Paris Phoenix Group

WHITE PAPER

Employee Focus Group Best Practices

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In this paper you will learn:

- Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups
- Focus Group Administration Logistics to Consider
- Participant Sampling Strategies
- Importance of Asking the Right Questions
- Research and Facilitation Tips
- Tips on Summarizing Results

When considering focus groups as a methodology for research, it is important to understand when they are most appropriate. Depending on your research question, focus groups may or may not be the best approach to data gathering. First, focus groups are best for obtaining live, genuine reactions (usually to a stimulus-maybe a product, poster, employee program) or even a new point of view. They are great for seeing what happens when people hear another person's perspective and gauging whether people will be flexible about a topic, or if they tend to hold more solid opinions (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). In focus groups, participants have the ability to challenge each other, or to offer caveats or context to one another's views (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Focus groups also are good when a topic lends itself easily to a two-way conversation, asking questions and changing the next question based on the response. On the other hand, focus groups are not as good when a primary intent is to get quantitative results to standardized statements or reactions, such as in a survey. While you can (and we sometimes do) employ the strategic use of a short paper survey within a focus group, generally there are not enough people in a series of focus groups to get the same breadth and generalizability that administering a survey would get. Nonetheless, it can be helpful to include a survey as a complimentary piece of the puzzle.

When considering focus groups, the administration and supporting work needs to be understood before determining if this will be a feasible method. While focus groups can be interesting and provide a good depth of information, if the logistics will not work or cannot be accommodated, then it's better to choose another method (e.g., interviews or surveys).

Our collective experiences form most of the best practices we will share here. However, knowing the norms and organization specifics where the focus groups are conducted can certainly override some of our recommendations.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Aspect	Advantages/Benefits	Disadvantages
Administration and Overall Aspects	Organized and focused group interview, benefitting from dynamics of the interaction of responses, facilitates a discussion, allowing increased richness of participation.	Many participants required to obtain generalizable findings. Can be time-consuming and expensive to administer compared to other methods such as surveys. Cannot cover as many topics as other methods such as surveys.
Method and Results	Good for complex research because participants can question each other and caveats to opinions can be explored or clarified. Clarifies similarities and differences with the ability to use probing questions.	Results are complex. Simple, quantitative results are more difficult to obtain. Differences between groups or demographic differences may not be easily quantified.
Process	Flexibility to slightly modify questions if participants don't understand the nuance of a question, or need further information. Particularly good if there are cultural sensitivities to account for that would be difficult in other methods.	Participants may feel coerced into 'getting along' or are unduly influenced by an outspoken participant. Accurately accounting for this in results and facilitating the group to ensure balanced participation takes an experienced researcher.
Participant Impact	Can serve as an intervention itself-introducing a topic or program to people in its early stages and creating initial buy-in can be a positive way to start a change management process, if the participants have been given appropriate information, and if the feedback will be incorporated into the design.	Can be detrimental or cause unrest if participants were not informed that all of their feedback could not be used, if none of their feedback is incorporated, or is perceived later on during a roll-out phase as not to have been incorporated.

Administration Logistics

To conduct focus groups, a location should be available that is easily accessible by the participants, and is not in an area where many other employees would be congregating. This is to help provide the participants with the confidentiality level that they will expect from the invitation. The location should also have enough natural seating and a place for the facilitator to be comfortable and heard by all participants. Natural seating should be a configuration that is normal for the organization, but is also conducive to a conversation, such as conference room style or a large circular style. Auditorium-style or classroom-style configurations do not work well.

In scheduling the sessions, be sure to plan for enough time in-between sessions to de-brief with the next facilitator or a co-facilitator (if needed), take care of any personal needs or meals, and to prepare the room for the next group of participants. This is also helpful in the event that a session needs to start late; you will already have a buffer of time if it goes longer. Generally, for a 90 minute session, reserve the room for 30 minutes before and after.

Depending on the time of the session, including snacks/meals can be a good way to make participants comfortable, as well as to ensure that they are not missing out on lunch or be tempted to arrive late or leave early to grab a snack. Advertising this in the invitation is also helpful and can serve as a small incentive to participate. Being sensitive to the fact that people need to eat, and are often better participants when they are not hungry, can go far in ensuring a smooth session.

Once the rooms are set, invitations can be sent out (see Sampling Participants section, below). Invitations should clearly state the purpose and sponsors of the project, the expected outcomes, and any logistical information the participant needs (e.g., snacks will be served, parking locations, room location, etc.). If possible the invitation should be sent at least two weeks in advance to allow for open windows of opportunity on participants' schedules, and ample time to invite additional participants if needed. To ensure the email invitation is opened, it should come from a recognized source or name. If that is not possible, sending a heads-up email from a recognized person or team will aid in increased acceptance rates, and legitimize the purpose of the focus group to the participant (a sample invitation appears at the end of this paper).

