

"A friendship founded on business is better than a business founded on friendship."
- John D. Rockefeller (1874-1960)

In January I wrote a piece on conducting a focus group meeting of the parents in your programs in order to keep them on your side and off your back. I realized that many owners, directors or managers may not be familiar with hosting and facilitating this type of meeting so offer the following...

Guide to Facilitating Focus Group Meetings & Roundtable Discussions

Meetings should last no longer than one hour (1 ½ hours at the absolute longest). The key is to facilitate and lead rather than direct. The purpose is to get EVERYONE involved in conversation and participate in the discussion. Typically, no direct action will take place at the meeting other than the creation of a plan to address items identified. It is not necessary to make promises to resolve or explain anything that comes out during the meeting but make sure the decision maker is included in the process and will get back to the group with resolutions, answers or explanations at a later (defined) date.

Welcome: Meeting Organizer [10 minutes]

Meeting organizer will welcome the group and thank them for coming, introduce her/himself as the host of the meeting, and recognize all key members. He/she will explain each of their roles in the meeting and then explain the background of the session. The important thing here is to establish objectives and expectations for the meeting – explain the purpose and goal of meeting.

Creating a Safe Environment: Site Host [5 minutes]

Before the meeting, always list the following ground rules on a flip chart:

GROUND RULES

- Maintain confidentiality
- Participate as much as possible
- Ask questions as they come up
- Turn off cell phones and pagers
- Respect other opinions
- Don't interrupt; let others finish speaking before you begin

The host should review these ground rules with the group and ask if there are any additional rules people would like to add.

Introductions: Site Host [10 minutes]

Ask participants to introduce themselves by stating their name and their background or relationship as it pertains to the topic.

Worksheet: Site Host [5 minutes]

Request that participants take 5 minutes to complete a discussion topic worksheet (this should be provided). If they do not wish to complete the sheet, they may think about the questions on the worksheet (site host should read the questions aloud to the group).

Questions: Site Host [45 minutes total—15 minutes per question]

Tell the participants that the goal is to have an open discussion about the questions on the worksheet. A scribe (a key member) will write what people say onto flip charts so that everyone is able to view their ideas. Request that participants let the scribe know if s/he did not capture their ideas correctly.

Discussion Question #1

What are the strengths of the program?

- Think in terms of resources, organizations, people, facilities, and programs that exist...

Discussion Question #2

What are the pressing issues facing the program?

- What are the top goals or priorities that needs to be worked on together during the next one or two years?

Discussion Question #3

How should we work together to make the situation better?

- How would you like to be involved? Which goals are most important to you?

Closing Remarks: Meeting Organizer [10 minutes]

- Thank the group for participating in the session.
- Next steps: The ideas shared during this forum should be compiled and sent out to all participants (if they didn’t already sign-in, remind them to do so). All contributions will be considered to help design a solution or recommendation, which will lead to action points and a strategic plan.
- Are there any questions?
- If anyone has questions about the session or about the results of the session, they can contact the meeting organizer.

Suggestions for facilitators running the meetings

- Arrange chairs in a semicircle facing the flip charts (try to obtain maximum eye contact, interaction, sharing among participants).
- If the group is quiet, begin with a sample response to the question but your position is primarily to facilitate discussion, not be the “expert with the answers.”
- Maintain a non-judgmental approach to participants and their viewpoints.
- Keep the group on task and try to solicit input from less vocal members (if some people just do not want to talk, that is OK).
- One approach that is helpful when working with quiet participants is to start with more general questions first and funnel down to specifics as the session progresses.
- Be vigilant of certain individuals who may attempt to dominate the discussion, limit their time.
- Watch for nonverbal behaviors.

- Focus on facilitating the session, not on leading it or the results obtained.

If gym owners/managers haven't taken this exercise with their staff, it is a great idea to conduct a discussion as a staff meeting. You could be surprised at some of the information that comes from your employees and some of the suggestions they have. I highly encourage you to give this focus group format a try. At any rate, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. A focus meeting such as this with the involvement of all staff members automatically creates a stronger team of employees as they feel engaged and involved in process – perhaps moving beyond involvement to being committed!

"The difference between 'involvement' and 'commitment' is like an eggs-and-ham breakfast: the chicken was 'involved' - the pig was 'committed'."

- Unknown

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