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The OD Focus Group:

A versatile tool

for planned change

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Abstract

This paper is intended to establish the OD focus group as a versatile, rapid, and inexpensive information gathering, processing and action-taking strategy in an organizational context. It employs both an interactive and nominal group process, intended to stimulate systematic, constructive conversation with a purpose. This account, based on both experience and the literature, provides operating rules and a rationale directed towards fostering the use of the OD focus group by the manager and the consultant. The OD focus group emerges as a flexible, user-friendly, insightful alternative to both the interview and the questionnaire. Because of the shortcomings of the latter, the OD focus group is likely to come into widespread use in planned organizational change in the years ahead.

Keywords
focus group; facilitation; interactive; nominal group; qualitative method.

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Introduction
The focus group is a distinctive team or group process intended to stimulate constructive conversation with a purpose. Taking part in a well conceived focus group exercise is like participating in a lively and stimulating conversation on the given issue or concern. Group members find it interesting and enjoyable, and intuitively perceive its relevance to the world of affairs. This is partly because of "reaction to ... sample polling techniques which provided lots of numbers but little insight into what was really going on, the why behind the numbers,"(Basch, 1987). And questionnaires and instruments tend to have a structured, dreary and "canned" quality (Fordyce & Weil, 1979). For these and other reasons the focus group is likely to come into widespread use by managers and consultants in carrying out planned organizational change in the years ahead.

This paper is intended to help establish the OD or planned change focus group as a versatile, rapid, and inexpensive information gathering, processing and action-taking strategy in an organizational context. An essentially "how to" account, based on both experience and the literature, it provides a rationale directed towards fostering the practical use of the OD focus group, by the manager or the consultant, as a way to mobilize the distinctive strengths of this approach to enterprise development. It provides an overview of the OD focus group; defines it; compares it with the interview as a method of gathering information in order to bring about enterprise change; outlines the planning necessary to make a success of such an exercise; discusses the kind of team facilitation task to be performed in the group; outlines data recording methods and ways of analysing the group-generated information; and suggests ancient and modern methods of reporting the information produced to its managerial sponsors.

Origins and Definition
The original focus groups were created by two celebrated Columbia University sociologists during the 1930s and 1940s. In the course of their field studies in the 1930s Paul Lazarsfeld and his collaborators invented and perfected the original focus group method. During the Second World War Robert Merton and his colleagues developed a related type of focus group to examine the persuasiveness of World War ll propaganda (Merton & Kendall, 1946; Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956). In the 1950s these methods and others were adapted to creating a marketing research focus group method. This became and remains the dominant, ongoing tradition in focus group research and practice. Most recently there has been a move by one or two sociologists to revive the older forms of focus group, to re-claim, elaborate and promote it as an information gathering strategy for social science research (Morgan, 1988). The OD focus group is heir to these traditions. It takes a distinctive form and style from its focus on managing organizational change and development of one kind or another.

To summarize and define the OD focus group, it is *an interactive and nominal*

group-based, people-centred, qualitative, information-gathering, analysing and reporting process intended to bring about organizational improvement. It is founded on the information-gathering possibilities inherent in mobilizing the experience, knowledge and skill of a spontaneously interacting set of up to about 12 organization members, appropriately chosen for the issue at hand. The group process offers a prime opportunity to record a large amount of relatively spontaneous, direct remarks by enterprise members on the chosen issue, within a short time period. But it also incorporates a contrary key element of the nominal group process, as part of the exercise, in which each member of the group is in turn provided full opportunity to have his or her uninterrupted say, while the other members of the focus group remain silent.

Characteristics and Strengths

OD focus groups interest participants by their design and mode of working. They tend to stimulate, not bore participants, unlike many surveys. They facilitate the systematic comparison of one individual's experiences and views with another's. As a participant voices his or her views the group leader or facilitator can probe the other members to determine their reactions. This characteristic is unique to the focus group. Another advantage of the focus group method is flexibility as to issue, conversation concerning it, and action taking. The prospect of serendipity - making discoveries by chance or accident - is a key OD focus group asset. In bringing to light points of agreement or disagreement between participants about a specific issue, something close to the perceived truth about it emerges.

Groups provide a stimulating and secure setting for talking about human experiences and for expressing ideas. And group participants or members learn a lot from one another about the group issue or concern, learning they bring back with them to the job. The synergic or "2 plus 2 equals 5" effect that may occur between participants in favourable group circumstances, can produce a wide range of information and problem resolutions, and also uncover important understandings.