It is also helpful to have a plan regarding notes or recording the session (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Because state laws vary with respect to audio or video-taping participants, it is critical to familiarize yourself with

From the Field

We have conducted focus groups on varying topics, including employee reactions to a company's emerging new vision and how it should be communicated, on career development programs and possible new technologies for facilitating performance management and talent management, and on employee ideas and solutions for workgroup-level employee engagement issues. In each of these examples it was necessary to consider the breadth and depth of information the client was looking for, as well as the logistics required for a robust study before determining that focus groups were the best approach.

local laws and organization-specific policies before determining your solution. We have found it helpful to have a transcriptionist in-person to type up the notes verbatim throughout the session. We let participants know that they are an outside person (usually with a signed Non-Disclosure Agreement), and that as participants they are welcome to review the transcript. An example is provided (projected on screen if possible) to make sure they are comfortable knowing that their name is not being used in the notes, only the words they are speaking. If tape or digital recordings are used in place of an in-room transcriptionist, please be sure each participant is aware of the recording device and that you continually monitor the volume level of the participants and that each person is speaking one at a time. Because recordings are not being transcribed real-time it is very important to ensure the equipment is functioning (batteries and back-ups) and that people are loud enough to be heard on the recording. The file or tape is then sent to a transcriptionist firm who will transcribe it and send you a readable file. In our experience, recordings work best for individual interviews, however if it is what is available then it is better than trying to take notes and facilitate at the same time.

The other alternative is to have a person take manual notes during the session. This does rely on a person who can type or write quickly, and their ability not to overlay their own opinions or interpretations into the notes. Though it can be distracting, sometimes a note taker can use flip charts to record the session so that participants can see what he/she is writing and be sure their view is recorded accurately.

Sampling Participants

There tend to be two overarching but differing views on sampling participants (Freeman, 2006). One view is more in favor of using pre-existing groups and the other favors more pure random sampling. We believe that each has its place, depending on how the research is to be generalized to larger groups or populations.

For example, when the results are intended to be generalized to an entire company, and the questions/topic are not directly tied to an experience in one group (e.g., manager-related), it is beneficial to randomly sample participants across the organization in multiple groups. This also adds a benefit of participants hearing from others in different areas of the company, likely gaining some feeling of anonymity, and potentially higher trust because the participants share an experience within the company, but do not have previous "baggage" or experiences with each other. However, it can be difficult to determine if there are demographic differences or other factors impacting the results when a random sample is used.

When using pre-existing groups, factors such as demographics can easily be accounted for if that is one of the groups. However, if groups that are perceived as "friendly" to the topic (e.g., an intact workgroup familiar with the topic), or are naturally occurring (e.g., a training group session of managers on another issue that is already scheduled), you lose some of the purity of a random sample. The people who are in the pre-existing group already have something in common, may know about the topic or may be familiar with it on a deeper level than the general employee base, or are pre-disposed to think similarly. It can be convenient logistically to use a pre-existing group, but can impact the results if you are trying to generalize the findings out to the rest of the employee population. Generally, we recommend these types of groups as a way to pilot-test the questions or as a round 1 of focus groups, before conducting broader groups.

A third way to approach sampling is to use a mixed method. We typically use this approach when we hypothesize that there will be or could be demographic differences in how participants respond to the questions. For example, in focus groups we conducted on career development programs we segmented the sample so that a third of the groups included managers throughout the company, another third of the groups included individual contributors, and the last third included human resources representatives. This helped us tailor one section of the questions to the audience and what they would experience in a new program, but also let us easily see differences in their responses to questions that were the same to all three groups. This mixed method approach allows us to separate the employee base by 1-2 demographics first, and then randomly sample within the demographic to ensure stratified participation (such as by business group or location), and be able to generalize back to the full population. However, be careful when adding demographics so that you don't end up so granular that participants are likely to know one another. One key advantage of focus groups is the relative anonymity participants feel when they do not know each other and can feel more freedom to open up and express their true opinions (Freeman, 2006).

