

# People, Partnerships, And Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

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## Focus Groups

*This issue of People, Partnerships, and Communities contains information on focus groups. It includes the “who, what, when, where, and how” the Conservation Partnership can use focus groups at the field level.*

### Why are focus groups used?

Focus groups can be used to identify opinions, impressions, and perceptions of a small group of people on one or more topics in a relatively short period of time. Focus groups have been used in the past to have people react to new products, television shows, advertisements and even presidential debates.

### When do you use them?

Focus groups can gather specific information from community residents who represent themselves or organizations. They can be used to gather distinct information about a topic of interest.

Focus groups are especially useful at the beginning of a process. One or more focus groups can be used to cover a number of themes or issues. Examples include identifying priority issues, developing new outreach methods, and watershed planning.

### How do you do it?

You can conduct one or more focus groups that cover a single issue or multiple issues. Focus groups have typical formats that include size, length of time, structure, and composition of the group.

**Size:** 8 to 10 participants  
**Length of Time:** 1-1/2 to 2 hours

#### Structure:

- Follow a prepared agenda to keep discussions on track.
- Use a skilled facilitator to lead the group.
- The facilitator encourages members of the group to talk freely and spontaneously.
- As new topics emerge from the group, the facilitator can urge the group to provide additional insights.
- The facilitator or an appointed person summarizes the meeting in writing.



*(continued on reverse side)*

**Checklist:**

- recruit participants
- prepare questions
- select skilled facilitator
- arrange for facility and tape recorder
- ensure full participation
- analyze results
- write up results

**Where can I find more information?**

*Information Gathering Techniques Guidebook, 1994, National Association of Conservation Districts, League City, Texas, (1-800-825-5547)*

*Resource Book: Conducting Small Group & Focus Group Meetings, July 1996, Social Sciences Team, (1-616-456-2247)*

*Focus Group Theory and Practice, Applied Social Research Methods Series, Volume 20, David Stewart and Prem Shamdasani, 1990, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications*

*NRCS, Social Sciences Team Home Page*

*(How do you do it ? continued from page 1...)*

**Composition of the Group; select participants who:**

- are typical of the target audience
- are new to focus groups which allows for more spontaneity
- are unfamiliar with the agenda before the session so they do not form positions in advance
- do not know one another so they are not previously influenced (this is not always possible)
- select individuals who have similar characteristics as they are likely to speak more freely
- You may want to run more than one focus group

**Duties of the Facilitator**

- guide the discussion
- follow the agenda
- remind participants there are no right or wrong answers
- avoid aggressive or personal attacks among the participants
- ensure everyone participates and no one dominates



**Advantages of Focus Groups**

- does not require a great amount of time
- promotes creativity
- can be used in a variety of settings
- easy to evaluate results
- allows follow up
- involve different groups

**Disadvantages of Focus Groups**

- limited number of responses
- responses may be biased
- importance of some responses may be overvalued or undervalued
- some responses are difficult to analyze
- difficulty in selecting participants who represent an entire organization

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**Social Science is the scientific study of human behavior. It helps us better understand the forces that affect us in social situations. A range of social science topics includes culture, social interaction, communications, groups and organizations, the economy, and social change.**