

HOW TO ORGANISE AND RUN FOCUS GROUPS

BACKGROUND

Focus groups can form an important part of the process of using the Management Standards to assess and control risks related to work-related stress. Focus groups are basically:

- Ways of listening to employees and learning from them;
- One way of facilitating active participation of employees in the risk assessment process for work-related stress; and
- One way for management to demonstrate commitment to a participative process of managing the risks from work-related stress.

PURPOSE

The purpose of using focus groups as part of the risk assessment process for work-related stress is to allow employees to draw on their own detailed knowledge of local and contextual factors to:

- Explore the sources of undue pressure in their work and to enable them to share perceptions and perspectives on underlying causes etc;
- Confirm or challenge the indications from the HSE Indicator Tool, other surveys and other management information;
- Prioritise the specific areas in which there is a need for action;
- Explore potential solutions; and
- Develop a set of action plans that help address the main causes of work-related stress.

HOW TO ORGANISE AND PLAN FOCUS GROUPS

Planning and timetable

The focus group is one of a number of ways in which you can consult with employees and, as such, can form an integral part of the risk management process for work-related stress. Experience has shown that, if you want to use focus groups to confirm or challenge the results from the HSE Indicator Tool or other surveys, it is advisable to start planning your focus group sessions as soon as you issue the Indicator Tool or survey questionnaire. Where possible, involve members of any stakeholder or working groups in planning and running the focus groups.

Selecting the group

In some cases it may be possible or desirable for you to involve all staff in your organisation, or part of your organisation, in focus groups. The number and make up of focus groups you select will be determined by such things as:

- The issues that need to be addressed as identified from the results of the Indicator Tool, your own survey or other relevant management information;
- Groups of employees who are likely to have to deal with similar types of work issues;
- Groups of employees who are likely to share a common or compatible perspective on such issues; and
- Considerations of practicability and feasibility.

Give priority in choosing focus groups to groups of staff who are best placed to address the issues flagged up by the Indicator Tool, survey or other relevant management information.

Choosing participants

Are participants likely to be comfortable with each other?

If the answer to this question is 'no', then you should reconsider running a focus group or reconsider the make-up of the group. The basic purpose in using focus groups is to hear employees' discussions of issues of relevance to them. Thus, it is important to set up groups where participants are likely to share common interests, encounter similar kinds of sources of work-related pressure and feel comfortable in expressing their views in front of the other group members.

When groups are made up of employees of very different grade or authority levels, lower-ranking employees may feel inhibited. This can be particularly acute when supervisors and subordinates are brought together in the same group. Similarly, if groups are composed of employees who are incompatible with one another in other ways which are important to the issues being discussed (for example, administrative and technical staff, staff from different sites or sections of the organisation) this can inhibit discussion.

Choose groups where participants are likely to be comfortable with one another. Avoid bringing together supervisors and subordinates in the same group.

Number of participants

The typical size of a focus group is six to ten participants. This range gives scope for a large enough range of different viewpoints and opinions, while enabling all participants to make contributions without having to compete for 'air time'.

Rules of thumb are that it is better to use smaller groups, typically six to ten participants when:

- Topics are sensitive, complex or emotionally charged;
- Groups or individuals are keenly involved in the issues;
- It is important to give all individual participants an opportunity to express their views in some detail; and
- You want the participants to develop and work through ideas for solutions.

Where a survey has highlighted areas of concern it will be advisable to employ smaller groups.

Focus groups can be run with larger numbers of participants. Such larger groups may be suitable when the above conditions do not apply or when the object of the exercise is to obtain a large number of brief views, suggestions or ideas. In general, it will be advisable to consider running a larger number of focus group sessions than to attempt to include too many participants. Once again, issues of practicality, feasibility and local circumstances will come into play.

The facilitator

The facilitator (there may be more than one) has the task of leading the focus group. This involves:

- Setting the scene, explaining the purpose of the focus group;
- Introducing participants to the topics for discussion;
- Managing the process (timing etc);
- Encouraging participation from all the group members;
- Controlling the flow of the discussion;
- Ensuring that all the key issues are addressed; and
- Agreeing and recording outcomes.

The role of the facilitator will vary according to circumstances such as the type of group, the nature of the organisation etc.

