

*Listening*

*To The*

*Public*

**TIPS** for Conducting  
**FOCUS GROUPS**  
to Develop  
Government Performance  
Measures and Reports

National Center for Civic Innovation  
Center on Government Performance  
April 2008

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

With unbounded appreciation, I thank:

Madelyn Hochstein, President, DYG, Inc. for her care, counsel and determined efforts in drafting these TIPS;

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for its continued support of the work of our Center on Government Performance;

Verna Vasquez, Associate Director of the Center on Government Performance, for her discerning judgment, unfailing determination to help us “get it right” and sustaining efforts to see this project and others at CGP through, from beginning to end; and

Rick Bruner for designing the cover.

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**April 2008**

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## Introduction

The purpose of the focus group research we describe here is to enable local, county and state governments to produce performance measures and performance reports that are aligned with the public's perspectives and needs.

Information derived from focus group research can be transformed into performance measures and accessible performance reports. The information also can lead to the redesign of government programs and practices, resulting in improved government performance.

These tips have been developed to provide a frame of reference, some guidelines and standards for governments starting the process of listening to their public for the purposes of creating measures and reports that reflect the public's perspective and engaging the public in the performance measurement process.

The recommendations here are for governments that are interested in finding out what the members of their public are thinking about their government: how they come to assess the services and other aspects of government performance, what they want, need and expect from government including information, and how they would like government to communicate with them.

The tips emerged in part from the experiences of 24 local, county and state governments that were recipients in a three-year government performance reporting demonstration grant program run by the Center on Government Performance (CGP) of the National Center for Civic Innovation, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The tips also derive from the 12-year experience of CGP's work in *Listening to the Public*, as detailed in our book of the same name.<sup>1</sup>

Focus group research can be costly, requires careful preparation, expert consultation and government involvement throughout. Some governments have mistakenly expected to use these focus groups to confirm previous beliefs and practices. This subverts its intention and usefulness. *An open mind—putting aside any lurking cynical views and already formed opinions about the public—an ability to listen to the public in new ways that are not confrontational or adversarial, and a willingness to consider new approaches to performance measurement and reporting practices are necessary. Good faith is essential.* You will be surprised at the important information that is revealed.

## 1. Using Focus Groups: When and Why

- Use focus groups when you need to know “what” and “why,” not “how many.”
  - Focus groups help governments define outcomes of governmental work, as the public sees them, and as government will then want to track and measure them. By soliciting the public’s views about how they rate specific government services and why, governments can identify new outcome measures, or adjust current ones so that they reflect the public’s perspectives.

We found that people want to know about the results of government efforts and the quality of work performed. For example, in the focus groups we conducted, people said that they want, across all neighborhoods, roadways that are smooth and streets free of litter. Performance measures consistent with these observations would be a Smoothness Score, a Jolt Score<sup>2</sup>, and litter ratings -- for the city as a whole and by neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>
  - Focus group discussions may also be designed to provide governments with information and insight into how the content and style of a government’s performance report resonates with the public’s need for and interest in information. New styles, content and dissemination strategies may result from these inquiries, enabling government to have an improved vehicle for communicating with the public about what and how it is doing.
  - Focus group work is a form of qualitative research. When done properly, it yields very useful insights and understanding. It does not produce hard numbers or projectable statistical results.
  
- Focus group research should be distinguished from strategic planning sessions in which government officials either run or participate in them. Focus groups, in the traditional sense, do not include participation by government employees so that the free flow of discussion will not be inhibited.
  
- When done correctly, focus groups will help governments learn the specifics about what people want, need, prefer, or do not like *vis-a-vis* government service delivery, thereby enabling government to be more responsive to its citizens.
  
- Support from the top is essential. Elected and appointed officials and staff need to see the usefulness of learning about the public’s point of view.

- Use focus groups before a citizen survey to determine what to measure in the survey from the citizen's perspective.
- Use focus groups after a citizen survey to get a better understanding of what the survey results mean, and/or why citizens responded the way they did.
- It is best to conduct focus groups at a neutral time of the year, avoiding a period in the midst of a local election, for example, or around holidays when people are distracted by other obligations or during typical vacation times when many people are out of town.
  - Be sensitive to religious and ethnic differences when setting dates.
  - Plan your own time so that you will be available and involved during all phases of the process.
- Consider how often to conduct focus groups.
  - How often depends on how much change is taking place.
  - You can intersperse targeted surveys with focus groups.

