**Things to Consider When Deciding to Conduct Focus Groups**

**Focus Group Guide Development**

* **Provide Introduction to Participants**
  + What is purpose of the study?
  + Why is session being held?
  + Who is sponsor?
  + How will the information be used?
  + Discuss confidentiality of session
  + Explain or request use of tape recorder to remember what is said
  + Establish ground rules
* **Categories of Focus Group Questions**
* **Opening Questions**
  + Questions that help participants feel connected
  + Designed to be answered quickly
  + Identify characteristics that participants may have in common
  + Not associated with attitudes, opinions or experiences surrounding subject of interest
    - Example: *Tell us your name and how long you have been participating in the program.*
* **Introductory Questions**
  + Begin discussion of topic
  + Introduce discussion of how people feel about a topic or phenomenon
  + May ask for definitions, explanations, general comments
    - Example: *How was it that you first learned about the program?*
* **Transition Questions**
  + Bridge to key questions
  + More in-depth or thought provoking than introductory questions
    - Example: *Think back to when you first became involved with the program. What were your first impressions?*
* **Key Questions** 
  + Obtain insight on areas of central concern in the study
  + Majority of time should be spent discussing key questions
    - Example: *In what way is your life different because of your participation in the program?*
* **Closing Questions**
  + Help moderator to determine where to place emphasis and brings discussion to closure
    - Example: *Is there anything that you would like to say?*
* **Probe Questions**
  + Developed to anticipate vague or unclear responses that have more than one meaning
  + Require thought, skill and time during transcription to tease out responses that are not important to the main intent of the discussion
  + Should be anticipated for more complex questions and developed strategically prior to the focus group to ensure they are consistently asked across groups
  + Examples:
    - *“Would you explain further?”*
    - *“Please tell us more about that?”*
    - *“Please describe what you mean?”*
* **Follow-up Questions**
  + Linked to previous question(s) by logic or reason
  + Requires more detail than first question
  + Similar to probes in that they seek to gain additional information
  + Different than probes in that they are intentionally written into the questioning route
  + Examples (follow-up question indicated by *B*):
    - Example 1A: What do you think people feel about HIV/AIDS in this community?
    - *Example 1B: Which of these beliefs do you think carries the most weight?*
    - Example 2A: What do you consider a major problem in this community?
    - *Example 2B: What are some of the causes of this problem?*

**Checklist for Focus Groups1**

**Advance Notice**

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Contact participants by phone two weeks (or more) before the session.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Send each participant a letter confirming time, date, and place.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Give the participants a reminder phone call prior to the session.

**Questions**

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Questions should flow in a logical sequence.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Key questions should focus on the critical issues.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Limit the use of “why” questions.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Use “think-back” questions as needed.

**Logistics**

\_\_\_\_\_\_ The room should be satisfactory (size, tables, comfort, sound, etc.).

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Arrive early.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Check background noise so it doesn’t interfere with tape recording.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Have name tents for participants.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Place a remote microphone on the table.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Place the tape recorder off the table near the assistant moderator’s chair.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Bring extra tapes, batteries, and extension cords.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Plan topics for small-talk conversation.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Seat experts and talkative participants next to the moderator.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Seat shy and quiet participants directly across from moderator.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Serve food.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Bring enough copies of handouts and/or visual aids.

**Moderator Skills**

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Practice introduction without referring to notes.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Practice questions. Know the key questions. Be aware of timing.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Be well rested and alert.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Listen. Are participants answering the question?

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Use probe, pause, or follow-up questions as needed.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Avoid verbal comments that signal approval.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Avoid giving personal opinions.

**Immediately After the Session**

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Check to see if the tape recorder captured the comments.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Debrief with the research team.

\_\_\_\_\_\_ Prepare a brief written summary.

1Krueger, Richard A. and Mary Anne Casey (2000). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. 3rd Edition.

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.