

Workshops

Overview

A workshop is an interactive, participatory group exercise. It can be used in a range of circumstances, including the evaluation of a project, event or activity. For instance within a project it could be used to either explore what needs doing or, for the purposes of evaluation, understand what happened when and who decided what. Similar to a focus group, the technique can also be used to gauge and compare opinions on a range of different aspects, criteria or qualities of a project or activity.

Why use it?

Workshops can be a means of capturing more qualitative information than a questionnaire will provide (i.e. probing the meanings participants give to their behaviour, ascertaining reasons, motives and intentions).

It is an excellent, interactive way to understand different peoples' opinions and experiences of a project. It is also a useful tool to provide participants with the chance to challenge the agenda set by the project leader; raising new issues and/or asking questions back. Whatever the focus - it can be useful to create some sort of visual and participatory activity to structure the discussion.

Depending on how the session is structured, a workshop can provide a good opportunity to reach a consensus or decision on certain topics or issues (i.e. for instance a group could be asked to rank or agree on priorities for the direction of or next steps for a project).

Instructions for use

There are some general rules for using workshops as a technique for evaluation:

- Workshops can be undertaken with small (6-15 people) and/or large groups (15-35 people, as people can be subdivided into smaller groups).
- Ensure there is a set of ground rules for the workshop this should include what behaviour is acceptable within the session. This should be read out at the start to all participants (or stuck on the wall so you can refer to it if needed). The ground rules should be agreed by all participants at the start, you could even ask the participants to suggest some rules.
- The workshop should be highly structured to include a range of interactive, participatory techniques to stimulate discussion. This could be undertaken in a number of ways, with a range of material, whatever approach is adopted the results of the workshop should be the basis of decision-making or further discussion.
- The role of the facilitator/moderator is very important. Leadership and interpersonal skills are required to moderate the group and structure the workshop. They should encourage discussion around particular topics or subjects. Try to use someone with experience or consider taking facilitation training yourself.
- The workshop should, if possible, be recorded and transcribed.
- You will need materials - paper, post-it notes, pens, flip chart paper, sticky dots.

Who to use it with

Workshops can be used with established groups (such as the project team) or with a group assembled specially (such as those involved in or affected by a project).

When to use it

It is probably best to organise workshops before and after the activity.

Limitations

- As with focus groups, workshops require good mediation. Beware of dominating personalities who may restrict others from talking. Furthermore, look out for shy individuals who may feel intimidated by the situation and require encouragement.
- Workshops should be viewed as an open-ended process; you will not get the precise answers that you would expect from a questionnaire or interview.
- Problems arise when attempting to identify the individual view from the group view - the analysis needs to focus on the group interaction data, rather than on individual responses.

Considerations

Assure the participants that their responses will be confidential, good practice is to ask each participant to sign a consent form.

Timing

The time needed to undertake a workshop depends upon the content and the number of people involved. In general, you should allow at least an hour to undertake the workshop, bearing in mind that the timing can always run over or under. Also, do not forget to build in time to write up notes and observations from the workshop, and to disseminate the findings to the group.

Link with other methodologies

The information gathered by other methods, including interviews, questionnaires and/or 'walk and talk' (i.e. photographs) can be used to stimulate discussion in a workshop.

Further Reading

If you are interested in finding out more about workshops, below are some examples covering both a background and application of the method:

Kindon, S., Pain, R. and Kesby, M. (2008) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*, Routledge: London

Example 01

The workshop guide below outlines an evaluation poster exercise. It was used with the core team involved in a community engagement project to look back over the

project, encouraging reflection on the impacts and the lessons that have been learnt by the project team.

Introductions (why are we here; what will happen; how long will it take)

Ground rules

Stage 1:

Make a timeline on a piece of flipchart paper. Complete start date and today's date, mark the timeline with some years/ months so events can be recorded in the right place.

Stage 2:

Highs and Lows. Ask each person/group to discuss amongst themselves the highs and lows of the project; before agreeing on the project's 2 highest points and the 2 lowest points. These should be written on Post-its with a short reason why they were chosen (different colours should be used for each group.) The highs and lows are then presented by groups to everyone else in the room while the Post-its are attached to the poster; at the appropriate date along the timeline.

Stage 3:

Connections, Impacts and Learning. Connections: Look at the poster with the whole group; discuss the overall picture. Any connections between highs and lows? Use a marker pen to link with arrows. Impacts: Discuss...

- What difference have we made by doing this project? Have there been any spin-off effects?
- How has the project helped people to develop new skills and confidence? Evidence?
- What do people do differently as a result of the project? Evidence?

Learning: Discuss...

- Have there been any surprises?
- What would we have done differently in this project if we knew at the start what we know now?

Stage 4: Moving forward. With the full group discuss the following:

- What do we want to achieve next? Thinking about goals needed to be achieved. Maybe you want to change the direction of the project, or develop the next one.
- What do we need in order to achieve it? Think carefully about actions required to achieve goals identified. Who could take responsibility for actions?

The poster is now complete

Example 02

The 'history of the future' approach was used in a workshop with the UCL Public Engagement Unit during the life of the programme to encourage a discussion around the aims and objectives of the programme, in order to break them down into indicators for the evaluation.

The 'history of the future' approach

Imagine that the programme is complete and that it has succeeded in its goals. X has asked you to present at a committee meeting. X sent you a list of questions beforehand that he would like you to address, so you can note the key points.

What did the programme actually do?

Who's going to benefit from this?
Why is this important?
How did you make the programme a success?