OD focus groups are particularly well suited to collecting in-depth information about the problems, opinions and feelings managers and organization members have, and the meanings they associate with various events in the life of the organization, and human attitudes towards them. Focus groups are useful for finding out how things are going in an enterprise or part of it, planning and evaluating organization development interventions, evaluating various kind of planned organizational change, and assisting policy-making and policy-driven research.

The principal opportunity the planned change focus group offers the manager or consultant facilitator is concentrated insight into participants' thinking about a particular concern. The focus group excels in uncovering *why* people think as they do (Morgan, 1988). A focus group exercise can establish a reliable platform of knowledge about the enterprise on which to found planned organizational change. And OD focus groups can be useful for the small enterprise, as well as the large one.

Focus groups provide the advantage of allowing more individuals to be reached quickly than by nearly all other information-gathering methods, especially considering the amount of time it takes to design or adapt a questionnaire of any complexity. And the OD focus group process is interactive: it automatically adapts to its participants, unlike survey instruments.

There are illuminating differences in emphasis between the OD focus group and the Marketing focus group. The planned change focus group mobilizes some admixture of enterprise members in order to discover, discuss and report on matters about themselves, and other people in the organization concerned. The group does not focus on *things,* such as inanimate objects like breakfast food, superlite beer, life insurance, or whatever. The OD focus group differs most profoundly from the marketing focus group in that it places under the spotlight human perceptions, attitudes and behaviour relating to the experience of the group members inside their organization. It is essentially concerned with the organization's human processes, and uses the information gained from the focus group to make changes in its functioning. Marketing focus groups, on the other hand, are essentially concerned with the organization's products, and aimed at modifying the enterprise's goods and services, in an attempt to improve sales or market share etc. The OD focus group is about organizational processes or mid states; the marketing focus group about organizational outputs or end states.

Focus Groups and Interviews
Why should managers and consultants use OD focus groups instead of individual interviews for information gathering purposes? In an individual interview interaction between people is limited purely to the interviewer and the interviewee; in the OD focus group, however, interaction takes place between the facilitator and the group members, and between the group members themselves. Both are influential and significant. For this reasons there is likely to be greater serendipity in holding focus groups than in carrying out interviews. Competent facilitation of a OD focus group generates material which is unlikely to arise either in response to an interviewer's question, or the participants' casual conversation.

Given that there are several members in a planned change focus group, the exercise does not take up the comparatively large amount of group leader or facilitator time in client contact, as in carrying out individual interviews. The time taken to analyse and feed back focus group material generated by a given number of people is similarly less than that for the comparable number of individual interviews. Hence the costs of gathering, processing and presenting focus group information is lower than for a series of one-on-one interviews. On these counts mounting a focus group is a cheaper exercise than carrying out interviews.

OD focus groups are likely to throw up the occasional participant who is a superb informant about the issue under the group's spotlight, who has much more valuable data to offer the facilitator than other group members. Where considerable depth in understanding an issue is desired, or more broadly based, "triangulated" proof is sought, such persons may be interviewed one-on-one in

depth.

Planning
An OD focus group may be planned and facilitated by a manager or an internal or external consultant, each of whom are referred to here as "the facilitator". In planning to set up a focus group the facilitator should consider what organizational goal or purpose is to be served. What questions or issues does the enterprise sponsoring the event want answered? These will suggest the kind of membership that should be invited to take part in the exercise.

In considering facilitating a prospective OD focus group the would-be managerial facilitator should consider the conceivable impact of his or her position in the chain of command on inhibiting subordinates from contributing to the best of their ability (McLennan, 1989). The manager should consider how best he or she can set up and carry out the OD focus group, given the need to exploit the method's strength in encouraging uninhibited conversation between participants. It is likely that in many situations it would be better to hand the task over to an internal or external consultant. A reasonably supportive climate in the enterprise concerned is needed in order to hold an effective OD focus group process. A group will not work well, in the creative or analytical senses, if it is suffused by mistrust of its auspices or the recipients of its efforts.

In order to promote useful conversation, where real issues are discussed in depth, the group should have a relatively homogeneous membership. It should be made up of people of about the same education, status and level in the enterprise. This will tend to maximise ease in working with one another, and increase mutual confidence.

At the time of inviting the chosen participants to take part in the group event the facilitator should provide information on the issues on the group's agenda, how the group process will be handled, and who else is being invited. This briefs participants adequately, and lays the foundation for favourable participant attitudes for a successful intervention.