It is often useful to employ a facilitator and an assistant. The assistant can concentrate on note taking and recording information while the facilitator is freed up to give all their attention to the group.

Selecting a facilitator

You do not need to employ specialist facilitators to run focus groups, though you may choose to do so. It is very important that the facilitator is seen as independent. This means that it may be very difficult for managers to fulfil this

role within their section of the organisation. Participants may feel uncomfortable expressing themselves freely:

- In the presence of their superiors;
- If they feel there may be a conflict of interest; or
- When they see management or particular managers as contributing to or the source of some of the problems they wish to discuss.

You may choose as facilitators members of your organisation's occupational health team, human resource or other specialists or people from different parts of the organisation who are perceived as having 'no axe to grind' and being good listeners.

Though they do not need to be specialist facilitators, facilitators do need to have certain skills or to receive some training. The most critical skills of the facilitator are those described as 'active listening skills'. Many large organisations may be able to provide in-house training in such skills; a wide range of organisations offer suitable courses.

How long should the focus group last?

The focus group is likely to take between 1.5 to 2 hours.

Planning the question schedule: What questions should I ask?

Questions or topic areas?

Because of the nature of focus groups, it is not necessary to ask the same questions in the same way in different groups (this can inhibit open discussion). Experienced facilitators may choose to work with a list of topic areas rather than a schedule of specific questions.

Prepare a question schedule in advance

A pre-prepared schedule of questions can:

- Help ensure each group is given adequate opportunity to discuss all the key issues in a similar fashion;
- Be helpful if the facilitator has been drafted in from outside and is unfamiliar with your unit or section of the organisation;
- Give a less experienced facilitator or someone drafted in from outside your organisation or unit the reassurance of 'something to fall back on'; and
- Help the facilitator to stay on track and on time.

Remember that you are not merely seeking oral responses to a questionnaire, it is important to encourage open exchanges and discussion. As part of your preparation you should focus on how to introduce questions and topics in a conversational manner. The set of questions should include:

- **Introductory questions:** questions designed to get participants discussing the issue of work-related stress in general before homing in on particular issues (for example, issues arising from the results of the Indicator Tool or a survey);
- **Linking questions:** questions which enable the facilitator to move from the broad general discussion, following the introductory question, to the more specific areas of interest;
- **Key questions:** questions which address the key issues which the facilitator wants to cover in the focus group session.

See **Appendix 1 Using questions in focus groups** for more detailed information on the types of questions you can use.

Number of questions

A rule of thumb is that you will have time for no more than four or five key questions in a focus group lasting 1.5 to 2 hours.

Other types of questions

Information on other types of questions that can be used to control the flow of discussion in a focus group is contained in Appendix 1.

Statement on future action

It is helpful to include at the end of your question schedule a prepared statement on what will happen next, for example:

- How results will be summarised, interpreted and reported;
- What other specific actions will be taken;
- The timescales for reporting and subsequent action;
- How participants will be kept informed of progress.

Location

If possible use a location for the focus group where:

- Participants will be free from interruptions and distractions;
- Participants will be able to see each other and hear each other easily. U-shaped seating arrangements or arrangements where everyone is round one table tend to work best;
- The facilities are comfortable and make it pleasant for participants to sit and talk to each other for up to 2 hours.

Managing expectations

The expectations of participants

It is important to manage the expectations of participants to ensure that these are realistic and correspond with those of management. Key things which you can use to manage expectations include:

- The invitation to participants and accompanying briefing note;
- The focus group introduction and briefing;
- The summary and any related action plans.

It is important to note that informal communication between employees (for example, feedback from participants in previous focus group sessions) is likely to have a significant effect on expectations.

The expectations of those not involved

If the focus groups you are running involve only part of your workforce, it will also be important to take into account the views and expectations of those who are not involved. How you do this will depend on your specific circumstances.

Invitation to participants and briefing note

You should send written (or e-mail) invitations to participants well in advance of the focus groups. Such invitations should include a briefing note that:

- Explains the purpose of the focus groups;
- Describes what taking part in the focus groups will involve for the individual employee;
- Explains how issues of confidentiality will be dealt with;
- Makes clear that participation is voluntary and offers alternative options for expressing their views where appropriate;
- Describes how results will be analysed and reported;
- Emphasises that individual responses will not be attributable;
- Describes what will be done with outputs, suggestions for action etc;
- Offers a contact point for further information; and
- Is signed by an appropriate member of senior management to demonstrate organisational commitment.