## 2. Bring In The Experts

- Professional, technical expertise at planning, organizing and conducting focus groups is strongly recommended. Impartial, professional researchers experienced with implementing focus group research are skilled and trained to do this work and carry no "baggage" into the process.
  - We found that when governments conducted focus groups themselves at their offices, there was not the free-flow of ideas and comfort that is needed for a successful focus group endeavor.
- Focus group expertise is often a sub-specialty of market research firms so start by interviewing local market research firms.
  - The *Green Book: Worldwide Directory of Focus Group Companies and Services*, published by New York American Marketing Association ([www.greenbook.org](http://www.greenbook.org)) is a good source for finding professional focus group firms/moderators.
- Do not use a firm that is associated with political polling in your area; any connection to political motivation is to be avoided.

### 3. The Steps and Mechanics of Setting Up Focus Groups

- Set your objectives clearly before you do anything else. Be sure you know what information you are seeking.
- Determine who should participate.
  - Focus group participants should reflect the demographic diversity of your population.
  - Consider your neighborhoods, precincts, wards; ethnic and racial groups; income and adult age groups; family composition, education level, marital status; religious orientations; long-term residents and more recent arrivals; small business owners, merchants, etc.
- Decide how many groups to conduct.
  - The number of groups depends on how many sub-groups you need to hear from and the diversity of your population.
  - One is usually too little; it could prove misleading.
- Bring the market research firm/focus group expert/moderator into the process from the beginning.
- Keep a journal.

Start a journal to record and document on-going decisions and developments—the objectives, specifications for the participants, how many groups and how often they will be repeated—so that you will be able to replicate and track the process in the future. The journal will also be invaluable when writing the methodology section of the report.
- Stay deeply involved yourself. Even with an expert firm/moderator, only you know your community and your needs.
- Recruiting participants:
  - Process must be anonymous in two ways. The focus group participants should not know who the groups are being conducted for and participants should not know each other so that honest, open discussion takes place. First names only should be used during the groups.
  - Recruitment is usually done by professional recruiters.



- Potential participants are not told in advance what the subject of the group discussion will be.
  - A screening questionnaire must be used to be sure the person meets your specifications and disqualifiers are screened out.
    - \* Screening identifies, among other things, the language a potential participant is comfortable speaking and understanding and the ability to perform other tasks essential to a particular group's design, e.g. reading or writing.
    - \* Multi-lingual screeners may be needed.
  - Exclude government employees.
  - Your market research/focus group consultant should be sensitive to cultural mores of the participants in forming the groups so that communication will not be inhibited or impaired.
- The age, sex, and ethnic/racial characteristics of the moderator may be relevant to the success of the group.
- Size of the focus groups:
- There are usually 8 -10 in a group
  - Recruit at least 12 to compensate for no-shows
- Where to hold the focus groups:
- A professional focus group facility is best.
- They have one-way mirrors for you to view the session without intruding on or influencing what people say.
  - They have recording equipment built in.
  - They know how to check and re-screen people in an orderly and careful way.
  - They have provisions for beverages and snacks, flip charts, easels, etc.
- Rewarding the participant:
- It is customary to provide some "thank you" to participants—money, invitations to an event, etc.
- Who should observe:
- Typically, there are not too many spaces in the observation room, but you and anyone who is working on the analysis and reporting of results should observe and take careful and thorough notes.
  - Government officials will find the sessions revealing and helpful.

- Impartial observers, in addition to the focus group consultant, can provide useful insight.
  - If anyone who would be recognizable to the participants is an observer, it is best for that person to arrive after participants have been convened in the discussion room.
- ☐ How to avoid cheating:
- To be sure that the person who arrives is, indeed, the person you recruited, the market research firm usually requires checking IDs and applying a brief re-screening questionnaire before the session begins.
- ☐ Recording the sessions:
- Audio and video recordings provide essential documentation.
  - A lot of useful information comes of every session, and analysts often listen to and watch recordings of sessions many times to cull findings.
  - Videos can be edited later to eliminate the ability of viewers to identify participants.
  - Participants are told that they are being recorded and observed, but their full names are not mentioned at any time during the session.