Deciding on the appropriate number of people to take part in a particular group process rests on two considerations: who the particular people in the enterprise likely to have useful experience and ideas bearing on the chosen issue are, and the dynamics of group size. Participants should be chosen on the basis of holding divergent views on the focus issue. Beware of the tendency to select members who the facilitator or top manager knows will say what he or she wants to hear. The upper size limit should not exceed about 12 people, the lower limit not less than 5 or 6. Bear in mind that the fewer the number of participants, the more each of them has to contribute to the group's deliberations in order to keep it going. This in turn depends largely on the degree of member motivation. At the other end of the scale, in a group with more than about 12 members the individual is very likely to find it difficult to be heard: there will be a shortage of air time.

A planned change focus group is best sited on neutral - or at least secure -

territory in the eyes of its members. A round, hollow square or horseshoe-shaped table and comfortable chairs are required. The duration of the group's deliberations should be 1.5 hours, a sensible measure of the limits of members' spans of attention. If the group shows high energy in working the chosen issue, or if it is complex, the group should take a coffeee break for 15 or 20 minutes at that point, then resume for another session of up to 1.5 hours long.

To provide adequate coverage of a given issue or issues, it has been found in practice that somewhere between a lower limit of 3 to 4 focus groups and an upper limit of 6 to 8 OD groups are necessary (Morgan, 1988). Experience indicates that the greatest amount of information-gathering and learning about the issue arises from the first one or two groups. The test of whether a sufficient number of groups have been held is when the "point of repetition" in information gathering has been reached, defined as the time at which the facilitator can anticipate what will be said about the issue in the group. Continuing beyond the point of repetition wastes time and money. It is probably best, therefore, to arrange firm memberships of 3 or 4 groups, and advise other possible participants of the next group sets that they *may* be required.

Facilitation
The facilitator is the lead player in the focus group: he or she plays a key role. Skill in facilitating effective group functioning is of key importance to successful outcomes. The facilitator should try to warm up the relationship between himself or herself with each member of the group as soon as possible. This is best done by greeting each person before the group starts work, not later than when each enters the room in which the group action is to take place. A handshake, a friendly word, and the offer of a cup of tea or coffee and a biscuit seems like trivial, microscopic detail. But it can make the all the difference in establishing at the outset the friendly and supportive atmosphere essential to the group's work:

> Given the proper environment participants are [likely to be] less on guard against personal disclosures because the atmosphere is tolerant, friendly, and permissive even when ... egocentric, aggressive or questionable judgments are voiced. (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981: 445).

Despite variations in norms from one enterprise to another, focus group members ordinarily expect discussion to be chaired by someone. Most people are used to working with a chairperson, and they are likely to project this role onto the facilitator if he or she doesn't assume it from the first. Many people normally expect to address their remarks to the chairperson, and this provides participants with some useful locus for their remarks. It is very often too much to expect that group members will be skilled enough in group behaviour to share the role of chairperson. Hence chairing the group becomes the major part of the facilitator's task during the group's life.

The facilitator needs to carry out many of the roles a chairperson practices in any kind of meeting: starting the group off; trying to keep it going; directing attention to certain issues; trying to bounce one person's ideas off another's; and so on. Having set the scene carefully the facilitator should of course be relatively quiet: it is not his or her remarks that are worth recording, but those generated by the

group's members.

It is not necessary that the facilitator be particularly knowledgeable about the issue under the spotlight in the group, nor about the enterprise concerned. In an ongoing OD focus group it is the *process of discussion* that the facilitator needs to pay primary attention to, rather than the particular *content* of it. It does of course help the facilitator to probe effectively the remarks arising in the conversation if he or she makes sure of being broadly informed about the issues beforehand.

Opening Discussion

Confidentiality about focus group discussions is a key concern. At the very start of the event the facilitator should encourage participants to say what they want to say, without fear of bring quoted outside and suffering possible retribution. What the British call "Chatham House Rules" should be adopted: there should be "no names, no pack drill". In this way Chatham House Rules can loosen tongues. The facilitator should make an opening statement about the importance of this practice for the success of the group.

At the beginning of the group's conversation the facilitator should invite each member of it in turn to make an uninterrupted personal statement in regard to the issues, as he or she sees them. The facilitator should encourage each individual to refer to his or her own experiences, and to tell his or her stories about actual incidents bearing on the group's issue. In presenting their remarks some participants are likely to wax eloquent; others may offer only one or two somewhat guarded remarks. The latter are often in the process of finding their feet in the group, waiting to see how the conversation develops, and how the facilitator handles it. They may come in later, or respond to a probe at that time.

