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The Focus Group as a Demonstration Technique

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Abstract: Focus group interviews are research techniques, and demonstration projects are Extension techniques. Our title is a little misleading; we are merely proposing that many aspects of focus groups can be used to strengthen demonstrations. We describe a focus group field forestry interview that was described by participants as an outstanding demonstration. This was surprising because our project had no demonstration objective. We discuss four aspects of focus group methodology that might be incorporated into demonstrations in order to enhance educational effectiveness: group dynamics, reversed information flow, enhanced networking opportunity, and increased variables in demonstrations to facilitate more discussion.

Introduction

Most Extension professionals are well aware of focus group methodology. It is a research technique frequently used to create credible illumination of the factors relevant to program, community, and organizational development. While it certainly is not routinely used as an Extension demonstration technique, it has several aspects in common with field demonstration program design. Both have a discussion leader, a group of people, a technical topic, and a focus on a knowledge base. The main difference is that information flows to the group from the leader in a demonstration and vice versa in a focus group.

Focus group interviews are often used to design or evaluate programs, to gain insight into motivations, or to identify factors that influence behavior. They have limitations; what participants say they will do is not necessarily what they'll actually do (Morgan, 1997). An advantage is that the technique provides insight into human behavior, observable group dynamics, and flexible, qualitative responses (as opposed to a number of choices in most surveys or a scale in most surveys). Participants are not limited in their responses and the process is considered naturalistic (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Focus Group Fundamentals

We do not attempt to describe the methodology, because most readers should be reasonably familiar with focus group interviews. Focus groups can produce muddled results if not properly conducted (Allen, Grudens-Schuck, & Larson, 2004). However, a brief overview of the process will serve to refresh the reader on the three phases that go into a focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). First, in the conceptualization phase, the objective of the group meeting is determined. What information is needed and who needs it? Who needs the information and who can provide it?

Second, in the interview phase, questions are developed. These are open-ended questions that follow a pattern. Feedback occurs, and sometimes unexpected questions arise. The interview is moderated to maintain control (focus). Group dynamics are anticipated (participants who are "experts" or another who is reluctant to speak). Third is the analysis phase. Field notes and tape recordings are analyzed. Observations should be in the field notes on things like body language and emotion. Templeton (1994) provides excellent detail on organizing, conducting, and analyzing focus group interviews.

Grudens-Schuck, Allen, and Larson (2004) discuss the foundations of focus group methodology. Focus group interviews provide insight into group perspectives. Homogenous (similar backgrounds) groups work best, with synergy designed into the program for participants to work together. Results are based on patterns, formed by themes or perspectives.

We report on focus group interviews that occurred in South Carolina in 2008. The objective was to obtain insights into forest owner perspectives on invasive species (mainly Chinese privet), chemical control of invasive species (herbicide use), and the factors, both biological and economic, that denoted effectiveness of treatment. The interviews were held on different field sites with varied treatment options and results. The participants were members of local forestry landowner groups and varied by personal forest management objective (some had strong timber management objectives, the others managed for nontimber values [e.g., wildlife or recreation]). The focus groups operated normally, including spontaneous and unexpected comments that are considered an advantage of the method.

The Surprising Result

"Focus groups arguable provide researchers with more surprises than other types of research" (Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004). At the end of each interview, the groups were very consistent that this was one of the best demonstrations that they had ever attended. Of course, the interview was not intended to be a demonstration. These forest owners had attended many Extension workshops and field demonstrations over the years and certainly were defining demonstration as an Extension professional would. Demonstration techniques are fundamental to cooperative Extension (Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997).

Why were the participants confused? There were many aspects of the interview that corresponded with a field demonstration. They were given a brief formal introduction to what they were going to see and

transported to the field sites by vans. Discussion was led by a strong facilitator and an expert (resembling instructors). Except to set the stage at each site, absolutely no information was shared with the group.

However, once the discussion was complete the expert answered technical questions from the group and explained the treatments on each site. There was much contrast between field sites, and the groups were exposed to a range of treatments and effectiveness levels. While they started out "in the dark" and were kept there during the discussion, by the end of the process they had developed a firm understanding of the differences in treatment, cost variables, and achievement of management objectives.

The surprising aspect was the level of enthusiasm for the method. Maybe it should not have been surprising. When forest owners were asked what they want in an educational program, they expressed a strong preference for just this type of experience. They strongly prefer "active" rather than "passive" delivery systems, and the two highest ranked methods were outdoor workshops and demonstration areas. Most important to the forest owners was learning knowledge application, and also highly ranked was networking with resource professional and other forest owners (Downing & Finley, 2005).

Of course, the facilitator quickly followed up to determine why the group felt it had just been on a very effective demonstration. Several reasons surfaced.

- First, a focus group field interview is physically very similar to a field demonstration. Both focus on field sites that usually contain variables (e.g., level of treatment).
- Second, the group dynamics allowed all participants to see the thought process of other group members. If a participant said a particular treatment was "good" or "poor," the next question was "Why do you say that?" and discussion followed.
- Third, eventually, the expert explained the reason for each treatment and how effective the ground example actually was. So, while it was not a program objective, a mini-demonstration ended each site discussion.
- Fourth, in order to identify the variables that participants used in making these decisions, a wide variety of treatments were used. Contrast in effectiveness was very pronounced and easy to see.
- Fifth, the group selection technique develops a homogenous group and similar people form the group. Networking opportunities are high, and this is important to forest owners. We included an incentive of a group meal after the interview to encourage attendance, and participants looked at that as a networking opportunity.

Conclusion

We are not suggesting that focus groups actually be used for demonstration purposes. It is not a cost-effective way to develop a demonstration. What did become obvious to us was that some of the focus group techniques and practices are appropriate to strengthen existing demonstration programs. The three primary "devices" that can easily be adapted from focus groups to demonstrations are group dynamics, reversed information flow (participant to facilitator), enhanced networking opportunity, and increased variables in demonstrations to facilitate more discussion. Extension professionals ought to consider some of these

techniques when developing demonstration projects.

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