

THE USE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

When organizations are scanning the internal and external environment as part of the strategic planning process there are a number of ways to gather input from stakeholders (i.e. clients, funders, partners, client families, board, staff etc). Focus Groups are one of my favorites because they are an effective, quick and relatively inexpensive means of soliciting input from a broad cross section of individuals.

It's good to "begin with the end in mind" when planning a focus group. **What do you want to know and who can tell you?**

Regardless of whether you are conducting the focus groups on your own, or are working with a consultant, here are some basic guidelines.

Determine the purpose and questions.

Select a time and location. Focus groups over breakfast or lunch work well. During a 1 ½ hour time frame, you can feed the participants and solicit input on 4 to 6 questions.

Prepare an invitation list – Strive for 6 – 10 attendees at each session. That means you have to invite 1 ½ to 2 times that number.

Mail the invitation and give participants at least two weeks notice.

Make arrangements for refreshments. Set up the room in a U so the facilitator can move in and out

Welcome participants, have a sign in sheet. name tents and easy to eat refreshments.

Explain the purpose of the focus group and the expectations for participants. (You have already told them this in the invitation letter, but remind them again).

Give participants the opportunity to think about their answers. Have paper and pen on the table. Use a round robin technique with each participant giving you one answer at a time and always having the option to pass.

Sometimes you have to repeat the question – "*What are the gaps in service?*" – because some participants just talk and don't really answer the question posed.

If possible, have a second person record the answers on postsize

Post-Its and always post them where people can see their answers.

Summarize the answers to each question and thank the participants for their assistance.

Explain how the information will be used.

Prepare a Summary Report and Analysis for use by the Strategic Planning Committee, but also email or snail-mail report to the participants.

Think about this also as a marketing opportunity for your organization. Have some give away – pens, key chains Post-It notes. with your logo. In business focus group participants are often paid for their participation. In the nonprofit sector a small give away is about as good as it gets.

Analyze and evaluate the process and the results.

For further reading on conducting focus groups, buy or borrow: :

The Wilder Nonprofit Field Guide to Conducting Successful Focus Groups by Judith Sharken Simon 1999 www.Wilder.org.

Focus Groups A Step-By-Step Guide, 3rd. edition, Gloria E. Bader, and Catherine A. Rossi, The Bader Group 1998, 1999, 2002.

Contact Pat, if you would like to have her conduct a focus group for your organization.