

Focus Groups

How Feedback from Employees Can Impact the Decision-Making Process

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The idea for the use of focus groups as a management tool was derived from a planned assessment with student employees. The success of the student employee focus groups led the researchers to expand the use of these groups with the library staff. In the evaluation of the results, the researchers discovered that the feedback from both focus groups could be shared with administration, potentially resulting in the management team making the suggested changes in the work environment. This article addresses the process of using focus groups as assessment tools and potential change agents for managerial decision-making.

Introduction

Focus groups, used heavily today as a means to gauge popular attitudes, can be defined as “a qualitative approach to learning about popular subgroups with respect to conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious psychological and sociocultural characteristics and processes” (Basch, 1987, p. 411). Politicians make use of focus groups to test their platforms; the entertainment industry uses them to verify the popularity of the latest film, television show, or music release; and marketing analysts make use of focus groups to test the latest consumer products (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Focus groups serve as an excellent research tool and can generate new ideas, produce a wider range of information, and uncover how people attribute meaning to a particular topic.

History and Overview of Focus Groups

In the late 1930s social scientists who had doubts about the accuracy of the traditional individual interview started to explore alternative ways of conducting interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The use of focus groups began in the 1940s at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University as a way to study the effects of media

on society. The Bureau, which was originally founded to explore the new media of radio, had transitioned by the 1950s to study a wide range of media and its effects (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Robert Merton, one of the most influential pioneers in the field of sociology, was one of the first to study the new concept of the focus group. His 1956 study explored morale in the military and showed that people would reveal sensitive information when placed in an environment in which they felt safe and comfortable (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The use of the focus group provided researchers with quick, relevant, and accurate information from a large number of participants (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Mostly ignored by academics, businesses used focus groups for market research to determine if their company's products were attractive to customers (Krueger & Casey, 2015). It wasn't until the 1980s when social scientists rediscovered focus groups, renaming them "group interviews" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 21). One of the most consistent and universal characteristics of the early focus groups was size, typically containing six to eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Zuckerman-Parker & Shank, 2008). Also, early focus groups sought to uncover the motivation of the participants with respect to such things as product consumption, film and television programming, and the public's understanding of health issues (Mansell, Bennett, Northway, Mead, & Moseley, 2004; Millward, 2012).

Focus group interviews can occur in a variety of environments: the for-profit environment (e.g., customer-oriented, market research interviews), the academic/scientific environment, the nonprofit sector, the participatory research environment, and internationally (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups can probe attitudes or opinions, elicit behavioral patterns, and involve cognitive or knowledge inquiry (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups can be extremely successful when "participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged" (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 4).

Employee Motivation & Satisfaction

The speed at which libraries are changing presents a challenge for librarians to redevelop themselves in the face of rising material costs, new technologies—which force staff to continuously learn new skills in unpredictable environments—and the changing expectations of library patrons (Macmillan, 2011). Library directors need to communicate with staff and motivate them regarding the value of the services they provide to a community (i.e., public, school, or university/college). Thus, library directors need a "creative approach to building flexibility, resilience, and staff engagement, to survive" (Macmillan, 2011, p. 1).

Library staff members feel vested within the organization only if there is high employee satisfaction as well as creative and flexible staff. Research on employee involvement indicates that greater involvement can lead to increased positive outcomes for both the organization and the employee (Grawitch, Trares, & Kohler, 2007). Providing library staff with the opportunity to share their personal perceptions of the library and their position within their designated unit may lead to increased satisfaction; their opinions have been solicited, and there is a feeling that their voices are being heard.

The most important asset, in any work environment, is human capital; thus, working towards mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders is critical. In 1965, Tuckman, a psychologist, developed a four-stage process for team building. Later Tuckman and Jensen coined this four-stage process "forming, storming, norming and performing" (1977, p. 421). "Forming" refers to the initial formation of the group in which most members are confident and polite. "Storming" is when the team pushes against the boundaries of the forming stage. During "norming" the team members resolve any differences and begin to appreciate the strengths of team members and respect the authority of the team leader. The final stage, "performing", is reached when the team's hard work leads to the fulfillment of its ultimate goal.

Regardless of the control method or style, library directors need to have a clear vision and purpose derived from core values, beliefs, attitudes, imagination, knowledge, experience, and intelligence. Clear and articulate communication is also a part of effective leadership. The next sections in which the researchers discuss their project will detail how focus groups can be used as a management tool to improve relationships and motivate employees.

Focus Groups = Management Tool

While there are a variety of management techniques and skills, building relationships with staff is a prevalent issue across management styles. In 1969, Cecily Surace addressed the important role individuals play in an institution and that “the social needs and recognition of workers are as important as the acknowledgment of their technical competence” (p.1). Surace (1969) goes on to state that the success of an organization is based on the people involved. This notion, discussed over 40 years ago, is relevant in today’s libraries.