RUNNING THE FOCUS GROUP

Materials you will need

The type of materials you will need to run a focus group session include:

- Notepads and pens or pencils;

- Flip chart and markers;
- Cards (or badges, stickers etc) for writing names on;
- Watch or clock;
- Results of the Indicator Tool or any surveys for the relevant group;
- Briefing note; and
- Question schedule.

Preparation / set up

The facilitator should arrive at the location before the participants and ensure that:

- Domestic arrangements and refreshments are in place;
- The room and seating arrangements enable participants to see and hear one another;
- The venue is comfortable and conducive to discussion.

Welcoming the participants and introductory briefing

After welcoming the participants to the group session, the facilitator should:

- Introduce themselves and any assistants to the group and explain their roles and such things as domestics, timescales etc;
- Ask people to introduce themselves, when not already known to one another or to the facilitator;
- Explain once more the purpose of the focus groups and re-iterate the points covered in the briefing note, particularly:
 - the fact that the main focus will be on issues that affect groups of employees and with tackling the organisational causes of work-related stress;
 - the fact that individual responses will be anonymised before being reported back (it may be helpful to say how you will ensure this);
- Explain how they will operate, that is:
 - beginning with open discussion;
 - focusing in on certain questions; and ideally
 - finishing with an action plan or suggestions for action;
- Ask for any questions or issues that need clarified.

'Ice-breaking' question

When people in the group do not know each other, it is often useful to begin with an opening or 'ice breaking' question such as "tell us your first name and some pleasant experience in the past week". This can be used to set the tone to encourage participants to relax and feel good about the session.

The focus group discussion session

Introductory questions(s)

Begin the focus group discussion session with the introductory question you have prepared in advance. Use probes and follow up questions to explore in more depth the individual responses to the introductory question and the subsequent discussions.

Linking questions

After allowing sufficient time for the exploration of introductory or general questions (this can take up to a third of the total time), you should ensure that the group moves on to discuss the key questions. It may be possible to link this in naturally to the preceding discussions. If not you may need to signal a break and a change of direction in the discussion and introduce the new topic of discussion.

Introducing the results from the Indicator Tool or a survey

One way to do this is to show the group the results from the Indicator Tool or survey and ask them a question along the lines “how does this match up with your experience of working in the organisation?” You can follow this up with more specific questions relating to areas highlighted as requiring attention. Allow sufficient time for exploration of all the facets of any problems which arise before rushing in to seek solutions.

Exploration of solutions

When you feel that issues have been discussed sufficiently and everyone has had an opportunity to have their say, begin to move the discussions towards explorations of potential solutions. Ask questions along the lines of “Can you suggest anything that we can do about that?” “Have you any ideas about how we can begin to tackle this?”.

It is worth noting that this part of the focus group can often prompt more discussion on other sources of stress as well as on potential solutions. It is, therefore, prudent to allow ample time for this.

When participants have finished suggesting and discussing their own ideas for possible solutions, you may wish to consider:

- The types of issues identified by other groups;
- The types of solutions which other groups have suggested.

If you do this, it is important to:

- Introduce ideas from other groups only after the group members have completed their own discussions of potential solutions;
- Present such ideas in a neutral way; “another group has suggested.. .what do you think?” rather than “a very good idea suggested by another group....”.

Summarising as you go along

One way to ensure that you have captured the key ideas discussed in each part of the focus group discussions is to use summary questions (see Appendix 1) to capture the key features of the discussion of each key topic area.

Finish by:

- Summarising the results of the focus group discussions in broad terms, highlighting the most significant issues raised;
- Using your prepared statement on future action or reiterating some of the points from the introductory briefing about what will be done next, how results will be reported, any other actions agreed, relevant timescales etc.
- Thanking participants and asking if there are any final questions.

Remember to:

- Explore the positive not just the negative by asking questions along the lines: “what’s good about working here?...what can we build on?;
- Make sure every participant is heard;
- Look for full answers (not just “we need more support” but “we need more support when people go on holiday and we could do this by...);
- Monitor time closely;
- Keep the discussion on track;
- Head off exchanges of opinion which go on for too long or into too much detail about individual items (there is a fine line to be drawn here as such debate can be a symptom of important underlying issues or organisational problems);
- Ensure that if the focus group gives rise to action plans, actions are prioritised, practicable and within the power of those agreeing to them to deliver within the timescales.

