Use Focus Groups For Rapid Needs Analysis

Rapid prototyping design and development methodologies require a strong needs analysis in order to be successful. Focus groups can be the answer.

BY ROSS TARTELL, PH.D.

Ross Tartell, Ph.D., is currently adjunct associate professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University. Dr. Tartell also consults in the areas of learning and development, talent planning, and organization development. He received his M.B.A. in Management and his Ph.D. in Social Psychology from Columbia University.

Almost all Learning and Development professionals have experienced the demand, "we need the training delivered yesterday!" This has led to the development of a range of rapid prototyping design and development methodologies—techniques that require a strong needs analysis in order to be successful. As Peter Drucker wryly noted, "There is nothing quite so useless as doing with great efficiency something that should not be done at all."

How can you rapidly get the necessary information to meet critical business needs? Often the answer is: focus groups.

WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

It is a group interview "with a purpose," which identifies ideas, opinions, and issues. Most focus groups consist of five to 10 participants; all are expected to contribute, in a safe and nonthreatening environment, with a common focus on a defined area. Like any business meeting, a focus group has an objective, agenda, and next steps.

CREATE THE KEY QUESTIONS

The most important step is creating the questions for the focus group interview guide. Use these guidelines to get the unbiased and useful information you need:

1. Make sure that the questions you create provide the information necessary for the needs analysis and are not just "nice to know."
2. Use the KISS principle. Keep it simple and use language participants will understand. Minimize jargon.
3. Create short questions that contain one idea. Eliminate "or" and "and" in the question. This will enable participants to discuss a single area and will simplify data analysis.
4. Use open-ended questions that will generate discussion and highlight differing points of view. Avoid "leading" questions in which emotionally loaded words (e.g., broken, horrible) or socially acceptable answers can influence responses.

> Use focus groups to give you the information you need to be on target when you get the call, "We need training now!"

CREATE THE QUESTION FLOW

Four principles govern the question sequence:

1. Start the discussion with questions that are easy to answer and less emotional. This helps get participants talking. For example, in a discussion about employee engagement, you might start with developmental opportunities and then proceed to the quality of the relationship with management.
2. Always start with a positive question when discussing operational issues or performance gaps. This can keep participants from descending into a gripe session and helps keep your data clean by separating strengths and weaknesses.
3. Use a "funnel" strategy to set the structure of the questions. Begin broadly and then use follow-on questions or probes to get the necessary details. For example, you might ask about a product or service and then ask follow-up questions to get a complete picture of training or structural issues that affect performance.
4. Use a summary statement followed by a "closed-end" question (e.g., "Have I summarized the discussion correctly?") to confirm your understanding before transitioning to the next major area to be explored.

As famous fictional detective Sherlock Holmes noted, "The temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data is the bane of our profession." Use focus groups to give you the information you need to be on target when you get the call, "We need training now!"