One means of securing employee perceptions is through the use of focus groups. The results yielded from a focus group setting can be used in assessing library functions or resources and can serve as an evaluation data collection method. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001) highlight the following advantages of focus groups/interviews:

- Focus groups typically provide more in-depth information than other methods.
- Interviews allow the interviewer to make a personal connection with the interviewees, which might enhance the quality and quantity of data provided.
- The interviewer can gather and record personal impressions regarding the interviewees, which may contribute further information to the evaluation.
- The interviewer knows the interviewees and thus can ensure greater participation.
- Focus group interviews provide opportunities for participants to interact with one another in ways that may enrich the depth and quality of the data. Participants often motivate each other in ways that result in new ideas and insights.
- Focus group interviews allow for the gathering of data from a large number of people at a relatively low cost (p. 272-273).

One task of the library administration is to look at all aspects of assessment including employee satisfaction. The potential for focus groups to play a role in this process is high. Surace (1969) is clear when she states, “we still have a responsibility to develop our staffs and to motivate them” (p.13). Through focus groups, staff members are able to articulate issues and concerns as well as achievements and areas of contentment. Managers, administrators, and faculty can use this feedback to assist staff members in achieving success through staff perceptions of their unit, workload, and the surrounding environment.

Implementation of Focus Groups in a Library Setting

Libraries are composed of numerous departments including circulation, resource sharing, reference, acquisitions, and cataloging, each requiring specific skill sets for staff and student employees. While there is interaction between various library departments, there is often little opportunity for library personnel to share feedback with library administration. Staff may engage in discussion about issues or challenges within a unit, which can lead to negative interactions and potentially cause turmoil or lack of trust and poor morale. The purpose of this research was to devise an efficient and effective platform in which library staff and student employees were able to provide their insight into the library and its functions and their perceived value at the unit and organizational level. It could also serve as a means by which morale could be improved.

Library supervisors or directors often ask employees to provide opinions or offer observations. These employees believe that their voices are being heard, yet library managers often avoid responding due to a lack of priority or the complexity of the issue. This may result in the 'dump and run' phenomenon (Roberts & Wood, 2011). Roberts and Wood describe the phenomenon as "those occasions when staff articulate a problem to management and then assume their involvement has come to a close" (p.92). The goal of employing focus groups is to ensure that all feedback on an issue is gathered and recorded, allowing management to address the issues.

The Focus Group Project

Slippery Rock University, which is located in Western Pennsylvania, has approximately 7,600 undergraduate students and 1,200 graduate students. The library consists of eight full-time faculty librarians, nine full-time staff, two part-time evening staff, 75-80 student employees, a part-time administrative assistant, and a manager of library operations (MLO). The library is supervised by the Associate Provost for Transformational Services. The library does not currently have a library director, and thus, decisions are made by collaboration among the Associate Provost, the MLO, and the faculty librarians.

Merriam (2009) addresses the need to ask good questions and how to develop good questions. For this project, the researchers devoted time to reviewing the literature on focus groups to ensure that questions were accurately stated and covered the appropriate breadth of information. The researchers developed focus group questions for this project by coming up with a list of topics pertinent to the particular group (students or staff) as well as by consulting sample questions (Durham College, n.d.). The researchers evaluated and edited the questions based upon topic and allotted time for each focus group. After reviewing all potential questions, they selected eight questions to be used with each group—student employees (Appendix A) and staff (Appendix B).

As the popularity of focus groups has ebbed and flowed for more than 60 years, there have been two points of consistent value associated with this type of research. First, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2001), is "capturing people's responses in real space and time in the context of face-to-face interactions," and second, strategically "focusing interview" prompts based on themes that are generated in these face-to-face interactions and that are considered particularly important to researchers (p. 554). It is based upon the notion of gaining feedback in real time with the means to allow the discussion to follow. The researchers have used focusing interview prompts to obtain insight into morale and functions of the library.

During the planning process, two library faculty members developed the idea to use focus groups with student employees as a way to offer them a voice in the planning and evaluation of customer service points. Because student workers interact with patrons at the various service points in the library, they are in a position to provide suggestions or ideas on ways to improve services based upon patron interactions. Also, students can provide insight into the needs and desires of the college student population. The focus group setting provided a means for student employees to share general insight into the student body.

The project began by inviting student employees from customer service points to participate in focus group sessions. The researchers held two focus group sessions, and each group was asked the same questions in the same sequence. The researchers recorded all focus group discussions, removing any identifying factors from the transcription. While information shared may reflect a specific library unit, the researchers did not include any identifying factors for individuals. They recorded detailed responses, and they transcribed all hand-written observations as well as the recorded session following each focus group session.