TAKING ACTION AFTER THE FOCUS GROUP

Interpret and report results

Summaries

Write up a summary of your notes and / or the notes of your assistant as soon as possible after each meeting - a quick turnaround time on the transcription helps avoid memory lapses. It's easiest for the facilitator or recorder to remember what was meant by a particular acronym or shorthand immediately following the session.

Analyse the summaries

It is useful to start by reading all the focus group 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, elicited emotional responses, or triggered many other comments, that would be worth noting in the analysis.

Write the report

The final report can take many different shapes, but it may include information about the background and purpose of the focus group, details of the sessions, results, and conclusions.

Translate results into action

The greatest failures in the use of focus groups occur in two areas: failure to report to the focus group participants and failure to apply the results to the purpose for which they were originally commissioned.

One major benefit of running focus groups to explore the causes of work-related stress is that the process ensures the active participation of your employees. Once they have invested their time and effort in attempts to prevent work-related stress at source, it is important to not let them down.

Send participants a summary from their session and include them in correspondence about how the information was used.

The following provides some suggestions for translating the results into action:

- Schedule a meeting to review the summaries and discuss their implications;
- Put the focus group information in context. Compare, contrast, and combine the focus group information with information gathered from other sources such as surveys, interviews, or secondary research sources;
- Highlight the main themes, issues, problems, or questions that arose in the focus groups. Discuss and record how you will address these;
- If there is a lot of information, prioritise it. Then decide what actions need to be taken with regard to the priority items and by when;
- Decide what issues can be tackled locally and which issues require to be tackled within a wider context (area, regional, national etc.).

Further information

For further information on the use of focus groups see Appendix 2.

APPENDIX 1: USING QUESTIONS IN FOCUS GROUPS

USING QUESTIONS TO CONTROL THE FLOW OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Sequencing and balance of questions

Rules of thumb for focus groups are as follows:

- Use general questions early in the focus group session;
- Use more specific and more focused questions later in the session, after the general questions;
- Use positive questions before negative questions; ask “what’s good about working here” before asking about the downside;
- Use un-cued questions before cued questions (cued questions are questions where you present the group with a range of choices or ask them for their reactions to a number of options).

The following questions are used at different stages in focus groups.

Introductory questions

Introductory questions should be open-ended (see below). Often all participants are asked the same introductory question to encourage everyone to get an opportunity to talk at an early stage. Where possible, the introductory question should be phrased in a neutral or positive manner. For example, you might begin by asking participants something along the lines of “*what’s it like to work here?*”.

Linking questions

The facilitator can make use of a wide range of types of questions and techniques to move the discussion on. One of the most common approaches is to make use of probes or follow-up questions to explore in more depth the individual responses to the introductory questions and the subsequent discussions. Though facilitators do not need to prepare these in advance, you might find it is useful to look at examples of the types of questions you can use and how you might use them (see below).

Key questions

Key questions address the topics which the focus group is set up to address. These may include questions based on the results of the Indicator Tool or a survey.

If you have used the Indicator Tool or your own survey, you could show the group the results and ask them a question along the lines “how does this match up with your experience of working in the organisation?” Following the general rule that you should use more general, uncued and positive questions first, this question would be best preceded by a question along the lines “what’s it like to work in this organisation?”.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

The main categories of questions which you might use in focus groups can be broken down into:

- Questions to avoid;
- Questions to use (some of them sparingly and with discretion).

Questions to avoid

Avoid the use of the following types of questions.

Leading questions

Avoid questions which lead the respondent in a given direction and contain the implied answer. Examples of leading questions are:

- “the first part was much better than the second, wasn’t it?”
- “do you agree that the first part was better?”
- “most people think the first part was better, what do you think?”

Loaded questions or ‘value laden’ questions

Avoid questions which use emotionally charged or value laden words, for example, questions such as:

- “would you be for or against unhelpful management practices which force....”

Multiple questions or ‘double-barrelled’ questions

Avoid asking double-barrelled questions such as:

- “have you ever worked in finance, and what was it like to work there?”

Ask each part of the question separately.

