FOCUS GROUPS IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH*

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ABSTRACT

Focus groups are commonly used in marketing research. In this article an application of the focus group technique within an organizational context is described. Nine focus groups were conducted during the planning stage of a survey intended to establish employee perceptions of advancement policies and practices in a major South African manufacturing company. Fourteen themes emerged from a content analysis of the discussions. Two of these reflected aspects requiring commitment decisions from management toward the survey. The others indicated areas of concern which should be included in the survey. In this way, the focus groups contributed useful information for the subsequent sample survey.

OPSOMMING

Fokusgroepe word algemeen in bemarkingsnavorsing aangewend. In hierdie studie word 'n toepassing van die fokusgroeptegniek in die konteks van 'n opname binne 'n organisasie beskryf. Nege fokusgroepbesprekings is gevoer tydens die beplanningstadium van 'n opname wat binne 'n Suid-Afrikaanse vervaardigingsonderneming gedoen is. Die doel van die opname was om die persepsies van werknemers teenoor die bestaande personeel- en bestuursontwikkelingsbeleid en -praktyke van die maatskappy te bepaal. Veertien temas is deur middel van 'n inhoudontleding geïdentifiseer. Twee hiervan het aspekte aangedui waaroor bestuur beginselbesluite t.o.v. die opname sou moes neem. Die ander het probleemareas aangedui wat by die ondersoek self ingesluit behoort te word. Sodoende het die fokusgroepe inligting verskaf wat vir die latere vraelysopname belangrik was.

A researcher, when requested to do organizational research, does not always know enough about the client organization to be able to proceed directly with a study. The focus group interview is one approach which could be used to obtain data in this exploratory phase.

Focus groups are commonly used in marketing research, often in the exploratory role. They have been used to study why customers like or dislike a specific product or service, or why they buy certain products instead of others. They have been used to find out how consumers of an organization's products or services view the behaviour of its customer-contact personnel. They have also been found useful for comparing the attitudes, approaches or skills of high or low-performing managers, capturing the cognitive processes, experiences and job approaches of successful sales people and, probing organizational preformance obstacles (Zemke and Kramlinger, 1985). When employed in an exploratory role, as in the planning stage of a research project, they are not used to produce definitive results, but to generate hypotheses (Sciglimpaglia, 1983).

Although Erkut and Fields (1987) suggest that focus groups could usefully be employed as a technique in the evaluation of training, no evidence could be found in the literature of focus group applications in organizational research.

A focus group is a qualitative method for obtaining primary data for a specific purpose. The technique involves convening a group of respondents, usually eight or ten, for a more or less open-ended discussion about a product (Calder, 1977). Zemke and Kramlinger (1985) describe a focus group as a facilitator-led group discussion on a specific topic with which all participants are familiar. The objective is to obtain responses from a group of people familiar with the topic or experience being discussed.

Aaker and Day (1986) see four stages as important for a successful focus group: planning the agenda, recruiting participants, effective facilitation, analysis and interpretation of results.

Planning the agenda would start with the translation of the research purpose into the questions with the research results will be expected to answer. This ensures that client and researcher are in agreement on the objectives before the study begins. From these questions, a topic outline that could serve as a discussion guide for the focus groups, is prepared. The set of topics may be changed after a focus group experience if questions do not prove to be generating useful ideas, or if interesting new ideas emerge which also need probing.

Participants should be recruited to provide for both similarity and contrast. Careful screening must ensure that groups are composed of people who are representative of the areas to be explored. Each group is designed to reflect the characteristics of a particular segment (Tull and Hawkins, 1982).

The focus group is led by a **facilitator** whose role is to lead the discussion and to ask probing questions on aspects which need to be covered in depth. The

