



Focus Groups, Brainstorming Sessions, and Large Group Planning Workshops

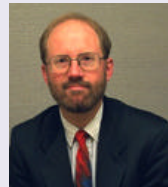
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At TCI Management Consultants, we undertake numerous focus groups and group workshop sessions in the course of projects for clients. These typically are of three generic types:

1. **Focus groups**, where the purpose is to explore the advantages and disadvantages of a number of pre-identified options which are presented to the group, in a highly structured way;
2. **Brainstorming sessions**, where the purpose is to explore as many solutions or ideas to a given problem or question as possible, without judging merit within the session itself, in a more unstructured way than in a focus group; and
3. **Large group planning workshops**, where the group itself determines the issues and the agenda to be followed, and in that sense does not have a preestablished or structured agenda.

Focus groups and brainstorming sessions typically involve on the order of eight to twelve participants (more than that can be problem-

atic as it may be difficult to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate). Large group planning workshops can involve many more than that (because a feature of a large group workshop is that the group itself breaks off into smaller sub-groups, who then discuss certain themes or topics of interest). While we



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TCI Management Consultants was founded in 1991 and consists of senior level management consultants who espouse a philosophy of providing personalized and direct service to clients. Our core focus is on strategic marketing issues in business-to-business situations working with organizations in tourism, entertainment, culture, publishing, IT, telecommunications, utilities, and energy service as well as government and the not-for-profit sector.

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have identified here these three generic types of group, it should be realized that there can be a great deal of overlap between them; for example, a large group planning workshop could then break off into two discussion groups, one of which runs itself like a focus group, the other like a brainstorming session.

Alternatively, a workshop for ten could be run for the first hour as a brainstorming session to generate ideas and for the second hour as a focus group to test those ideas.

The accompanying chart outlines the underlying philosophy and situations in which each type of format is appropriate. First we discuss certain logistical matters that pertain particularly to focus group and brainstorming sessions, then deal with large group planning workshops.

Focus Groups and Brainstorming Sessions

Recruiting Participants

As stated above, typically a focus group or brainstorming workshop involves eight to ten participants. The characteristics of individuals invited to the group will clearly depend upon the nature of the issues to be discussed, but typically they will have certain features in common. These may be demographic factors such as age, sex or cultural background; they may be geographic, such as individuals living within a certain city or region; or they may be situational, such as employees of a particular company, or members of a certain association. Typically participants will not know one another prior to the session.

Individuals invited to a focus group or brainstorming workshop are recruited either

from the general public by means of a screening questionnaire, or from lists of preidentified individuals who have agreed to participate.

In the latter case, individuals are typically used for no more than three focus groups, on entirely different topics, then dropped from the list. This avoids individuals becoming 'professional' focus group participants, which could lead to distortions in their responses and thus in the professional decisions based upon the focus group results.) Recruiting from a survey and screen of the general population is clearly the best approach to use when time and budget permit; however the costs of recruiting can be up to three times that of recruiting from a pre-identified list.

When recruiting, we have found that the following principles apply:

- Participants need to be given at least two weeks' prior notice of the session
- Clear instructions regarding the time and location obviously must be given, along with instructions relating to transit access, parking, etc.
- In most cases, an incentive for participation (usually between \$30 and \$50) is promised
- A reminder call to the participant should be made one or two days prior to the workshop
- Clear instructions about who to contact should be given to the participant in the event they are unable to make the event.

Room Preparation

Often a focus group brainstorming workshop is held in a specially-designed facility, which is set up specifically for sessions of that type. These facilities typically feature:



- A viewing room, behind one way glass, where a second group (often the client) can view and hear the proceedings
- Audio and video-taping facilities, to record the focus group or brainstorming workshop
- Audio and video presentation facilities, to present to participants details for subsequent discussion in the meeting
- Whiteboard, flip charts, or other means of recording ideas
- Temperature and climate controls
- The session should not run for more than two hours
- Participants should be given an agenda at the outset
- The moderator or facilitator must ensure that everyone has a chance to speak, or is drawn out to speak, and that no one individual dominates the discussion
- The moderator must also ensure that the agenda is covered within the time available

A typical agenda for a focus group of brainstorming session would be the following:

However, a successful focus group need not be held in a special purpose-built facility; we have run many successful groups in church basements, company boardrooms, or even individuals' homes. Whatever the venue though, it needs to be set up prior to the session with some basics:

- Paper and pencil should be provided to each participant
- All participants should be seated 'equally' around the table, with the leader or facilitator clearly at the head
- Tea, coffee, juice, etc. should be available, preferably not on the table, but rather off to one side
- Any presentation materials
- Videotape, 35 mm slides, transparencies, etc.) should be set up and tested prior to the meeting
- Distractions, and potential distractions, should be removed or minimized

Running the Session

We have found that the following principles apply to the operation of a successful focus group or brainstorming meeting:

- Brief introductions are made around the table, with everybody stating their name and (usually) occupation - this should take no more than 5 minutes
- Next, the facilitator or moderator outlines the purpose of the focus group or brainstorming workshop reviews the agenda, and lays out the 'ground rules' for the session - again this should take no more than 5 minutes
- Often the next item is an introduction of the problem or issue at hand: the situation that you want to brainstorm about, or the issues that have led up to the focus group - clearly, the time taken for this may vary, but it usually takes anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes
- This is followed by the discussion on the issue, and occupies the bulk of the time, anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half
- The moderator then concludes the session after the agenda is covered, about 5 minutes before the time is up - he or she summarizes the main points that came out of the discussion (if that is appropriate), thanks



participants, and provides them with their remuneration.

