

Working Groups (Group Activities and Group Processes)

Group process is used to manage how people work together in groups. Group processes refer to a variety of techniques and activities through which a facilitator leads a group to a desired output and corresponding outcome. Group activities can be used to identify issues and opportunities, to build consensus, to prioritize issues or alternatives, and to assess clientele needs. A facilitator can lead a group through one or more activities to create an output over a period of 2-3 hours, or it may require dozens of successive activities (processes) conducted during hundreds of hours of meetings and spread over multiple years. When group process is used to inform a needs assessment, the output is an assessment report that documents needs based on direct stakeholder input, consultation, and consensus. (See Tropman, 1996 for a valuable resource on using group processes for building consensus.)

Uses of Working Groups

In many ways, the appropriate uses of group processes are comparable to the appropriate uses of focus groups, except that the output from a group process can be a specific product in addition to a record of the session. The similarity with focus groups is largely due to the interaction among participants. As a consequence, the resulting output is more of a collective product and less reflective of the needs of any one individual. Group processes are useful when your goals include:

1. To gain information from a selected group of individuals about their views and experiences on a topic.
2. To gain insights into people's shared understandings, rather than individual thoughts and interests.
3. A product that reflects a consensus viewpoint among participants.
4. A collaborative effort to organize data or consider alternatives (such as a prioritized list of issues or options).
5. Creating or enhancing organizational credibility and a relationship with participating stakeholders.
6. Qualitative data that does not need to be representative of a larger population.

Advantages of Working Groups (several are similar to those for focus groups) include:

1. Relatively easy to set up, can be fast and inexpensive.
2. Can bring project personnel and beneficiaries together.
3. Stimulates dialogue and new ideas.
4. Generates insights, ideas, and questions to include in other evaluations or surveys.
5. Social "synergism" (people respond in group settings).
6. Group processes can accommodate 12-30 participants comfortably (about 18 is ideal, depending on the facilitator and various activities chosen for the group work)—considerably more participation than is desired for focus groups.
7. Format allows the facilitator to probe (flexible).
8. A well designed process can lead to a participant-created product, requiring minimal data analysis.
9. Can be used to resolve conflicts or generate consensus.
10. High face validity (individual stakeholders contribute to a consensus product).

Limitations of Working Groups are also similar to those for focus groups.

1. Difficult to separate the individual view from the group view.
2. The role of the facilitator is very significant. Strong group leadership and interpersonal skills are required to facilitate a group successfully, but the facilitator must exercise discipline to keep from swaying the discussion.
3. A skillful group facilitator will produce different results than a less skilled facilitator.
4. Work groups require logistical and practical arrangements that meet the needs of a fairly large number of people, they may be time consuming to assemble and require an environment conducive to conversation and candor.
5. The format is easily misused; purposes must be consistent with the attributes of the methods.
6. Avoiding bias can be difficult, both in the conduct of the group and in interpretation of the outputs.
7. Most groups are unwilling to commit the time needed to go beyond major issues sufficiently to generate detailed data.
8. Results cannot be generalized to apply to the entire target population.

Role of the facilitator and purpose of group techniques

1. Create and maintain structure in the conversation, to keep it on track and moving forward.
2. Acknowledge all ideas and contributions made by participants.
3. Ensure that all participants feel safe to contribute.
4. Protect participants from reprisals or personal attacks.
5. Downplay the relationship between an idea and its author.
6. Reduce the influence of group opinion on the individual.
7. Allow an objective comparison of alternatives.

ⁱ John E. Tropman. 1996. *Making Meetings Work: Achieving High Quality Group Decisions*. Sage Publications. Thousand Oaks, California.