from each focus group session, adding details as necessary.

_______ 16. Recorder and facilitator review notes and make necessary revisions.

_______ 17. Summarizer **performs** content analysis based on focus group notes, completes data analysis, and drafts a report.

_______ 18. Project team reviews the draft report; makes necessary revisions.

_______ 19. Project team determines optimal method for distributing results.

_______ 20. Summarizer finalizes report and prepares any necessary versions for distribution to the various stakeholders.

_______ 21. Distribute results.

_______ 22. Develop action plans.

F. Action planning matrix

Topiclissue	Action(s)	Approval yeslno	Person(s) responsible	Outcome measure	Date due
I					
A	A1				
	A2				
	A3				
B	B1				
	B2				
II					
A	A1				
	A2				
	A3				
	A4				
B	B1				
	B2				
III					
A	A1				
	A2				
	A3				
B	B1				
	B2				
C	C1				
	C2				