Let's Get Focused: Strategies for Developing and Running Your Own Focus Group

What is a focus group?
A focus group is a facilitator-led group discussion consisting of 6-10 people. Its main purpose is to gain and generate insight about a particular subject that can be used to make change and hopefully generate further discussion.

While using our lived experiences and voices to advocate for youth is powerful, sometimes we need something more. That's where a focus group can be helpful. Focus groups can produce tangible facts, which can then be shared and used to gain insight into a particular topic. The information can also be used for research, writing grants, and putting together reports.

Examples from Youth MOVE Massachusetts

Youth MOVE Massachusetts youth and young adult focus groups are run by trained young adult peers. We have found that we get genuine and honest responses from our participants because we run our groups in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Youth and young adults are more likely to be open about their opinions when speaking directly to a peer rather than an adult or professional. We have run many focus groups in the last few years and have used our findings to make change in our community, inform others about topics they may not have known much about, and publish a report about youth leaders entitled "Pointing the Way to Leadership." Some of the other topics we've run focus groups on include bullying, confidentiality in healthcare, and young women in healthcare.

Tips to get You Started

- Prepare questions to ask your group. Be conscious of time when writing them. You want enough questions to gather the information you need, but you also want to have enough time for your participants to get through all of the questions.
- Recruit participants for your focus group. You'll need enough participants to get a discussion going, but you also want everyone to have enough time to answer all of your questions.
- Have at least two trained, impartial facilitators lead the focus group, and one note taker. That way, the facilitators can focus on leading the discussion while the note taker can focus on writing down all of the details.
- Create a safe, friendly environment for your youth participants.
- Remember to treat the participants like they are on your level. Otherwise, they may feel a power imbalance and become uncomfortable sharing.

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Creating a Friendly Environment

Not only do youth want to be heard, but they also want to feel safe while doing so. Creating a friendly, safe space for your focus group will make it that much easier for youth to be open and honest while answering your questions.

Here are some tips on creating a youth-friendly environment:

- Provide snacks and water. Put fidgets (play-dough, silly putty, stress balls, etc.) on the participants' chairs or on the table.
- Have at least one 10-15 minute break so youth can stretch their legs, go to the bathroom, etc.
- Let the youth know that if they need or want to talk afterward, they are more than welcome to do so.

Moderating

Introductions

Introduce yourself as the moderator and explain your role. Have the participants introduce themselves. Include a fun question or a short icebreaker!

Confidentiality

It's important to convey that everything that is said within the focus group is confidential- names and any other personal information will not be shared outside of the focus group!

Setting Ground Rules

Ground rules can help keep things in order and on time. Tell participants:

- How much time the focus group will take
- There will be a note-taker present
- Everyone should be respectful of others' answers and agree to disagree
- Cellphones should be on silent or vibrate
- You'd love to hear any questions or concerns

Background

Spend 2-5 minutes explaining the topic of your focus group, why you're asking questions, and why their feedback is important.

Questions and Discussions

Ask your questions to the youth participants. If you want more information on specific questions, use follow-up questions like: "Can you tell me more about that?" "Could you elaborate a little on that?" "Does anyone want to add to that?" Remember to be mindful of time. You want everyone to be able to give their feedback.

Wrap up

Ask if anyone has anything else they'd like to add before you wrap up. Thank them for their time and effort. For those moderating, it may help to develop a Moderator's Guide to help you facilitate your focus group and stay on task.

PPAL
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