Tips and Best Practices for Community Focus Groups

The Challenge

Local governments and community-based organizations (CBO) often engage with the community when deciding an impending action or at the next stage of a project. Many institutions report that meaningful public engagement improves outcomes for the community. However, policymakers and practitioners have struggled with the challenges of designing a successful engagement campaign. In practice, many find it difficult to reach all community members, especially historically underrepresented citizens such as low-income families, the disabled, the unhoused, formerly incarcerated people, people working nontraditional work hours, people who speak English as their second language, Black, Indigenous, Persons of Color (BIPOC) communities, among others. This challenge represents a missed opportunity to develop a project that is inclusive and equitable which in turn limits long term success. Understanding how to engage respectfully and equitably with the local community is key to implementing successful programs that benefit the community.

How Community Focus Groups Can Help Engage with Local Residents

Community engagement can take many forms, ranging from town halls to participatory budgeting, community mapping, community action planning, charrettes, crowdsourcing, surveys, community-based participatory research, and focus groups. A focus group is a forum to hear direct feedback and begin to understand community priorities. This collaborative participation builds a stronger and more diverse coalition and creates a shared vision of environmental sustainability and resilience. Community focus groups aim to be mutually beneficial for the organization, the organization's partners, and the local community, uncovering information and creating dialogues that guide project planning.

Types of Community Engagement

There are five levels of community engagement: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower, with the degree of public involvement increasing at each level. A focus group is a collaborative form of engagement where facilitators work with participants to formulate solutions and incorporate advice into their decisions to the maximum extent possible. It is important to consider if a focus group is the best fit considering the project and timeline. Additionally, it's important for local governments and CBOs to consider their feedback goals, timing/urgency, ability to respond to potential feedback, level of community engagement capacity, and alternative options for engagement that might be easier, more efficient, and less bothersome to community members, before pursuing this option.

The checklists below serve as a starting point for key elements that organizations should consider if they decide to move forward with a focus group.

Conducting Focus Groups: Key Steps

Identify the Host and Facilitator
A key first step to a focus group is identifying the meeting's host(s) and facilitor(s). A few key considerations to inform this process are summarized below.

- What are the responsibilities of the host?
    - The host provides a space to hold an in-person focus group, ideally a comfortable setting that's familiar and accessible to participants.
    - Possible hosts: a local business, place of worship, community center or other similar venue.
    - The host should be an affiliate or supporter of the community partners to help lend credibility.
    - The host does not have to be the facilitator, though they can also play that role as well.
    - The host often serves an important role in promoting the event, by posting flyers, spreading the word with customers or potential attendees, etc.

- Who is the facilitator?
    - The facilitator (or facilitators) guides the conversation with community members and should be comfortable facilitating group discussions
    - They utilize pre-determined discussion questions, created by the focus group organizers, and ideally are familiar with the topic of focus group feedback.
    - A neutral party (someone outside of the local government/CBO) is someone with meaningful community connects can lend local credibility and build trust.
    - Responsibilities include outreach and recruitment, securing the meeting location, guiding the conversation for meaningful responses
    - Consider assistant moderator to record (with consent) or take notes
    - Not required to be associated with the host

- Will the community help to select the facilitator?
    - The facilitator should reflect the demographics of the focus group participants.

Invite Participants

The host and facilitators (and other supporting partners) typically collaborate to develop an approach to inviting participants to join the focus group. Some key elements to consider during this process are described below.

- Do the attendees reflect the larger community?
  - Attendants should be residents or business owners who reflect the demographic (e.g., race, religion, age, and socio-economic) characteristics of the community at large.
  - Focus group organizers can reference the demographics of the participating community to ensure inclusivity
  - It's important to recruit participants carefully and inclusively; the focus group host and other local community groups and leaders are important partners in designing the outreach and recruitment process.

- What size will the focus groups be?
  - Small groups of approximately 5-10 people can encourage more dialogue and ensure everyone has a chance to participate/speak. For groups with more participants, it can be helpful to plan how many facilitators will be present to support smaller group discussions.

