

Ten Tips for Troubleshooting Focus Group Pitfalls

Note on use: Soliciting physician input early and often—whether through an informal discussion or formal focus group—is mission-critical when it comes to building physician awareness and support for an initiative. Review the scripting and facilitation guidance below ahead of any input sessions to effectively navigate group dynamics and walk out of the discussion with truly actionable input.

Facilitation Challenge #1: Developing partial ideas and anecdotes. It’s very common for participants to propose an idea that is not fully developed. When this happens, take time to acknowledge the idea and ask the individual or group to say more to uncover more actionable input. Try to get the group to talk the idea out directly with one another, rather than respond only to your inquiries.

Situation	Recommended Technique and Scripting
<p>Teasing out partially formed ideas: You should clarify and get more information from the participant when you hear a partially formed idea .</p>	<p>“Tell me more about that idea.”</p> <p>“I think I hear you saying...”</p> <p>“What do you think is causing that to happen? What else?”</p> <p>“Can you expand on that? Can you tell me about a time when that happened?”</p> <p>“Do others in the room agree with that thought?”</p> <p>“Anyone disagree? Tell us why.”</p>
<p>Determining if a new idea has merit: Engage the group to evaluate the idea and determine its relative importance.</p>	<p>“How many of you feel that this is one of the two or three most important causes of our problem?”</p> <p>“Interesting. That is something that I thought about and put aside because I didn’t think it was as important as some of the other points we’ve discussed today. But I’d like to ask the group. Is this more important than something else we have listed on here?”</p> <p><i>If the comment ties in to a previous suggestion:</i> “So, this is another excellent idea, and it also makes [the other idea] feel that much more important since the two feel related.”</p> <p><i>If the comment is out of scope for the conversation:</i> “That’s an important point, let’s put that in the parking lot to discuss later.”</p>

Facilitation Challenge #2: Engaging all participants. Inevitably, you will have very vocal participants and others who are less willing to talk or compete for air-time. Use these tactics to engage the group early and to draw in more reserved participants.

Situation	Recommended Technique and Scripting
<p>Preventing a quiet group: You want to warm up a quiet group by getting them talking immediately. Use a non-threatening, yes or no question to break the ice.</p>	<p>You can usually prevent this from happening by getting the group talking within the first few minutes of the meeting. One strategy is to ask the group a non-threatening question that requires little initiative to respond—e.g., raising a hand.</p> <p>“Before we get started, I’d love to get a quick show of hands. How many of you have had a hard time getting physicians to implement care standards?”</p> <p>“Quick show of hands from the group: How many of you feel that the physician burnout rate at our hospital is too high?” Call on a couple of people to elaborate.</p>
<p>Engaging quiet participants: Read the body language of quiet participants to determine whether they have something to say, and call on them to share.</p>	<p>Participants who volunteer to participate in a focus group or input session know that they are expected to share their ideas and opinions. When you see a participant making a facial expression or responding with their body language, it’s ok to call on them by name since they expect to participate.</p> <p>For example: “Carolyn, it seems that you may have some thoughts. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with this problem. How does this impact your work?”</p>
<p>Managing a chatty group/person: Practice playing “time cop” to appropriately pace the discussion and keep moving forward.</p>	<p>Set expectations from the outset that you will be playing “time cop” and you have a set time for each section.</p> <p>“We have time for one more thought here, and then need to move on for sake of time.”</p> <p>“I’m so sorry to cut this discussion short, but let’s move that to the parking lot and discuss it after today’s session. I want to address it, but we need to move on to the next section to get through our agenda.”</p>

Facilitation challenge #3: Managing challenges and confrontations. Given the sensitivity of some focus group topics, hitting landmines is unavoidable. Participants take the issue personally and some have passionate opinions to share about this topic, or possibly another topic. Use these tactics to gracefully defuse potential conflicts, move those heated discussions to another setting, and ensure your focus group meets its objectives.

Situation	Recommended Technique and Scripting
<p>Bringing up past failures: Acknowledge past failures and move the conversation forward.</p>	<p>“We know that this issue was handled poorly in the past which is exactly why we want to reevaluate it. I’d love to get your ideas on what can be improved now.”</p>
<p>Airing out-of-scope concerns: Acknowledge the issue and offer to discuss in a different setting, and then refocus on the issue at hand.</p>	<p>“I understand this is also a frustration for many of you and it’s very important to me that we address your concern. That said, today’s conversation is on a very tight schedule <reference the ground rules>, so I invite you and anyone in the room who’d like to speak more about <that concern> to schedule some additional time with me or one of my colleagues.”</p> <p>“Setting that aside for the moment, there is still a lot we can do together today to make this a better place to work by addressing <the primary problem.> And I want to make sure we can make inroads there.”</p>
<p>Fielding confusing or difficult questions: When you don’t understand a question or you don’t know the answer, avoid stalling the conversation by offering to discuss in another setting.</p>	<p>Listen to the entire question and ask for clarification. If you still don’t understand:</p> <p>“That is an interesting question. But if it’s alright with you, I want to move that to the parking lot, and we can discuss more after the session. I definitely want to address your concerns but we need to get through our agenda and I want to be respectful of everyone’s time.”</p> <p>If applicable, redirect the question back to the group:</p> <p>“That is an interesting question. Any thoughts from the group on that question/comment? What do you all think?”</p>
<p>Managing a hostile comment: Affirm and welcome the comment, but quickly save it for another setting and move the intended conversation forward. Maintain a positive tone.</p>	<p>“You are absolutely right that [insert concern] is a concern. Why don’t you and I schedule a separate meeting to talk through that. Today, we have a really tight agenda, and I really need your help vetting these ideas. The purpose of our time today is to make sure that we are not overlooking any particular root cause or solution. So if you have a suggestion along those lines, I am happy to add that to our list for consideration.”</p> <p>OR</p> <p>“I’m so glad you mentioned that—it comes up a lot in these conversations. Let’s set up a meeting and I will share our current thinking on that issue...”</p>