You can frame a multiple question with a statement, for example:

- “I want to find out about the pros and cons of working here. First of all, what are the good things about working here?”

Questions to use

Open questions

Open questions, or open-ended questions, should be the most frequently used questions in focus groups. They allow the respondents as much freedom as possible in deciding how to reply. They do not constrain them to ‘Yes / No’ answers or a limited range of options, they don’t imply the type of response that I expected. They are useful at all stages of a focus group but particularly in the early stages.

Examples of open-ended questions are:

- “what did you think about ...the course?”
- “what is it like to work here?”
- “how did you feel about that?”

They are sometimes phrased as requests for information or invitations to “Tell me about...” something, for example,

- “can you tell me a bit about what it felt like.....?”

When the idea is to encourage participants to be spontaneous and give ‘first thoughts’ rather than tell you what they think you want to hear, you can ask the question along the lines:

- “what are your first thoughts about...?”
- “what’s the first thing that strikes you about ...the new proposals?”

An example the use of this type of open-ended question which was used as an introductory question to start off discussions on the issue of work-related stress in a focus group for managers is:

- “when you hear the words ‘work-related stress’ what is the first thing that comes to mind”.

Closed questions

Closed questions have important uses but must be used with caution as they can stifle discussion. Closed questions include questions which call for ‘Yes / No’, ‘one word’ or brief answers.

For example:

- “how old are you?”;
- “are you married or single?”.

They tend to close down discussions rather than open them up, so they are generally avoided early on in focus group sessions. They can be very useful later on in focus group sessions when you want to narrow down the focus of the discussion, for example:

- “which of these issues needs tackling first?”

or to check understanding:

- “do you mean by that that ...?”

And they can be good lead-ins to open-ended questions:

- “which is the most important?”

followed by an open-ended question:

- “how do you feel about it?”.

Probes

Probes are questions where the facilitator asks for more information or more detail. They can be very useful in assisting with the flow of the discussion and for encouraging participants who give brief or ambiguous contributions to say more. Examples of probes are:

- “could you tell me a bit more about that?”;
- “I’m not quite sure what you mean....?”;
- “could you explain a bit more?”
- “how does that work in practice?”
- “can you give us an example?”

Probes usually arise relatively spontaneously in the course of the discussion, though they can also be partly pre-planned. They can help the facilitator to home in on an important issue or control the direction of the discussion. For example, the facilitator might say:

- “Peter has said that he feels strongly about X, but I didn’t understand fully....Could you tell us a bit more about X”

Follow-up questions

Follow up questions are similar to probes and can be equally useful. They are often planned into the question schedule. For example, the facilitator might ask:

- “what is the most important issue facing the organisation today?” followed by “what can we do about it?”

Closing questions

Closing questions are designed to allow participants to express their overall view or position on the topic, for example, the facilitator might ask:

- “if you were asked to advise HSE on what it should do about work-related stress. What would you say.”
- “write down on a “yellow stickie” (is post-it a brand name??) what you think is the most important issue the organisation needs to tackle concerning work-related stress”.

Summary questions

At the end of each period of discussion, and at the end of the focus group session, the facilitator can give a summary of the points to emerge. The facilitator should attempt to express the issues raised by participants in the language in which they were expressed by participants. The facilitator can then ask:

- “how well does that capture what was said?”
- “have I managed an adequate summary of the discussions?”

and finish by asking:

- “is there anything we’ve missed?”
- “have we covered everything?”

See ***Developing questions for focus groups*** (Appendix 2) for further information and ideas.

Appendix 2: FURTHER INFORMATION ON FOCUS GROUPS

A useful source of practical advice, helpful hints and suggestions and do's and don'ts, sample questions etc is provided by:

Morgan, D.L. and Krueger, R.A.(1998). *Focus Group Kit*. Volumes 1-6. SAGE Publications, London.

The four volumes below are the most relevant in the series:

Morgan, D.L. (1998). The Focus Group Guidebook. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit*. (Vol.1). SAGE Publications, London.

Morgan, D.L. (1998). Planning Focus Groups. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit*. (Vol.2). SAGE Publications, London.

Krueger, R.A.(1998). Developing Questions for Focus Groups. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit*. (Vol.3). SAGE Publications, London.

Krueger, R.A.(1998). Moderating Focus Groups. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit*. (Vol.4). SAGE Publications, London.