- What are participants' preferences around the meeting time and location?
  - Is the location familiar to attendees? Is it located close to or convenient to their homes and/or places of work?
  - Is the location accessible by public transit? Will public transit be operating during the time of the meeting?
  - For participants who may be driving, is parking available nearby?
  - Is the meeting held at a time that enables participants to attend (e.g., outside of work and school hours)?
  - Are participants likely to feel safe in this location (for instance, if the meeting takes place in the evening, is the street of the location well-lit)?

- Is the location accessible?
  - Parking should be available and free
  - Meeting locations should be accessible and in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act
  - Consider providing a translator or interpreter for those that speak different languages and/or hard of hearing
  - Consider providing childcare
  - Choosing a location - is public transit available? Are people familiar with it? Do they feel comfortable there?
- Time of day - it is easy for people to participate (e.g., accounting for work schedules, weekend activities, etc.)

Create Content

It is important to create content that aligns with the feedback goals and participant capacity. Below is a list of considerations for content creation.

- Create and share an agenda (include this in the invite, and provide hard copies or post this at the meeting)

- Prior to the introduction, the facilitator and any other supporting organizers should engage in small talk to create a warm and friendly environment

- A draft or template agenda follows below. It's often helpful to include these core elements:
  - Welcome: Introduce facilitator and assistants, and any other supporting team members (if applicable)
  - Overview of topic:
    - Introduce topic
    - How the feedback will be used
    - Explain why they were selected
  - Ground rules
    - No right or wrong answers
    - We're tape recording, limit speaking over others
    - Listen respectfully, even if you do not agree
    - Limit outside communication (cell phones, tablets etc.)
    - Facilitator is a guide, talk to each other
  - Icebreakers
  - Facilitated discussion, guided by group discussion topics or questions
    - Start with broad questions and progress to the specific topic
  - Final thoughts and next steps
    - Summarize with a confirmation from the participants
      - "Is this an adequate summary?"
    - Review purpose and make sure nothing was missed
      - "Have we missed anything?"
    - Share thanks and any upcoming next steps
  - See the additional resources section below for more information about and examples of agendas.

- Discussion Questions
  - Complete questions prior to meeting
  - Structure questions to encourage thoughtful and personal responses
    - "What do you think about...?"
    - "What would you change about...?"
    - "What do you like best about...?"

- See the additional resources section below for more information on question formatting

- Facilitation best practices
  - Ask questions about how they feel and listen to what the community needs and desires; do not assume you know everything about their experience
  - Following up on participants' responses:
    - Allow room for a response, 5 seconds
    - Types of follow up questions:
      - "Would you explain further?"
      - "Would you give me an example?"
      - "I don't understand, please clarify?"
  - Reacting to the discussion
    - Non-verbal: head nodding, open posture, eye contact
    - Verbal short responses: avoid "that's good" or "excellent" as it does not encourage further dialogue
  - Manage experts, dominant talkers, and ramblers and encourage quiet participants
  - Be honest - don't over promise or under deliver
  - Make sure you are respectful of people's time
    - Stick to the schedule and guide feedback if going over on time

Getting the word out
A few best practices for getting the word out and encouraging participation in focus groups are listed below.

- Engage community groups early, to explore their interest in partnering on outreach and engagement, session design, recruitment strategies, etc.

- Meet people where they are (advertise in libraries, local grocery stores, parks, community centers, etc.)

- Send information through multiple channels such as email, social media, postcard invitations, mail, etc. to make sure it reaches everyone

- Ensure digital content is viewable on all devices

- Consider any translation needs (e.g., ensure information is available in the languages spoken by community participants)

Additional Resources

Community Engagement Guide, King County, GA, May 2011
Community Engagement During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond, A Guide for Community-Based Organizations, Urban Institute, Martha Fedorowicz with Olivia Arena and Kimberly Burrowes, September 2020
Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews, Richard A. Krueger, University of Minnesota, October 2002
Facilitation 101: Roles of Effective Facilitators, Bonner Program
IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
Index of Community Engagement Techniques, Tamarack Institute
King County Plain-Language Writing Guide, King County, GA, December 2016
ProPEL: Protype Project on Early Literacy, Focus Group Invitation, Upper Hudson Library System
Shut up and Listen: What We Learned from Community Conversations in the Cleveland Area, Alliance for the Great Lakes, February 2018
The Principals for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement, Kip Holley, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, May 2016