When determining how many people you will need to sample and invite to your groups, or how many groups you will need, you first need to know the full size of the employee base (or full audience you are generalizing to), as well as typical response rates in the organization. In our experience with most clients there is about a 25% acceptance rate from the overall invitations list, which can increase when it is a focus group that is specific to one group or one that is heavily sponsored. However, for typical, large-scale, broad projects, we recommend sampling 4x the number of people you would prefer to attend each group. For example, if you are comfortable with 8-10 people per group (our preference to ensure a rich but manageable discussion, but also recommended in Kress & Shoffner, 2007), then we recommend sampling and inviting 40 people per group. Of course, if the organization generally has higher acceptance rates for research, or the groups are well-known because of the topic, or sponsored at a high level, then it may be better to invite fewer people to start. Then, consider the demographics that you will be trying to separate that make sense for the topic (e.g., manager vs. individual contributor). We recommend at least 2 focus groups (optimally 4) per demographic break-out. Therefore, if we wanted to generalize to the full population of 50,000 people, and we wanted to see differences in managers vs. individual contributors vs. HR, ensuring representation across multiple business groups, we would recommend a study of approximately 15 focus groups minimum; 5 with managers, 5 with employees, and 5 with HR. For those groups, we would need to sample 600 people total to invite, anticipating that only 150 people (10 per group) would actually attend.

Asking the Right Questions

Developing the question set (i.e., script or protocol) should be done carefully and thoughtfully. Different types of questions will yield different responses, so it is important to understand what you want and need from the group. The table below provides examples of question types that you may consider. In our experience it is best to start with 'easy' or non-emotionally charged questions (i.e., what, describing a situation, and yes/no questions) to let people feel comfortable with the topic before broaching deeper topics (e.g., how and potential impact types of questions).

Open-ended questions are best for getting the conversation flowing, and encouraging interaction between participants. However, you may at times need to include some yes/no or voting-based questions to get a clearer sense (or quantitative sense) of the feelings in the room. While 'why' questions can be interesting, they often imply that a rational reason is needed as an answer. Instead, try using 'how' or 'what' questions such as, 'How does that impact you?' 'What makes you feel that way?' or 'How could this be different?'

When different viewpoints are expected, it is helpful to start with the positive side of the reactions, and then give equitable time to the negative or reverse reactions. For example, "Let's talk about the positive side of X, and then we'll talk about the alternative side of X."

Finally, having good probing questions in the script can help you as a researcher to ensure that you have gotten the deeper rich responses you desire. Example probes include: Would you explain further? Are there any other reactions? Can you give me an example? Is there anything else? Would you say more? Please describe what you mean. What makes you feel that way?

In closing the session, be sure to leave a few minutes for participants to add anything that they have been thinking about but haven't said yet, and to reiterate the confidentiality level of the groups and your appreciation for their attendance (a sample script appears at the end of this paper).

It can be a good practice, if your schedule allows for it, to conduct a pilot group in which the questions are tested out, but the responses will not be used in the overall summary. This may be a smaller group than the actual study focus groups, but can be a great way to determine if the order of questions makes sense or if questions need to be edited or specific probes added to ensure a rich discussion (Kidd & Parshall, 2000).

Rough Guidelines on Question Types

Type of Question	Time	Example
Facts	Very brief. Sometimes less than 60 seconds.	How many of you read the email from xxxx?
Examples and Stories	Moderate. Can range from 5 to 10 minutes.	Tell me about an example of poor cross group collaboration.
Discussion, compare and contrast	Long. Range from 10 to 15 minutes.	What do you think of the program?
Activities, involvement, reflection, sharing	Very long. Often more than 15 minutes.	I'd like you to read the proposed changes on the flipchart. How do you think these changes will affect you and your team?

Research and Facilitation Tips

Facilitating a focus group is a skill best learned by observation first, then by practicing in a non-threatening group (i.e., without an emotionally-charged topic) while an experienced facilitator observes and provides feedback, and then independently.

It is important to remember that you are also a researcher, not just a facilitator. This will ensure you remember to keep an objective point of view, reflecting back what people have stated, but not allowing your personal point of view into the discussion or summary (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). Being transparent and honest in answering participant questions, ensuring their confidentiality, and keeping the methodology as clean as possible are key differences for a researcher. As a researcher, being comfortable that the group will likely not reach consensus about a topic is different from a facilitator, who may see their role as organizing the thoughts of the group or reaching a compromise.

Making sure participants feel comfortable and can trust you is important in the first few minutes. Initially, it is helpful to include in the script the confidentiality level they can expect, the rationale for the session, the sponsor, and the overall direction of the questions you will be asking. This helps set the stage for participants, and if they anticipated a topic that isn't being discussed, to ensure they are aware what is 'on' and 'off' the table for discussion. Occasionally participants may have a preconceived idea of what topics they want to be sure are covered, and without setting the stage for them it can be challenging later if they bring up topics that you are not prepared to handle. Giving participants an outlet for more feedback (e.g., internal department) can also be a good strategy to ensure they feel heard, even if it is on a topic or sub-topic that is not core to the discussion.

