

Creating Great Focus Group Sessions  
By Rhonda Williams, Ph.D.  
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As a Research and Evaluation Analyst for [Region 10](#) Education Service Center, I provide internal program evaluations in addition to external research and evaluation services for our partner districts.

My first project was to evaluate a school-based leadership program. A component of this evaluation included hosting focus groups to gain insight from former program participants. The first task in creating these events was developing a feasible and realistic schedule for myself as the primary evaluator. I chose to host one session per week for a month-long period, giving myself proper time for preparation, hosting and analyzing the data. Using *Eventbrite* allowed me to provide a brief overview and my contact information; also allowing participants to register for the session that best fit their schedules and to cancel when needed.

After my focus group questions were vetted and approved to ensure that they would surface the desired data, I began planning all the details to make the events successful. To gain access to this highly sought-out group of campus-based school leaders, it was suggested to hold each session during the lunch hour, with lunch sponsored for each session. Even when cost prohibits this type of arrangement, providing drinks and/or snacks creates a welcoming environment. This format enabled participants to know they would be in a semi-relaxed environment with peers and their only role would be to answer questions related to the program.

All sessions were scheduled to begin at 11:30 am and end at 1:00 pm, allowing for 50 - 60 minutes of participant-discussion time. To obtain the desired number of participants, I invited three times the amount needed to ensure each session would have between seven to ten participants. By inviting twenty participants per session, each session generated the desired number of participants. A printed agenda with all questions was shared at the beginning of each session along with my contact information to provide the framework for the session; these questions can also be shared ahead of time.

Each focus group session began with a personal welcome to each participant. During the first fifteen minutes of the session, they served themselves while greeting others. Next, I formally introduced myself and stated the purpose of the focus group; each participant was asked to introduce themselves by giving by name and title. We proceeded through each question and participants were allowed to pass on any question if needed. This created an atmosphere of safety, where they had the option to share or not. There was no deviation from the questions provided to ensure uniformity of all sessions.

Handling key logistical concerns with prior planning helps to create a welcoming environment where your participants will be more likely to provide you the necessary information for your final report. Greeting each participant, providing beverages, sharing a printed agenda and stating the context for the session are key ingredients for creating great focus groups. These tasks are more event-planning oriented but are essential in creating a welcoming focus group environment.