#### **4. The Focus Group Discussion Guide**

- ☐ A discussion guide is an outline of all the topics that the moderator will cover during the focus group discussion. The guide provides the moderator with the order in which topics are to be discussed, the important probes to be explored, and when and how to use the special materials prepared for the focus group.
- ☐ A discussion guide is needed to keep the focus group discussion on track and make sure all important areas are covered.
- ☐ The wording of the questions in the discussion guide is very important. We do not recommend asking people: “What are the two or three services that you care about most?” We now know enough to anticipate that most people will always put public safety services at the top of a list. But if you think that you can base your conclusions on that answer alone, you will be mistaken.
  - Does that mean that they do not care about or assess their water supply? Or schools? Or roads? Or libraries? Or code enforcement? Refuse collection? The other service and functions you perform? Most definitely the answer is that they do

care. Do not think you have “listened” after asking a very limited question. That will be a waste of your time and money and lead to erroneous conclusions and misinformation.

- ❑ Who writes the discussion guide?
  - The discussion guide is usually drafted by the professional moderator; however, you must provide the moderator with the background of the project and what you want to learn.
  - You must review and edit the discussion guide.
  - You should have the final say and approval of the discussion guide.

## **5. What Happens During A Focus Group Session**

- ❑ The focus group session usually begins with the moderator explaining what the session will cover and what the participants can expect. Usually, the identity of the sponsoring organization is not revealed.
- ❑ The moderator will try to make participants feel comfortable and ease any anxiety participants may feel. The moderator will also explain why the session is being taped and assures the group that the information will be used without attribution and for research purposes only.
- ❑ The moderator also states that everyone’s views are important and need to be heard; therefore, it is important that comments are made one at a time and not while someone else is speaking.
- ❑ The moderator introduces and allows time for any preliminary tasks before discussion takes place (e.g., reviewing the existing performance report; rating government services based on familiarity, importance, and satisfaction.)
- ❑ The moderator usually asks each participant to introduce him/herself without revealing private information (first name only; neighborhood, but not address; etc.)
- ❑ The moderator will use the discussion guide to start and continue the conversations. In our case, the moderator asked a participant at random to identify a government function that s/he considered critically important. If at least half of the group agreed, the moderator

then asked each participant what numerical rating they gave, then asked why, and probed further into how they came to their decisions.

- ❑ In a well-run focus group session, all participants have an opportunity to become engaged in the discussion and freely share their opinions.
  
- ❑ The role of the moderator is to:
  - Follow the discussion guide.
  - Listen to what is said and try to uncover why the participant holds a particular view.
  - Create an environment that is relaxed, comfortable and conducive to open discussion; the moderator does not argue with participants or correct false or misguided information.
  - Make sure the group runs the amount of time promised the participants—two hours is customary.
  - Cover all substantive material.
  - Keep the discussion on topic.
  - Make sure no participant is left out.
  - Remain neutral.
  
- ❑ Usually, refreshments are available during the focus group session for the focus group participants and for observers in a manner that does not detract from the conversations.

## **6. Designing Focus Groups to Develop Citizen-Based Performance Measures: One Approach That Worked**

The Center on Government Performance of the Fund for the City of New York, a sister organization to the National Center for Civic Innovation, introduced focus group research to determine how the public judges local government performance and if the public uses measures that are the same or different from what local governments typically use. The methodology and results, including more than one hundred performance measures and items of information the public identified are described in the book, *Listening to the Public: Adding the Voices of the People to Government Performance Measurement and Reporting*.

A brief outline of the steps we used in conducting and using the focus groups follows.

- ❑ Consulted with major survey research experts.