Given the deliberately selected, often relatively homogeneous membership of an OD focus group, the potential for pathological Groupthink can be quite considerable. Measures should therefore be taken to guard against it (Janis, 1982). Several such measures should be activated by the facilitator at the beginning of the group's discussion. A norm should be suggested to the group by which consensus is *not* sought. He or she should make a loud and clear statement like "We are *not* seeking a *consensus* view on this issue or any part of it. I expect we will explore various different positions on the same or similar issues."

Given the requirements of the facilitation role, it is obvious that the facilitator should be skilled in working in face-to-face groups, and have solid training and experience in group dynamics. These skills will certainly be tested. It is, for example, a straightforward requirement that the facilitator have the self-confidence to pursue the once-around-the-room nominal group process phase, in the possible face of powerful group members, who may want to keep on talking and override others. A colleague suggested, after reviewing a draft of this paper, that the right motto for the OD focus group should be "approach with enthusiasm and caution".

Recording Methods

Some method of recording the ongoing deliberations of a group must be set up

in order subsequently to analyse the points made, and to inform and persuade others, like, for example, top managers in the organization concerned. The prime purpose and scale of the focus group process should dominate in selecting which data recording system is adopted. A highly transparent system is usually needed to suggest openness, and to establish and maintain member confidence in the process.

From the technique point of view the use of closed circuit television (CCTV) boils down to considering the virtual necessity of holding the group event in a TV studio, or a training room similarly equipped, given the needs for several cameras and the sheer obtrusiveness of the medium. Audio tapes are on the other hand much less intrusive, easy to use, low cost, and likely to be adequate for many focus group applications. A group with more than a handful of participants will need two or three microphones, linked by a mixer to a tape recorder, in order to generate a decent quality record. From the point of view of disclosure of the source of remarks is concerned, CCTV is almost entirely transparent as to who said what, audio less so, and remarks on paper least.

Having a "scribe" sit in with the group to make a continuous, displayed, checkable record of what is said, as it is happening, is probably the quickest and most transparent feedback method available. This can be nicely carried out in a high tech way by a computer typed, projection screen displayed, laser-printed, newsprint-sized summary posted on the meeting room walls. But a hand-written and hand-posted wall-display system, while much less sophisticated looking, is quite as effective for the purpose, and more in keeping with the spirit of informal interaction of the scribe-facilitator with group participants. It is also much less elaborate and less prone to breakdown.

Using a scribe or CCTV involves having two facilitative people working with the group, and implies significantly higher contact staffing costs than the audio method. Scribes and technicians are, of course, much cheaper to hire than external consultants. If the scribe is an internal consultant who can also act as an analyst of the information gathered, less external consultant time - and hence cost - is entailed.

Agenda Development

Given that the facilitator will for the point-of-repetition reason nearly always facilitate at least two or three groups, the issue arises as to whether to adopt a fixed or rolling group agenda. The latter suggests reviewing the agenda after each group discussion is over, and revising it as appropriate. The position adopted here is that the agenda of successive groups should be adapted and developed, since the preceding ones have already mapped a given part of the chosen territory. And it is often also appropriate to involve group participants in generating emergent questions for the agenda of the next group in the series, as the final task in their group discussion.

The assumption about how focus groups behave, underlying the adoption of a rolling agenda, is that such groups are robust, not easily driven away from what their participants want to say, given reasonably supportive conditions. It follows

that the facilitator can ring in successive changes in the group's agenda, within broad limits, bearing in mind two bench marks: the point of repetition and the old adage that "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink". Group members will in their conversation talk about what they are moved to talk about. And each successive group will naturally tend to highlight some aspects of the issue's territory, and more or less neglect others. This is not necessarily exactly what top management or the facilitator had in mind when they started out. But creative, serendipitous, informative connections are often made by participants, connections that had not been made before by executives or others in the enterprise.

The facilitator may opt to use a video, an audio tape or a slide projection of a conversation passage, theme or sequence as a way of getting a successor group to explore an issue under the spotlight. This practice may in some cases blow individual anonymity out of the window: the facilitator should obviously seek permission for it, and not necessarily expect to get it. Such a method is not worth considering if confidentiality is key - that mutual trust is not high in the organization concerned.

Analysing and Reporting
In order to make sense of the words and sketches - on a pile of newsprint sheets, or a stack of audio or video tapes - after the discussion work is over, the facilitator has to sort out the material under some or other set of headings. The fixed or rolling agenda points used are useful for this purpose. The analysis - reporting phase of the process consists of finding a way of growing some structure and style for organising and presenting the data, arising from the organizational purpose to be served in setting up the OD focus groups, from what people have to say, and the focus group's managerial sponsor.