discussion should be focussed on relevant areas, but in a non-directive manner. The facilitator should make sure that topics of significance are raised. He or she guides the discussion, keeping it within fruitful bounds, but rarely participating in it himself (Goldman, 1962). The competent facilitator attempts to develop three clear facilitation stages: (1) establish rapport with the group, structure the rules for group interaction, and set objectives; (2) provoke intense discussion in relevant areas; and (3) summarize the group's responses to determine the extent of agreement. (Hagler in Tull and Hawkins, 1982). The facilitator has to keep the group moving and on focus, guiding discussion into relevant areas while exerting minimal influence on the content of the discussion. Group interaction on the topics introduced by the facilitator is important. The facilitator should stimulate group members to interact with each other rather than with him. Each participant is encouraged to express views and to elaborate on or react to views expressed by others. The process is similar to the unstructured indepth interview, but the focus group facilitator plays a more passive role than does an interviewer (Aaker and Day, 1986). The group situation offers stimulation to the participants, making new insights more likely (Goldman, 1962). Spontaneity, candour, and the security of being in a group also encourage the expression of ideas. Effective facilitation encourages participants to discuss their feelings as well as their convictions on issues relevant to the topic, without being biased or pressured by the situation. A critical facilitation skill is the ability to establish rapport quickly. Careful listening is important. Flexibility is required in implementing the discussion agenda in a manner which the group would find comfortable. Slavish adherence to the agenda could cause the discussion to lose spontaneity and to degenerate into a question-answer session. Ability to sense when a topic has been exhausted and to know when a new topic should be introduced will help ensure the discussion flow. Dominant individuals or sub-groups need to be controlled, otherwise contributions might be inhibited. When participants meet, the purpose is explained, how and why participants were chosen, and how the results will be used. Confidentiality is stressed, and permission sought for recording the discussion. Questions would normally proceed from general to specific. The facilitator's comments would be non-judgmental and focussed on clarification and other process aspects. Where necessary, speakers would be protected or supported. All members should be given an opportunity to contribute. It is often useful to conclude by adding a general, catch-all question of the "Is there anything else which should have been discussed?" type. A group session could run from one to two hours.

Analysis and interpretation, the last stage, should produce a report which captures the range of impressions and observations, or interprets them in terms of possible hypotheses for further testing. Verbatim transcripts of each focus group discussion should be produced for detailed analysis. Key ideas are extracted. Quotes of exact words used to express an idea are useful in lending colour to a report. Specific topics or key ideas are finally clustered into themes.

Each theme would provide a heading for further consideration or for reporting back, depending on the objective of the particular exercise (Zemke and Kramlinger, 1985).

Focus groups make high demands on the facilitator, which is why the facilitation aspect is given relatively more emphasis in this discussion than are the other stages. Since they are gathering data in a group context, facilitators should be well versed in group dynamics. They need to be able to create an environment in which group members feel safe to respond. They should know how to elicit contributions from quiet members, and encourage more effusive members to focus their comments on the issue being discussed. (Erkut and Fields, 1987). Facilitators should demonstrate interpersonal skills of respect, empathy, congruence and concreteness, the core dimensions postulated by Rogers (1961) and accepted by Carkhuff and Anthony (1979), Egan (1973), and Ivey, Ivey and Simek-Downing (1980), as being characteristics for successful facilitating and helping behaviour.

According to Wells (1974), three or four group sessions are often sufficient. By the third or fourth session, much of what is said has been heard before. Zemke and Kramlinger (1985) believe that if carefully selected to ensure adequate representation, five focus groups could "cover the turf".

Zemke and Kramlinger (1985) state the advantages of focus groups to be the following: Focus groups give access to the ideas, attitudes and experiences of a work group. Focus groups can indicate areas to be investigated via subsequent survey or other techniques. Specific word pictures which focus group participants generate could aid in developing questionnaire items. Focus groups can produce critical incident or case study material which could be incorporated into subsequent training programmes, should training be a feasible approach to the problem under investigation. Tull and Hawkins (1982) contend that the interaction induced by the group situation allows individuals to expound or refine their opinions. 'Snowballing' occurs when a comment by one member triggers an idea in others. The group situation could be perceived as exciting and stimulate participants more than an individual situation would, making more meaningful comments likely. The security of being in a group could encourage some people to speak.

There is concern about the subjectivity of the technique, for example, that a given result might be different with different respondents, a different facilitator, or even a different setting (Calder, 1988). The facilitator could introduce bias by the way topics are shifted, by verbally or non-verbally encouraging or inhibiting certain answers, or failing to cover specific areas. Because the results of a focus group study are qualitative, they do not indicate how widespread the expressed viewpoints are in the population from which participants were drawn (Aaker and Day, 1986). While all the contributors surveyed indicated the importance of reliability and validity, these issues were usually discussed in terms of sampling adequacy,

representativeness and generalizability. No statistical reliability or validity coefficients were reported.

In a recent article Miller and Tsiantar (1988), discuss what might prove to be the first case of commercial marketing malpractice. A client is seeking damages from a market research agency whose predictions for their products did not materialize in the market-place. Focus groups are mentioned as one of the methods used to divine consumer preferences.

Despite such problems, if correctly used, the focus group interview is seen as a potentially useful instrument (Tull and Hawkins, 1982).

Calder (1977) distinguishes three contexts within which focus groups could be used: Firstly, he identifies the **exploratory** approach, in which focus groups are often conducted before fielding a sample survey. Secondly, he mentions the **clinical** approach, in which focus groups provide qualitative data for clinical judgement. This would be the case where so-called "depth" focus groups are conducted to seek information which is more profound than is accessible at the level of overt inter-personal behaviour. The third approach is to use focus groups in a **phenomenological** context. This would be where the researcher is trying to experience the group members' perspectives of the subject being studied. In this study, the focus groups were mainly used in the exploratory mode. Howerver, insofar as the respondent's own experience and perspectives were sought, the phenomenological aspect was also present.