It is useful to remember that each minute of focus group time costs about \$5 (equivalent to \$300 per hour), assuming twelve participants at \$50 each for a two-hour session. Accordingly, valuable time must not be wasted on discussion of side issues or trivialities. It is the job of the moderator to ensure maximum effectiveness of the workshop.

If the session is being recorded (which it probably should be), the moderator must inform participants that this is being done. As well, if there are observers behind a one-way mirror (so that they can see the dynamics of the group, but cannot themselves be seen), the facilitator has a moral obligation to inform the group that this is the case. In our experience, participants do not object to either being recorded or observed; while there may be some initial awkwardness on the part of participants in the discussion, this soon disappears as they focus on the issues or the problem at hand.

Follow Up

A successful focus group or brainstorming session will generate many good ideas and suggestions, and will provide some direction relating to the issue that was discussed.

The key findings or highlights from the discussion need to be documented in the form of a short report (usually 3 to 5 pages in length), that typically follows the original structure of the agenda set for the meeting. After a brief introduction to the issue(s) being discussed and the common characteristics of the group that was assembled, key areas for discussion in such a Report would be:

- Any consensus or unanimous opinions emerging from the discussion
- Any areas of major disagreement encountered
- Lists of ideas or suggestions relating to the topic under discussion
- Different or unusual perspectives raised during the session
- Any other issues or ideas discussed

Sometimes, albeit rarely, it is useful to prepare a transcription of the detailed discussion. This is expensive and time-consuming, but sometimes is required in order to undertake a more detailed analysis of the group dynamics and the issues discussed. Of course, the audio or video recording of the session is also available, for those interested in specific comments made, or nuances that emerged.

This focus group Report should be made soon after the session by the moderator, while the session is still fresh in memory.

Large Group Planning Workshops

When there are more than ten to twelve participants in a session, but fewer than 50, a large group workshop is likely more appropriate than either a focus group or a brainstorming session. A feature of a large group workshop is that the facilitator will break the group into smaller discussion units, provide each with a topic upon which to brainstorm or develop solutions for, then have them 'break out' into separate areas to discuss the issues. After a specified period of time, the sub-groups report back, and (usually) present their findings and conclusions to the larger assembled group.



Advantages of a large group planning session such as this are:

- They are a very efficient and focused way of obtaining ideas and input from a large group;
- They ensure that everyone attending the session is encouraged to share their questions and ideas, which maximizes interest in the event and contributes to a feeling of ownership on the part of the group; and
- They are very useful in not only generating long lists of ideas and suggestions, but also getting a sense as to what the group feels are the highest priority items
- Those suggestions that are made over and over clearly reflect the priorities of the group).

The sorts of venues in which a large group workshop is appropriate include:

- Community meetings and/or public input sessions
- Industry associations or business group meetings
- Boards of Directors planning sessions
- Staff sessions in private companies or not-for-profit groups
- Interest groups, special purpose organizations, issue-oriented groups

The distinctive characteristic of a large group planning workshop is that its purpose is to gather input from a large group of people, on a particular topic or issue, as opposed to simply conveying information. A large group planning session thus differs from other large gatherings of individuals such as po-

litical rallies, shareholders meetings, public information sessions, etc. Earlier it was stated that a large group planning session of the type discussed here is appropriate for a group sized between 10 and 50 individuals; for groups larger than this, some sort of questionnaire or survey is the only feasible means of getting useful input within the usually limited time available.

In preparing for a large group planning workshop, it is imperative that the session be planned for maximum flexibility, as there is often uncertainty regarding the numbers of participants, the issues raised, and whether or not there may be 'wild card' factors at play (for example, interest groups that show up in large numbers and try to dominate the agenda). For the above reasons, public meetings tend to be most uncertain, whereas business group meetings or staff sessions often run as planned.

Key points that must be kept in mind when planning a large group session are:

- No fewer than 3, and no more than 5 individuals should be in a break out group in order to facilitate discussion and ensure that everyone has ample opportunity to contribute; the number of groups will thus be a function of the total number of participants in a large group planning session - a simple rule for accomplishing this is to divide the total number of participants in the room by five, then adjust one or two groups by adding or subtracting an individual as need be
- Individuals for each break out group can be either randomly chosen •by the simple expedient of assigning people in the room a number in sequence, where the number of the sequence corresponds to the number



of groups desired), or by inviting people to join the group of their choice - this latter approach works best when different groups are given different agendas

- When planning break out groups, it is important that each group has a separate space to go to, where they can discuss issues without interruptions or distractions, yet are not too far away that significant and valuable time is lost in travel to and from the main meeting area - the number of break out spaces available may influence the number and size of the break out groups, as discussed above
- Each group has to be given a clear agenda, that it is reasonable to accomplish within their time allotment - these agendas may be identical for each break out group, or they may differ, if many issues are to be addressed
- A 'reporter' needs to be designated from each group, who is made to understand that his or her job is to report back to the main group or plenary session the highlights i.e. ideas, conclusions, recommendations, further questions to be probed, etc.) of the dis-

cussion within their group - when reporting back, each group should be given no more than 5 minutes

- It may be appropriate to provide to each break out group an overhead transparency or flip chart sheet to prepare in the break out time in order to facilitate their reporting back to the main group - this often forces the group to summarize and clarify their main points, and can save time in the 'reporting back' phase

During the break out time, it is the job of the facilitator or team of facilitators if there are more than four break out groups envisaged) to rove from group to group, to ensure that they understand the task and the questions being asked of them, to see that they have designated a group spokesperson, and that their presentation is focused and to the point.

In summary, large group planning sessions can be a very effective means of generating qualitative input from larger groups of individuals, providing they are well-planned and executed.