The researchers began by asking an introductory, ice-breaker-style question. Next, they asked a transition question, requesting students to share feedback on their first impression of working at Bailey Library at Slippery Rock University. After students shared their first impressions, the researchers asked about job satisfaction, reaction to

recent renovations, and their perceptions of the improvements and how they are meeting the patron's needs. The questions included experience and behavior themes (e.g., How long have you worked in the library? What are your responsibilities regarding their position?); opinion and value questions (e.g., What do you find challenging about your job?); and feeling questions (e.g., What do you perceive as an issue or challenge for our patrons?).

It was during the student focus group sessions that the researchers came up with the idea to conduct similar focus groups with library staff. Student employees provided a high quality of feedback and ideas; the researchers saw the potential for similar results from staff. This would provide library faculty and administration with pertinent information to drive changes within the library with regards to policies, environment, and morale. The researchers used the data extracted from the student focus groups to create policies and update current procedures for student workers. Examples include the use of identification badges for student workers, allowing library patrons to easily identify student employees. In addition, library staff developed a detailed student employee manual for students working in certain areas of the library, such as the Instructional Material Center.

Questions for the staff focus groups were similar in nature yet more direct. The researchers eliminated the opening demographic questions since this data could be obtained from the library's administrative assistant. As the researcher's goal was to collect as much feedback as possible without asking too many questions and making the interview too long, they used all eight questions to elicit opinions, knowledge, and feelings rather than background information.

Student Focus Groups

The overall participation for student library employees serving in a customer service role was 23 percent. As this was the first time that focus groups were used with student employees, the researchers speculate that they may have been hesitant to participate. While conducting the focus groups, it was clear that the student employees had deep insight into being "the face" of the library. They indicated that, as the first point of contact for many patrons, they were expected to answer both directional and general questions, and at times, they felt unprepared for all of the questions. It was noted that the student employees were sufficiently trained in working with library faculty and staff, yet more detailed training (especially on answering the phone and transferring calls) would be beneficial.

At Bailey Library, interior renovations have been underway for over three years with more slated for the 2017-2018 academic year. Student employees shared what they have heard from library users. Students heard varied responses about many of the cosmetic changes such as color schemes and the replacement of tall, six-foot stacks with shorter, half-sized library stacks. As the renovations were designed to improve the environment for students, it was clear from the focus groups that these changes left voids. In reorganizing the space, study areas were changed and modified. It is evident from a variety of assessment sources, including this focus group, that there is a need to expand both individual and group study space even though library users approved of the overall library renovations. Based on the data provided by student employees, the library administration worked with the planning committee to create additional study space in the upcoming renovations.

The most prominent point taken from the student employees was the lack of respect they felt, not from the library staff but from patrons who are typically their peers. They indicated that a name tag or badge that recognized them as employees might make their jobs easier. As a result of the student focus groups, their supervisors provided them with ID badges indicating their departments for the fall 2016 semester.

It is noteworthy that while the student employees had some concerns, they also indicated on several occasions their high job satisfaction. One student directly stated that her job in the library is the best job she has had and that she is sad to think that she will no longer work at Bailey Library when she graduates. These positive

accolades are valuable; administrators are taking note of what is currently going well and ensuring that they continue to receive feedback by planning future surveys and focus groups.

Staff Focus Groups

Following the success of the student employee focus groups, the researchers held two sessions for staff (allotting the same amount of time—approximately an hour and a half—and using the same questions), yielding similar results. The staff, excluding library faculty, was eager to share their issues and concerns as shown by 88 percent participation by the full-time staff. The first question was used as an icebreaker for staff to express their initial concerns about their library unit. Issues included workspace during (and in some cases after) the next phase of renovations and the lack of communication about non-library-based departments housed within the library such as Academic Services, Career Development, and the Writing Center. Noise is a consistent problem since some units are located near the central stairwell, and the flooring tile offers no buffer against voices and high volume traffic. While many of these issues will be evaluated long-term on a larger scale, library administration should presently address the lack of sufficient workspace and proper computers. Staff stated that their desks were of varying heights and not suitable for working long-term without hand cramps or neck aches.

When asked about the physical environment in their workspace, participants shared many ideas on how to mainstream workflow during renovations. They discussed barriers impacting work, but it should be noted this was not a list of complaints. The following are some examples of challenges the staff noted in meeting job duties: the building closing procedures, the need to hire security staff, and the need for new technology to complete their work. This list reflected their initial thoughts and focused on the potential solutions instead of simple complaints.

Often supervisors ask their staff to give feedback, but the staff sees few, if any, changes based upon their input. Focus groups provide data in written format that can be used in future planning processes. For this particular project, the researchers transcribed and shared focus group data with supervisors and the library administration so it could potentially be used in the decision-making process for the library. At the time of this article's submission, library faculty, the MLO, and the Associate Provost of Transformational Experiences were continuing to evaluate the focus group data. The researchers stored the transcribed data on a network drive for staff and faculty to review.