In this article, the use of focus groups in a context other than marketing is described. The focus group application in question formed part of a study commissioned by a South African manufacturing company in which the author was requested to survey the organization to determine employee perception of the company's policies and practices relating to the development of its employees. This article describes how focus groups were used in the exploratory phase to establish the dimensions which should be included in the questionnaire to be designed for the subsequent sample survey.

METHOD

The study commenced with a review of the literature on employee development. Work done by Charoux (1986), and Human and Hofmeyr (1986) provided useful pointers on methodology.

Because the researcher lacked detailed knowledge of the company, it was decided to use focus group interviews at an early stage in the investigation. It was hoped that aspects of concern, suggesting areas which should be included in the subsequent organizational advancement survey, would emerge during the focus group discussions.

Subjects
In all, nine focus group sessions were conducted. The groups were selected to provide both horizontal and vertical coverage of the organization. One group (a shop steward group), consisted of two members only,

the rest varied in size for seven to nine. The organizational sectors represented were shop stewards representing the three unions in the company, production workers, supervisors, engineering department employees, female employees, personnel and industrial relations, and senior managers.

Procedure
The author, who acted as facilitator, started each session by introducing himself and his research assistant, who acted as recorder. Participants were welcomed and thanked for their presence. The objectives of the focus group discussion were explained against a backdrop of the larger organizational survey which would follow. Personal confidentiality was guaranteed and permission requested to record the discussion. This was always obtained. The facilitator led the discussion in terms of the guidelines outlined earlier.

Seven questions pertaining to employee advancement were put verbally to each group and screened by means of an overhead projector at the same time: (a) (Company's name) has asked us to find out what employees think of the company's efforts to develop its people. What is your reaction to the news of such a survey?; (b)Which problems do you think exist regarding the development of (company's name) employees — of its African, Coloured, White and female employees?; (c) How do you feel about African employees advancing in the company? What are your concerns?; (d)What do you like/dislike about previous advancement initiatives at (company's name)? — of African, Coloured, White and female employees?; (e) What advice could you give us for planning the survey? Questions to ask, areas to cover, to whom to talk?; (f) How do you feel about the term "black advancement"?; (g) How successful do you expect the survey to be? Why?

Focus group scripts were transcribed, then content analyzed. The principles for content analysis as outlined by Scott and Wertheimer (1962), Cartwright (1966) and Crano and Brewer (1986) were used as guidelines. Categories were not drawn up in advance but developed as the communications were analyzed. The coding unit was the theme or themes contained in each contribution. For example, the comment "Often nothing comes of management undertakings to employees and their representatives" was coded into a category **"Employee perceptions of management"**; the comment "We have difficulty in identifying the next step in the company because there is no next step for us. Nothing happens in between performance appraisals. The forms are just filed away" into a category **"Employee perceptions of advancement policies"**, and the comment "I can see this company having black and coloured superintendents and area managers, but the only thing is they must make sure it is on merit. Then we will accept it with open arms" into **"White attitudes to black advancement"**. Only categories agreed to by both researchers were retained. In this way, an attempt was made to enhance the reliability of the procedure. However, reliability issues, particularly relating to the consistency and the representativeness of the findings, have not been fully answered. Important provisos remain on whether the

information obtained by the interaction of these nine groups with the specific facilitator and his assistant, adequately represent the concerns of all the employees in the organization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fourteen themes were elicited by content analysis. These are presented and briefly discussed.

Perceived need for a survey
Respondents agreed that a survey was needed. Many of the company's policies and practices, including some related to advancement and employment, were seen to be in need of review.

Management's intentions with the survey
Participants considered it important that management state its intentions with the survey beforehand. Management was expected to give an undertaking that they would act upon the issues revealed by the survey.

Employee expectations regarding feedback
Employees wanted to be told the findings of the survey and expected management to undertake to share the survey results with employees.

Employee perceptions of management
Doubt was expressed as to management's real commitment to the survey. The likelyhood that they would act on the research findings was questioned. Management was seen as generally not following through on initiatives seen in the same light as the survey. At each of the hierarchial levels, a desire was expressed for greater involvement by the immediate superior in the development of employees. Employees at all levels expressed a desire to be consulted to a greater extent by their immediate superiors and a willingness to contribute to decisions, when asked. Perceived autocratic decision styles were questioned.

Company spending on social issues
African shop stewards expressed a desire to be consulted on decisions regarding the disbursement of company spending directed towards community needs.

Perceptions of advancement policies and practices
Advancement initiatives resulting from the survey should include all races, both sexes, and all job levels. The reassurance should be given that advancement would not emphasise a particular group to the exclusion of others. Training programmes should be incorporated into advancement programmes in a more systematic way.