- Determined that we wanted to hear from people in all five boroughs of the city and from as many of its 59 community districts as possible.
- Specified that we wanted to hear from people of various ages, major racial and ethnic groups, family compositions, income levels, neighborhoods, etc.
- Consulted with City Planning Department demographers to identify where there are concentrations of people having the characteristic we sought to listen to and learn from.
- Produced decks of cards—one deck for each participant—to read and mark at the start of the group session. Cards briefly described all 34 major local governmental service areas the city provides, one card per service. Here is one example:

**PUBLIC SAFETY – CRIME REDUCTION**

**Reduce crime, disorder and fear;  
protect lives and property.**

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1. How familiar are you with this city function:

Very familiar  
 Somewhat familiar  
 Not familiar at all

2. Score the city on this service (Circle one) \_\_\_\_\_

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

←Very Poor Performance      Excellent Performance→

3. Rate the importance of this service:

Critically important  
 Moderately important  
 Of small value

001

- Asked participants to rate (1 to 10) how well they thought each service was being performed. This exercise and the ratings were the basis for the subsequent group discussions. The moderator asked participants, “Why did you rate it the way you did?” “How did you know?” Participants also rated how important they thought each service was (Critically Important, Moderately Important, or Of Small Value) and how familiar they were with each service (Very, Somewhat, or Not At All). The cards provided a mechanism for the moderator to focus on issues that were of higher importance and familiarity, and also to uncover why participants rated a particular service so poorly or so highly.
- Professional research firm advised on every step. We were involved in every step.

- Professional recruiting firm selected the participants according to our specifications. Research firm oversaw this process.
- Professional, experienced moderators selected by the research firm conducted the sessions in room with audio and video recording; we observed behind one-way mirror.
- Moderators were assigned sensitively by the research firm. For example: Gen X group was moderated by Gen X moderator; Hispanic group by Hispanic moderator.
- Listened and took copious notes.
- Invited government representatives and a small number of other observers.
- Research firm listened over and over to the tapes, produced report of findings, and made presentations with us to government leaders.
- Developed our own report, building on the work of the professional researchers; our presentations included video clips.
- Developed agency specific presentations and videos.

## 7. Analyzing And Reporting The Results

You will want to include in the report several levels of information culled from the focus group sessions. Focus groups provide information about the way people think about their government in general. We learned that even with criticisms, people love their city and respect the difficult jobs government has to perform.

Focus groups are an extraordinary source of insight into the way people think about the services provided them by government. You will learn which government services they consider important, which services evoke emotion, and what criteria people use to evaluate how well or how badly each service is being performed. For example: *"I count the bumps as I ride on my street."* *"I had to call three numbers before I got the right person."* *"They came quickly, were polite, and knew what to do."*

The observations and comments will enable you to identify performance measures that may be different from your current measures and will resonate with the public. What you hear can help you design performance standards for your staff and contractors and will also enable you to design improvement plans for some of your services, based on what people in the community say they need and want. The insights can also help you create a citizen survey.

The physical materials that come out of focus groups that you will be able to work with to create your report include audio and video tapes of each focus group session, the notes that you took during the live sessions (ask other observers for their notes) and transcripts of each focus group so that you can read as well as listen to what participants said. In our case, we collected and analyzed the cards participants used to rate each service (see section 8 below).

Usually the research consultant will provide a draft report after carefully reviewing the video tapes and transcripts, but you, too, must:

- Listen live, listen to the tapes, read the transcripts—you can never go over what is said in the groups enough.
- Look for sub-text, not just what is said. This takes some practice. The sub-text is everything that is not said but is communicated nonetheless through emotion, body language, sometimes tears or laughter. Sub-text is also about consensus or disagreement, and it is about catching all the details of what people say about government performance, even small details. Think of the results of focus group work on government performance as a tapestry of your citizens' view of government. The specific words said about each government service are the threads; the sub-text is what brings the threads together—the patterns, the emotions, the highlights and lowlights—to create a full picture of your citizens' view of their government.
- Emotion is as important as words.
- So is body language, including facial expressions, nodding in agreement or scowling in disagreement.
- Notice when there is agreement in the group.

- Be alert for the patterns and themes that underlie what is said about the services and the performance measures.
- Search out all the performance measures, preferences, likes and dislikes, information sought; cues used, large and small, obvious and subtle. Provide specific examples in the report. The more you find, the more you will understand your public.
- Video and audio “clips” to use with reports and presentations tell the story effectively.
- In your report, include a description of the methodology used. People—your policy makers, managers, legislators and the public at large—need to be able to understand how the conclusions and findings were derived.

