

Conducting My Voice Focus Groups

LOGISTICS

- Gather a diverse group of 6-8 people who took the survey. For student focus groups, it is best to have students from the same grade level participate together. For example, one focus group comprised of all sophomores, one of all juniors, etc.
- Within that parameter, selection of focus group participants should be as random as possible. The more representative the group is of the general school population, the better feedback you will receive.
- During a focus group session, allow a minimum of five minutes to discuss each question.
- Have two interviewers present. One individual asks questions, while the other observes and takes notes.

QUESTIONS

- Should be open-ended. For example, “What does it mean to feel welcome at this school?”
- Should be arranged from general to specific within each topic. For example, start with, “How important is effort to being successful?” Then you may ask, “What specifically does our school do to reward students’ effort?”
- Should prompt thoughtful conversation rather than yes/no responses. For example, ask “What does it mean to be bullied?” rather than “Are kids bullied at this school?”

Keep in mind that My Voice Focus Groups differ from the My Voice Survey in important ways:

<i>My Voice Focus Group</i>	<i>My Voice Survey</i>
Insights	Data
Confidential, but personal	Anonymous
Homogeneous group	Heterogeneous
Flexible	Standardized
Unrestricted answers	Restricted to Likert Scale
Results in words	Results in numbers

THE SESSION

Assure the participants of confidentiality. Let them know that you will share what they say, but not *who* said it. Confirm that participants understand this, providing examples as needed.

Be cautious not to lead participants in a particular direction or act surprised, hurt, or disappointed by their responses. Be aware of your own biases. Are you focusing on what you want to hear, as compared to what the participants are really saying?

After a question is asked, listen not only for content, but for emotions, paradoxes, contradictions, and discomfort. This will help you learn or confirm not merely the facts (available in the survey), but the meaning behind the facts. The result of a focus group should be further insight into the information you already have from the survey.

Keep in mind that the personal, non-anonymous nature of focus groups shapes the results. The conversation among participants should result in a picture of combined perspectives. The interviewers should strive to see how the information “all fits together.” Do not conclude that one student’s agreement with another is that student’s final word on that matter. Probe students who agree with another’s comments for their particular point of view.

The goal of focus groups is to produce meaningful conversation about the topics you are discussing, rather than a series of short answers. You want participants to “color in” the black and white sketch provided by the survey. Good conversation includes laughter (humor is important to pay attention to), personal (not private) stories, connections to things that were said earlier, disagreement, contradiction, interruption, and silences (these can be important to notice, as well). With that said, balance the needs of participants to have input with the need to stay focused.

Keep in mind that, unlike the survey, the interviewers now share control of the process with the individuals being interviewed. Feel free to take advantage of the spontaneous and surprising moments. Encourage spontaneity and watch how participants respond. Be sure to observe body language. As long as the conversation is on track and you are learning (not just rehashing something), pursue the line of conversation. Ask follow up questions. You may learn something that you can then use in a subsequent session.

ANALYZING AND SHARING RESULTS

When analyzing the results of focus groups, look for *patterns* in the conversations. What themes emerged, both positive and negative? What particular perspectives were evident? Did males answer differently than females? Did 11th graders have a different point of view on an issue than 9th graders?

Do not report the results of focus groups by percentage (e.g., 75% of the males we talked to said that most bullying happened in the locker rooms). Instead, report that “a common theme among the boys regarding bullying was that it typically took place in the locker room. Several boys mentioned that they had witnessed incidents that they considered bullying after gym class.” When the particular way a student has said something captures or highlights a theme, include the exact statement in the report (e.g., One boy said, “I saw some older guys kick a younger kid and no one did anything to stop it.”)

Be sure to report what *you*, as an interviewer, learned. What insights did the conversations provide for you? What previous judgments were confirmed or called into question? Also include follow-up questions you believe remain and should be discussed further.

Share your findings with the appropriate audience. Use the information gathered during focus groups, in conjunction with the My Voice Survey results, to inform your next steps. Create an action plan focused on improving areas of weakness, as well as celebrating and maintaining identified strengths at your school.