

Good practice guide 16: Setting up a volunteer focus group

This document is an example of how you might develop a volunteer focus group within your own organisation or group.

Key Points

Most people enjoy being asked their opinion and generally have information that they want to share. Volunteers are no different. A volunteer focus group is an effective way to connect with your volunteers for feedback and comment. Organisations often use focus groups in planning, marketing, or evaluation, either to improve the current volunteering service or to help develop new volunteering projects, services or strategic plans.

What might be discussed at a volunteer focus group?

Specifically, a volunteering focus group concentrates on:

- gathering opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about volunteers experiences;
- listening to ideas about ways to improve volunteering;
- developing new volunteer practice including policies and procedures;
- testing out assumptions;
- encouraging discussion about a particular topic relating to volunteering;
- providing an opportunity to learn more about a topic or issue.

Suggestions to consider when setting up your own volunteer focus group:

You do not have to include everything, but it is a good idea to consider some of the following points.

Preparation

1. Define the purpose of the volunteer focus group

This has to be clear and specific. The more defined the objective, the easier the rest of the process.

2. Establish a timeline

A volunteer focus group cannot be developed overnight. The planning has to start several weeks ahead of the actual session. Make sure you have enough time to identify the volunteers who you wish to participate, develop and test the questions or topics, locate a site, invite and follow up with volunteers, and gather the materials for the sessions.

3. Identify the participants

Determine how many volunteers you need and how many to invite. Make sure that you have their contact details and send invitations. Volunteer focus groups should ideally consist of six to twelve participants. Fewer than six participants tends to limit the conversation, because there is not enough diversity to spark discussion. A group larger than twelve makes

it challenging to manage and voices get lost. However, you may wish to invite more, in the expectation that not all will be able to attend.

4. Generate the questions

A volunteer focus group will last for little more than one or two hours, you will only have time for four to seven questions or topics.

To be effective, focus group questions should be open-ended and move from the general to the specific. For example, after asking the question, “What did you like about your volunteering induction?”, you might ask, “If you could build a new volunteering induction from the beginning, what would you put in to make a better one?” or “What would make the volunteer induction more appealing to attract more potential volunteers?” or even more specific, “What do you think we need to change about the current volunteer induction”.

5. Develop a script

Generating questions is a starting point to developing a more detailed script for your volunteer focus group.

There are three parts to a volunteer focus group script:

- The opening is the time for the facilitator to welcome the group, introduce the purpose of the focus group, explain what a focus group is and allow for introductions.
- The question section is where you ask and discuss the key questions that you generated in step 4.
- The closing section draws together the focus group. This includes thanking the participants, giving them an opportunity for further input, telling them how the data will be used, and explaining when the larger process will be completed.

6. Select a facilitator

A volunteer focus group facilitator should be able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on track, and make sure that every participant is heard.

The facilitator should be knowledgeable about the volunteering project. He or she can be a staff member, volunteer, or member of a committee.

Be wary of anything about the facilitator (or facilitators) that might make participants uncomfortable. For example, you may not want the Volunteer Manager to facilitate a focus group about improving the way volunteers are supported.

7. Choose the location

You need a setting which can accommodate the participants and where they would feel comfortable expressing their opinions.

When choosing a location, ask these questions:



- What message does the setting send? (Is it corporate, comfortable, informal, sterile, or inviting?)
- Does the setting encourage conversation?
- How will the setting affect the information gathered? Will the setting bias the information offered?
- Can it comfortably accommodate nine to fifteen people (six to twelve participants plus facilitators), where all can view each other?
- Is it easily accessible? (Consider access for people with disabilities, safety, transportation, parking, etc.)

8. Conduct the focus group:

The materials you might need for the session are: notepads and pencils, computer with presentation facilities, flip chart paper, list of expected participants, markers, bluetac, post it notes, name tags, refreshments and a watch or clock.

- The facilitator should arrive before the volunteers, set out the refreshments, and arrange the room so all participants can view one another. U-shaped seating or all at one table is best.
- As volunteers arrive, the facilitator should set the tone for a comfortable, enjoyable discussion by welcoming them.
- Introduce yourself, and the co-facilitator if relevant.
- Explain how the session will be recorded, for example if notes will be taken.
- Carry out the volunteer focus group.
- The facilitator should have some room for spontaneity, for example allowing for questions that arise from the discussion, probing deeper into a topic.

9. Attention to the following items will help ensure success:

- Set the tone; volunteers should have fun and feel positive about the session.
- Make sure every volunteer participant is heard; draw out quieter group members.
- Get full answers (not just "we need more money" but "we need more money to purchase an answer phones").
- Monitor time closely; don't exceed time limits.
- Keep the discussion on track; try to answer all or most of the questions.
- Try to avoid exchanges of opinion about individual items, or about issues that are outwith the scope of the group.

10. After the focus group:

This will depend on the purpose of the focus group but you should at least write up a summary of the focus group. You may also need to write a more detailed report, for example if the focus group is to help evidence the need for a funding application.

There are three steps to creating a report on your volunteer focus group:

1. Summarise each meeting

- Write up notes that were taken soon after the session is over and write a summary of the focus group. A quick turnaround time to do this helps to remember what was said. It is easiest for the facilitator or recorder to remember what was meant by a particular acronym or abbreviation immediately following the session than it is a month later.

2. Analyse the summaries

- If you have a series of focus group you should read all of the summaries in one sitting.
- Look for trends (comments that seem to appear repeatedly in the data) and surprises (unexpected comments that are worth noting).
- Keep in mind that context and tone are just as important as the reiteration of particular words.
- If a comment (or a number of comments) seemed to be phrased negatively, led emotional responses, or triggered many other comments, this should be included in the analysis.

3. Write the report

- The final report can take many different shapes, but it should include all information about the background and purpose of the focus group, details of the sessions, results, and conclusions. You can also include relevant quotes from those attending if you have permission to do so.

You may also want to use web-based surveys as a way to gather information from volunteers; this may provide more information about opinions, but has the disadvantage of not generating discussion. The results of web-based surveys can be combined with a focus group report, or described separately.

Next step

Remember you will need to set aside time regularly to review how you run focus groups. It is worthwhile involving volunteers in the review process. Even if you don't make big changes, a regular review will allow for updates and emphasise its importance to the organisation or group.

Need extra help?

If you would like more help or advice in relation to this good practice guide please contact

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