## 8. Creating Performance Measures From What We Heard In The Focus Groups

- We assembled direct quotes from the focus groups for each major governmental function.
- We reviewed our notes and the videos to ascertain if there was agreement within the group about a comment (heads nodding; similar comments, frequently).
- We analyzed the comments to cull the essence, asking ourselves: What aspect of people’s responses reflects their specific concern and is measurable?

- Some examples:

### **Emergency Medical Services**

#### What People Said:

*“They came out as fast as they could and they performed their duties. They treated me very nicely.”*

*“They are trained to care.”*

*“They [EMS workers] took control and they were very good, very nice and careful.”*

#### Performance Measure:

Satisfaction rating of compassion, courtesy, respect and responsiveness



## Public Libraries

### What People Said:

*“My biggest complaint about the library is the time... They don’t open until 12:00... They’re just not open long enough. I don’t think the city provides the funds that are necessary.”*

*“There are whole days when local libraries are not open due to cutbacks. What does a school child with a research project do if the library is closed all day?”*

### Performance Measure:

Citizen satisfaction with hours and days of operation

## 9. Using Focus Groups To Get Suggestions About Your Existing Performance Report: One Approach To Consider

- Have a copy of your performance report for each participant in the group.
- At the beginning of the session, give participants time to look over your performance report before the discussions start.
- Suggest that they think about the: look of the report, ease of understanding it, and its content.
- Then, have them discuss:
  - Their comments about the content of the report
    - \* Is the information in it useful to them? Understandable? Relevant to their lives and interests?
    - \* What, specifically, is interesting, useful, relevant, irrelevant, or hard to understand?
    - \* What, specifically, would they like to see in the report that is not there now?
  - Their comments about the style of the report
    - \* Is it easy to read? Off-putting?
    - \* Too big? Too short?
    - \* Candid? Or just spin?
  - Other comments and suggestions they may have

## 10. Special Issues for Small Municipalities

- When everyone knows everyone else. If it is unavoidable that at least some participants will know each other, the moderator needs to acknowledge this and emphasize “no judgments.”
  - When no one knows anyone else in a focus group, participants start off on an equal footing when it comes to their views. While some people may try to dominate the group, that is usually due to personality, not to the relationships and history with others in the group.
  - When there is a relationship and history among participants, one may defer to another because of perceived status differences (a more successful merchant) or a past competition (got better grades in high school), or for some other reason.
  - When it is unavoidable that at least some participants know each other, the moderator must acknowledge this and try to neutralize the influence of their relationship and history by making clear that in a focus group all opinions are equal and need to be heard. (*“I know that several/some/all of you know each other outside this room. For the next two hours, I’d like you to pretend that you do not know each other; you have just met. It is very important that everyone here gets a chance to speak and say what they really feel and believe, so let’s be strangers and listen to each other.”*)
  - The moderator must work extra hard in these circumstances to cut off a dominant person and encourage a shy person to speak up and out.
  - The use of materials and exercises that will allow each participant to write their full thoughts before speaking and then read aloud what they have written, can, to some degree, neutralize the influence of their history and relationships with one another.
  
- If you have limited resources, you can still conduct groups in a neutral and comfortable non-governmental place, be able to locate someone who has professional experience doing facilitation, record the sessions, and identify one or two impartial observers.

## 11. Read More About It

There are many books and articles about focus group methodology, history and applications that can provide further information.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See [www.fcny.org/portal.php/govt/Publication/](http://www.fcny.org/portal.php/govt/Publication/) for information about obtaining a copy of Listening to the Public: Adding the Voices of the People to Government Performance Measurement and Reporting.

<sup>2</sup> See “How Smooth Are New York City’s Streets?” 1998 and 2001 for a description of how these measures were developed and applied, [www.fcny.org/cmgp/streets/pages/reports.htm](http://www.fcny.org/cmgp/streets/pages/reports.htm)

<sup>3</sup> See description of Sanitation Scorecard, [www.nyc.gov/html/ops/downloads/pdf/scorecard/about\\_scorecard.pdf](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/downloads/pdf/scorecard/about_scorecard.pdf) and [www.nyc.gov/html/ops/html/scorecard/scorecard.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/ops/html/scorecard/scorecard.shtml) and My Neighborhood Statistics, [www.nyc.gov](http://www.nyc.gov).



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