Plans for Future Implementation

There was some concern when the researchers first suggested conducting focus groups within the library since both researchers worked with or knew the student employees and staff. It was reasonable to think that the participants would feel uncomfortable expressing the challenges in their units or the library as a whole. Surprisingly, both the student library employees and staff focus group sessions were highly successful. As a result of this success, the library administration has modified the assessment cycle of the library to include focus groups as a standard assessment tool. The cycle will include a three-year rotation between the focus groups for staff and student employees, a satisfaction survey for library employees (faculty, staff, and students), and an overall satisfaction survey for all library users and constituents. This cycle will include both qualitative and quantitative methods and will be used to enhance and/or fulfill the mission of both the library and the university. Questions for both focus groups and surveys will be similar in content, providing a means to assess growth as well as determine if changes were made based on the results of the feedback from the previous focus group or survey. One item for future exploration includes the use of focus groups with library faculty. Currently, library faculty members hold bi-weekly meetings to

discuss the library department and the units within the library. A discussion with the library faculty will be necessary to determine interest in and potential value of conducting a particular focus group.

Finally, as a result of the focus groups that were conducted at Bailey Library, several changes have been implemented. Some staff indicated that their furniture was not conducive to the work that they do. Furniture issues included the lack of adjustable chairs and pull-out keyboard and mouse trays. In response, the library administration agreed to purchase new seating options to correct the immediate ergonomic problems. During the upcoming renovations, the library administration will evaluate desk workspace and may purchase new furniture. Additionally, the 2017 renovations will resolve the noise issue in the lobby area through the complete reconstruction of the entrance and lobby.

Other points noted by the focus groups were the need for continued improvement regarding communication, the hiring of a second part-time employee, and the desire for casual get-togethers. Improvements in library communications are part of a continual process. One recent change, however, has been to share the minutes from library faculty/Associate Provost Meetings in an effort to keep all library employees more informed. In the summer of 2016, the library administration hired a part-time staff member to assist with the opening and closing of the building and provide limited security on weekends. The addition of the part-time weekend staff member has significantly benefited library patrons (especially Slippery Rock University students) as this has enabled the library to extend service hours during the academic semesters. Lastly, the Manager of Library Operations has begun organizing small events outside of work hours allowing faculty and staff to interact on a social level. It was through the use of focus groups that these changes, large and small, were addressed. Staff now feels their voices are truly being heard.

Focus Groups in Public Libraries

Despite the fact that these focus groups were conducted in an academic library, there is potential for use in public libraries. Focus groups are beneficial due to their nature and structure. The questions that are asked in focus groups guide participant responses yet allow for significant interactions between participants. Think of focus groups as group interviews where “the reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2). While the questions in this project were designed to cover a wide-range of topics, researchers can develop focus group questions that relate to more specific aspects of the organization.

Staff meetings often serve as the qualitative channel by which library directors can extract feedback. As previously mentioned, these meetings can become lists of complaints rather than insightful discussions. A well-designed focus group serves to invite thoughtful and deeper responses due to their nature. By providing staff with a voice and the knowledge that their feedback is valued, a majority of participants will want to contribute something significant to the focus group process.

Another potential positive outcome of using focus groups in public libraries is the opportunity to build relationships between staff, librarians, and the library board. The results of the focus groups can serve to spark conversations, which could potentially lead to decision making that addresses current workplace challenges or the development of ideas that are beneficial to the library as a whole. Regardless of how the results of the focus groups are used, the participants will likely feel a vested interest in the decision-making process, which may serve as a team-building experience.

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Appendix A

Focus Group: Question Set

Spring 2016

Bailey Library Student Employees

Opening Question:

1. Tell us who you are, where you work in the library, and one of your hobbies.

Introductory Question:

2. How long have you worked at the library?

Transition Question:

3. Think back to when you first started working at Bailey Library. What was your first impression?

Key Questions:

4. What do you find challenging about your job?
5. What do you perceive as an issue or challenge for our patrons?
6. How have the renovations of the first, second, and third floors helped our patrons?
7. How have the renovations had a negative impact on our patrons?
8. If you had the chance to give advice to your supervisor in regards to meeting patrons needs, what advice would you give?

Appendix B

Focus Group: Staff

Perceptions of Employee Engagements

Spring 2016

1. How do you describe the work environment in your unit?
2. Are you satisfied with the physical work environment? Can you describe any concerns you have about your physical environment?
3. Can you identify any barriers within Bailey Library which impact your work?
4. Are you recognized/rewarded for your work? How would you like to be recognized/ rewarded for the work you do?
5. Do you *feel* valued for the work you do?
6. Do you have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect you?
7. What does employee engagement mean to you?
8. In what ways (and how often) should units and Bailey Library celebrate successes?