In our experience, most groups run smoothly, and most participants are genuinely interested in providing their experience or reactions to what you are asking. Occasionally there are participants who are more interested in hearing what others have to say (rather than speaking), or have a personal agenda they want to talk about. Because the dynamics of all groups are slightly different, there are not one-size-fits-all 'rules' for facilitation. In general, it is important to be able to 'read' or sense the mood of the room early on in the session and continue to use your observation skills to determine if the mood is changing, and how you can influence it through the script and questions (if needed). This is not easy because you should stick to the script as much as possible so that the data gathering process remains consistent, but you may need to ease points of tension by changing your tone, asking others to provide input who may have been silent, or breaking the moment with humor (if possible and appropriate). At other times, it is important to have ways to address someone who may have taken the group in a different direction (off-topic), or comments that are intending to question the validity or method of the research. With each situation, having a way to diffuse it is the key to ensuring a successful group. Physically, if you have been sitting down throughout the session, you can use body language to take attention away from someone thwarting the group by turning your body to face the side of the table (or room) you want more responses from, decreasing eye contact with the participant who is dominating the conversation, walking around the room to take more physical command of the room, or just standing up in place to redirect attention to you as the facilitator.

As the groups progress, you should feel that you are reaching a level of saturation with responses; that is you are hearing enough of the same consistent themes in responses. Once you react that point, you have likely conducted enough groups to feel confident that the results are reliable. If each group is providing very different responses, it may be wise to review the questions again, determine if there have been any deviations or issues with any group, and determine if probing questions need to be more specific to determine if saturation can be reached. The topic may be very complex, in which case more groups may be needed (or added) to determine where themes are occurring and where differences are truly a part of the current state.

Post Focus Group and Summarizing

Immediately following the focus group, write down any observations you have about the group, including number of participants, mood/tone of the group, if anyone was dominating the discussion, and general themes you heard from the group on the high-level key topics. Note any issues with questions that were misunderstood, and any particular quotes or phrases that stood out to you which you might want to use in the summary. These notes will be helpful when writing the overall summary across groups.

When you begin to summarize responses across groups, review your notes first to look for your overarching trends or themes. Re-read transcripts for any groups you personally did not facilitate (if the study was large and multiple researchers were facilitating). Try to categorize what you heard into three areas- Consistent findings, Trends, and Distinctive findings. Consistent findings are heard across almost 100% of participants. Trends are heard across 40-70% of participants, and Distinctive findings are unique or may be related to a sub-group. It is not a listing of individual comments, but rather something notable, or a valid exception.

When many researchers are used as facilitators, it is good to schedule a de-brief session to review the three categories of results (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). You may wish to start summarizing together using a flip chart method as each person reviews their notes and transcripts. Then, using the notes, write the summary and share it again with all facilitators. Ensure your summary has an Executive Summary piece noting high-level themes and trends on the most critical topics, and then a more detailed summary including some sample quotes/verbatims from the groups to illustrate the points. Review the final summary with any researchers or facilitators who assisted in the study, clarifying any points they have to add, or noting additional caveats.

If you recommend follow-up research, be specific on the areas that you feel were not conclusive and how you recommend obtaining additional feedback. If your client asks you to recommend possible solutions or next steps related to the topic, be careful to stick to what the participants indicated, and only add your personal recommendations if you are familiar enough with the organization or topic.

More Facilitation Tips

- Introduce yourself (and the larger team). List your name, the transcriptionist's name, and the sponsor's name on a board or flipchart in the room.
- Be welcoming. Smile and engage participants in light conversation before the session begins. Offer the refreshments (if present), and note the location of the break room/kitchen or restrooms (if large building or campus).
- Don't rush at the start. Wait a few minutes after the start time to begin if you anticipate more people arriving. It is better to wait 2-3 minutes than to re-start the group with the introduction and ground rules multiple times.
- Give people time to answer. If someone looks like they have a response, encourage them to share.
- Offer to 'go around the room'. This may be necessary to get responses so everyone feels comfortable responding. Generally this is only needed in the beginning of a session, or where you anticipate unique responses.
- Encourage vocal (dis)agreement. Nodding or head-shaking can't be recorded by a transcriptionist, so encourage people to agree and disagree verbally.
- Acknowledge or redirect as necessary. If responses are not in the direction you intended, are coming from the same person repeatedly, or participants seem to be misinterpreting the question, you can't just ignore them. Re-state the question slightly and direct it to others in the room by saying "Thank you for sharing. Does anyone have a similar or dissimilar experience or opinion to share?"
- Keep an eye on the clock. Note on your copy of the facilitation guide where the halfway point should be so that you can stay on track.