White attitudes to black advancement
Whites consistently warned against tokenism in black advancement. Negative attitudes to black advancement were expressed. Fears relating to job security, feelings of being expendable, and possible victimization through reverse discrimination, as well as white prejudice, formed a basis for such fears. Where black advancement was supported, advancement on merit only and guarantees of job security were often added as important qualifications to such statements of support.

Communication
A desire was expressed to be better informed on company matters.

Perceptions of discrimination
In their advancement decisions, the company was perceived to discriminate in various ways against Africans, African women in particular and women in general, Afrikaans-speakers, and factory workers.

Perceptions of change
While a need for change was recognized in some quarters, fears regarding their future were expressed by some participants, especially certain whites. Such fears would have to be allayed, or resistance to change would remain.

The fact that changes had already occurred was recognized by many in the company. Africans, however, did not perceive much change and pointed to a legacy of continuing discrimination.

Attitudes to the company
Much goodwill toward the company exists. Most respondents expressed loyalty and their desire to make a career with the company rather than seek opportunities elsewhere.

Perceptions of problems faced by African supervisors
Members of other race groups believe that African supervisors face difficulties from within their communities when they are promoted. They could be victimized as a result of disciplinary actions they might have to take in their supervisory role.

The disadvantages with which African supervisors or managers would have to contend as a result of their marginal status and their relatively deprived backgrounds, are not generally appreciated.

Shop stewards see the training given to newly-appointed African supervisors as "brain-washing", i.e. as a deliberate attempt to alienate them from the work force. Management's expectation that they leave the bargaining unit on becoming supervisors, is seen in the same light.

Perceptions of a restructuring of the supervisory job
Reference was made in the focus groups to a previous exercise which involved a restructuring of the supervisory job. While this had been introduced as a necessary attempt to improve the level of supervision in the factory, it was also seen as a design to increase the number of African and so-called Coloured supervisors. Opinions differed on the need for bringing in outsiders. The paucity of internal talent cited as the reason for external recruitements, was doubted. Resentment was expressed because those who had been bypassed still had to teach their new supervisors the jobs they had to supervise. The aftermath of this exercise is likely to affect reactions to future advancement initiatives. Suspicion that the development of existing empoyees is being overlooked, is an important issue.

Shop stewards' attitudes to the survey

Shop stewards from two of the unions were initially opposed to participation in the survey. They felt that they should have been consulted, and that the money involved could have been better spent on projects benefitting African workers. Eventually they agreed to support the survey, ostensibly because they came to believe during focus group discussions that their members could benefit from the outcome of the survey.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to show how focus groups, normally used as a procedure in marketing research, were usefully employed in designing a research project for an organization.

Fourteen themes elicited in the focus group discussions were fed back to and discussed with management. Management gave assurances on two concerns that had been expressed in the focus groups: that they would act on the findings of the subsequent survey, and that findings would be shared with employees. After management had considered the focus group results, the author was instructed to proceed with a survey for determining employee perceptions of the organization's policies and practices relating to the development of its employees. The following areas were to be included: Employee perceptions of management, supervision, advancement policies and practices, communication opportunities, pay and benefits, the company's role in the community, levels of job satisfaction, attitudes toward black advancement and employees' commitment to the company. These aspects covered the remaining concerns that had been expressed in the focus groups. They also reflected areas shown in the literature to be important for integrated management development in contemporary South Africa (Chalmers, 1983; Human and Hofmeyr, 1985; Charoux, 1986). The fact that this focus group exercise identified various issues which other researchers had independently shown to be important for integrated management development, can be seen as indirect evidence in support of the validity of the technique.

Three experiences in the focus group exercise illustrated the importance of a sensitive and flexible approach in determining group composition when controversial issues are likely to be raised. The group of supervisors contained only one African, who did not participate in the discussion, while discussion in the group of production workers was dominated by African participants to the extent that Whites were inhibited. In both instances, "minority" inputs could have been valuable. Similarly, the inclusion of a superintendent in a supervisor group may have inhibited discussion by the other participants, some of whom were his subordinates.

It is possible that the focus group exercise proved useful in paving the way for the subsequent administration of questionnaires in that participants, who represented a broad spectrum of employees, were given a stake in the survey by assisting in its design. In this way, the focus groups may have served a legitimating function. In addition, union endorsement of the survey, secured in focus group discussion, was vital to its success.

Further discussion of findings falls beyond the scope of this article. However, it is clear that, despite the lack of statistical evidence relating to reliability and validity, the focus groups proved useful in giving the researchers information about and a feel for the organization, thus suggesting areas which should be included in the survey. They also provided organizationally-relevant material for subsequent questionnaire items.

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