Some of the harder problems to crack in using OD focus groups reside in these data analysis - writing up considerations. At the simplest level this is because in group conversations participants duck and dive all over the place: much analytic sorting out is therefore necessary. At the complex level the job of synthesising the substantial output of a number of groups in a large scale focus group process into some kind of coherent report form can be very demanding. The task ultimately requires significant thinking and writing skills.

The operating maxim recommended here, directed towards the end of making a good job of the task is to "stay close to the data" and "let the data do the talking", as a team of Harvard Business School writers remarked in referring to analysis of qualitative data (Kotter, Faux & McArthur, 1978). High fidelity in reporting what people said must be attained and maintained. The report writer must be rigorous about preserving the exact words and meanings group participants intended. This depends ultimately on respect for what the participants actually said, and showing this in reporting. It also requires respect for preserving the *intent* of the group conversation data. And any adequate report must capture the flavour of the message the group participants are trying to convey.

The flavour that comes through the final text is something group participants

must identify with if the report is to have their strong support, and enterprise change and development emerge from it. In seeking the maximum impact the report should capitalise on the use of the telling phrases participants used. The analyst should select the most colourful, metaphorical and penetrating comments on a given point. Such phrases can sum up a whole line of thought or experience. Finally, the analyst-writer should show his or her draft report to a convenience sample of the people who generated it, to ensure that it contains a 'true and fair' interpretation of what they said and thought.

Any transcription of video or audio tapes, hand-made notes or massage of the data generated by a focus group of course involves processing time and cost. For example, it typically takes about three to four hours to note fully each hour of conversation on an audio tape, let alone analyse it under a common set of heads.

Data Gathering Traditions
It does not do to mix the qualitative and quantitative data gathering traditions in working with OD focus groups. Using a quantitatively defensible random sample of the population taking part in a substantial OD focus group process, for example, makes sense in providing strong inference from the sample to the total population. This is likely to impress the statistically aware and potential nay-sayers. But the cost is likely to be severe data overload on the group output analyst, likely delays in reporting, and impressively higher reporting costs. As advocated above the sampling principle must rather be the qualitative criterion of the point of repetition, a quantity usually much lower than a statistician would be happy with, but one which rings true at gut level.

On the other tack, the quantitative way to fish for useful themes in OD focus group material is by "content analysis", often by reading the data into a computer and then scanning it for key phrases, ideas or correlations. Sophisticates use the Oxford Concordance Programme, for example, or the like (Krippendorff, 1980) The mindless correlation of one item, A, with another item B, and so on to N is of course not constructive, and the analyst must take a stand somewhere concerning what is worth analysing. This brings in a matter of judgment, just like being a manager does, and lies outside the range of the null hypothesis brigade. Use of the Oxford programme or other programs of like complexity will, for almost all planned change purposes almost certainly involve far too much time, expense and delay to present any kind of practical alternative.

Ancient and Modern Reporting
The choices in reporting on a focus group to an executive in the enterprise concerned range on a continuum between the extreme points of the ancient and modern methods. The ancient method emphasizes a stand alone, traditional written report, in a format that systematises and summarizes the focus group data, and suggests action conclusions growing out of it. Such reports can be rendered more pointed, readable and persuasive by the tactical inclusion of telling or catchy phrases and motifs used in the groups, as discussed earlier. The executive recipient is supposed to read the report, and figure out what action, if any, he or she should take.

The modern approach consists of setting up some kind of interactive reporting back device by which the decision-making recipients of the focus group output receive the report under conditions where they can be maximally informed and influenced by it. This may consist of a "fish bowl", for example, where executives sit silently on the outside circle in a conference room, while a sample team of focus group participants and a facilitator, seated on the inside circle, outline and debate their findings. Mixed sub-groups may then subsequently discuss these findings. Various such creative people-centred designs can be constructed to fit the enterprise and the focus group issue.

Finally, after the entire OD focus group process is over the facilitator should make a note about how the whole process went, with the view of noting innovations, useful practices and the like.

Conclusion
The OD focus group provides a major intervention process tool for bringing about planned organizational change and development. It mobilises the possibilities of small group interaction as an information stimulating and gathering device via the application of group dynamics and team facilitation skills. A people-centred rather than a thing-centred process, group participants enjoy the experience of taking part in stimulating, often creative conversation. It is a much more user friendly, people-centred and human-responsive process than that evoked by the typically impersonal, document-based, bureaucratic ethos of the questionnaire or instrument. Its face-to-face data-gathering costs are much lower than those pertaining to one-on-one interviews. And data reduction and feedback may be flexibly tailored to the managerial sponsor's needs.

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