



Six Reasons Why Focus Groups **Alone** Do Not Provide Enough Information for Planning

Holy Cow! Consulting has conducted hundreds of focus groups over the years. We believe that focus groups are important for organizations seeking creative input, needing to generate buy-in, or to drill down into the meaning of a broader organizational assessment process such as an organization-wide survey. However, focus groups alone generally do not provide enough information for planning. Here are six reasons why.

Reason #1: Focus groups typically involve too few persons to provide reliable information for the entire organization.

The number of folks willing to attend a focus group is generally a small fraction—often less than a quarter of the persons actually involved in the organization. After talking with 20 persons from an organization with 100 members, about one in five of your conclusions about the entire organization is likely to be wrong. In addition, focus groups tend to favor the perspectives of those who are more involved in the organization over those who are less involved since they are less likely to attend a focus group meeting. This works fine if an organization is only interested in maintaining the status quo; it works less well if there is concern about deepening the involvement of its more marginal members. Organization-wide surveys require much less time investment per participant (about 15 minutes), have a higher response rate, and produce more reliable results.

Reason #2: The information collected from focus groups is skewed toward the opinions of those who are more outspoken and extraverted.

Members of focus groups vary in their level of comfort with speaking their thoughts. Some are more extraverted and speak easily. Others need more time to process information internally before they speak. By the time these more reflective members know what they want to say, the agenda of the meeting has often moved on to the next question. Over time, members begin to recognize the voices within the organization that are the most influential and tend to defer to those voices even when they hold a different view. Organization-wide surveys are indifferent to power and personality type. The opinion of each person has equal weight.

Reason #3: Cultivating candid conversations in focus groups requires a high degree of trust that may not exist in the organization.

Focus groups assume that there is enough trust in the organization for people to speak candidly about their experiences and perspectives. Their effectiveness plummets when the level of trust is part of what needs to be assessed. People walk up to the facilitator after the meeting and whisper “I didn’t feel that I could say this in the meeting but...” Organization-wide surveys can not only assess the level of trust, but also get a more accurate read on other issues when trust is low.

Reason #4: Focus groups do not permit a comprehensive assessment of the health of an organization.

It is impossible to explore a large variety of issues in a focus group. If the facilitator allows each person in a group of twelve to speak for one minute in response to a particular question, only six questions can be addressed in a 72-minute session. Setting aside ten minutes at the beginning of the session for describing the process followed by introductions and five minutes at the end for questions and next steps fills most of a 90-minute time slot. Organization-wide surveys typically register the respondent's views on up to ninety questions and also allow for open-ended responses of indefinite length. It is the difference between going to the doctor for a specific concern and getting a comprehensive physical that checks out every aspect of your health.

Reason #5: Focus groups do not provide a way to know if the information collected indicates a relative strength or a weakness compared to other, similar organizations.

There are few surprises that come out of focus group information because they are internally focused. After you summarize all the comments from a focus group in a particular question, you still do not know if you are dealing with a relative strength or weakness because you have no way of benchmarking the information. For example, we often hear in focus groups that a few people are doing most of the work. But this is true in almost every volunteer organization. What people perceive as a weakness may, in fact, be a strength compared to other, similar organizations...and vice versa. Organization-wide surveys allow leaders to do a better job identifying the real issues, both strengths and work areas.

Reason #6: For the amount of information collected, focus groups are labor intensive and often expensive.

Designing a focus group process requires a considerable effort, even if it is standardized with set questions. Participants can only offer their input at a limited number of times. They must travel to and from the focus group site and invest one to two hours in the process. The logistics of managing the PR effort, invitations, RSVP's, group size, room set-up, supplies, refreshments, and attendance list are significant. Securing the services of a skilled facilitator who is trusted and objective is crucial. At the end of the process, all the information must be transcribed, coded, sorted, and counted. The cost of doing this well is literally hundreds of hours and often thousands of dollars. There are short cuts at every stage (like one large "town-hall" meeting with subgroups) but these significantly reduce the quality of the information for all the reasons discussed above.

On the other hand, today's organization-wide surveys are logistically simple and can be taken by the respondent in about fifteen minutes 24-7. Thousands of respondents can participate with no need for travel, room-setup, or refreshments. They do not require the services of a skilled facilitator and the information does not need to be transcribed.

While focus groups will continue to be useful for collecting certain kinds of information, resourceful leaders increasingly will discover that technology has provided a cost effective way of assessing the perspectives of those they are serving that will help them make better decisions, in less time, with more confidence.