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Focused Group Interview

The focused group interview is an alternative to those paper-and-pencil questionnaires used to evaluate Extension meetings and conferences.

Using this approach, participants in small groups discuss prepared questions about the sessions they've just attended.

At a three-day conference, involving a couple hundred people, we invited a different third of the participants each day to take part in the focused group interviews. We did this by placing different colored invitations in the registrants' conference folders.

Toward the end of each day, we reminded that day's "sample" to meet in a spacious room. For half an hour, in circles of seven, they discussed prepared focus questions using a volunteer convener and a recorder in each group.

The recorder noted three things about each session: (1) the range of feelings—satisfied, so-so, or unsatisfied; (2) the number of people who felt that way; and (3) why they felt that way.

We quickly summarized all of the small groups' responses and shared the summary with the program planners.

We observed several things. First, the program planners carefully considered our daily summaries in planning for the next day as well as our overall summary in planning the next conference.

Second, most people liked talking in small groups about their feelings better than writing them individually. They said it helped them meet more people, compare notes, find out about concurrent sessions they'd missed, tell us things anonymously that they wouldn't take time to write, and bring closure to a full day.

Third, conference participants, for the most part, were willing to serve as conveners and recorders, for they added their comments just like the others.

And we learned some things about the focused group interview: how important it is to write summaries of people's feelings accurately, that their feelings and the reasons for those feelings are more useful to program planners than the participants' judgments about the sessions, and that the technique saved time for evaluators, participants, and planners because it used just a sample each day and avoided repetition of responses.

For future planning, the focused group interview technique succeeded in giving us evaluative information that was current, comprehensive, accurate, easily summarized—and fun to collect!

We think focused group interviews can be appropriately adapted to a lot of program evaluations in Extension. A brief manual about the focused group interview as an evaluation tool is available, free of charge, from: James S. Long, Staff Development Specialist, Cooperative Extension, 323 Ag. Sciences Bldg., WSU, Pullman, WA 99164-6230.

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