Consultant's Corner

Focus groups are an interactive way to engage employees in a rich discussion to lend personal experience and impact to a research project. When conducted appropriately, results can be useful from influencing broad decisions with employee impact (such as changing an HR process or employee benefits) to providing real-time working tactical solutions and feedback. Compared to other research methods (e.g., online surveys or a small set of interviews), focus groups can be time-consuming and more expensive overall, but can be worthwhile when the context needs to be provided to employees to understand the problem, and their emotions and reactions are necessary to consider in possible solutions.

References

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Through customized business solutions, Paris Phoenix Group helps answer complex organizational questions around employee issues. Our consultants focus on understanding how the employee perspective fits into the organizational people system. Each of our customized solutions is founded on a rigorous research approach. This allows us to provide our clients with well-founded and effective solutions to meet their business needs.

Sample Material

Sample Invitation

Highlighted areas should be customized and the email sent from the team alias.

Focus Group Invitation

To: Participants

Subject: Focus Group Invitation

From:

Signature: None

You are invited to participate in a focus group related to ___________. We are interested in your experiences with ___________ and your feedback on some ideas for the future. Your participation will help us learn about ___________ and areas we can improve upon.

Please note:

- Light snacks will be provided and the focus group will last the full 90 minutes.
- Please plan to be on time so that we can share the background and ground rules with everyone together.
- If you are not familiar with the meeting room location, please plan ahead to allow for parking or shuttle time.

You were randomly selected to participate in this confidential focus group. We hope you will participate - please let us know if you are coming by accepting or declining this invitation. Please do not forward this invitation to others - if you cannot attend, please simply decline.

Our focus will be on how you think about ___________.

We look forward to hearing from you in our session!

TEAM NAME

Sample Protocol/Script:

Introduction:
Welcome. I am _____________, and this is the focus group for _____________.

Before we get started, I want to introduce myself and our transcriptionist, _____________.

I am _____________, from Paris Phoenix Group, and I'll be facilitating the group today. We work with the _____________ team on research projects like this related to employees' experiences at _____________. As an external facilitator, my role is to lead the conversation and to ensure that each of you share your experiences with us. We are conducting multiple groups this week, and your responses will be combined with the responses of the other groups which we will use to identify themes across groups and provide recommendations to the sponsors of this project.

Background:
These focus groups are being sponsored by the _____________ Team to understand more thoroughly what employees view as _____________, what has had the most impact on _____________, and what would happen if we change any aspects/features in the future. The information will be used to inform some of the questions in an upcoming survey to employees, as well as in future program changes. We won't be covering _____________ today, so if you do have any questions related to that, please contact _____________ or your HR Business Partner. (Edit if needed based on final invitation.)

Our transcriptionist _____________ is here today to transcribe our conversation so that instead of taking notes, I have the ability to focus on what you are telling me and to be sure I understand your perspective. Your comments are not attached to any name or identifier, only indicated as "Participant" in the transcript. Because of this, your comments here are completely confidential, and I ask that you are honest in your responses to the questions. To be sure that we can maintain the confidentiality of our conversation, I am also asking that each of you keep the conversation confidential as well, which means not discussing what you said or heard in this room with anyone outside of this room. As we know, details often change from the initial ideas and exploration stages of a project to the final product, so we want to be sensitive to that and consider this the exploration stage. We don't want anyone who wasn't involved today to make assumptions about the direction of this work, and because of that I ask you to keep this conversation confidential.

Is that ok with everyone? Are there any questions before we begin?

Distribute Worksheet:
The first thing we want to start with is a worksheet exercise to help gather some brief data about a few things we want to be sure we capture from your perspective before we get started. The demographics included will help us ensure that we heard from a wide variety of employees, and help us if we see trends or similarities across groups. We'll also come back to some of the concepts throughout our conversation. If you are a manager, answer from your own perspective in your career development, as an employee.

Give 5-10 minutes to complete it.

When you have completed it, please pass it down to me.

Sample Questions:

Aim for 12-15 questions including probing and transitions

- What are your initial thoughts about _____________?
- If we were to change _____________ to _____________, what is your first reaction?
- What are the implications of making those changes?
- If you are a manager, how would it impact your role?
- What positive feedback do you have about _____________? Why?
- What negative feedback do you have about _____________? Why?
- What could be done to make _____________ more successful or well-received?
- How would you introduce _____________ to your team?

End with: "Any other thoughts about _____________ that we didn't get to?"

As we agreed earlier, please remember to keep this conversation confidential, and thank you for coming!