CONTROLLING RISK TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANISE AND RUN FOCUS GROUPS

BACKGROUND

Focus groups can form an important part of the process of using the Management Standards to assess and control risks related to work-related stress. Focus groups are basically:

- Ways of listening to employees and learning from them;
- One way of facilitating active participation of employees in the risk assessment process for work-related stress; and
- One way for management to demonstrate commitment to a participative process of managing the risks from work-related stress.

PURPOSE

The purpose of using focus groups is to discuss the findings from Step 2 of the risk assessment process (survey results, absence data, etc) with a sample of employees and to elicit suggestions for improvement.

Employees can draw on their own detailed knowledge of local and contextual factors to:

- Uncover the underlying causes of any undue pressure in their work;
- Enrich interpretation of the data collected at Step 2 of the process e.g. the HSE Analysis tool, other surveys, sickness absence data, exit interviews, etc.
- Identify local issues;
- Prioritise the specific areas in which there is a need for action;
- Explore practical and workable improvements

In our experience, of working with organisations using the Management Standards approach, steps 2 and 3 seem to generate the most challenges. In that, some organisations find it difficult to effectively form data collection and analysis (Step 2) through focus groups (Step 3) to the generation of and implementation of action plans (Step 4). Some common errors we have encountered is that organisations either try to circumvent Step 3, moving directly from data analysis to action planning, or alternatively, make Step 3 overly complex generating very detailed and exhaustive action plans that are very difficult to implement. The true purpose of Step 2 and Step 3 is to enable the organisation to identify the key issues and work with their employees to develop appropriate interventions (actions).

The role of the steering group will be to combine the focus group information with results gathered from Step 2 e.g. analysis tool data, other surveys, and sickness absence data, etc. The main issues and solutions that arose at overall and local level will be then summarised and prioritised.

In deciding what actions to include on the action plan the following aspects need to be considered:

- What action is the organisation already taking?
- Is it enough? In order to help answer this question the states to be achieved should be revisited.
- What more does the organisation need to do?

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO RUNNING FOCUS GROUPS

PREPARING FOR THE FOCUS GROUP

Developing a question set

The data gathered in Step 2 of the process should have highlighted a number of areas warranting further exploration. Therefore, it is advised to base the question set on these areas. The HSE Analysis Tool or other survey tools may have indicated that for example employees poorly perceive 'Demands'. The question set may then contain questions to unravel causes of undue pressure asking focus group participants to comment on priorities and time pressures. The question set can also focus on the sickness absence data trends. After exploring the issues, it is important to remember to elicit some practical and workable improvements from participants.

A pre-prepared schedule of questions can:

- Help ensure each group is given adequate opportunity to discuss all the key issues in a similar fashion;
- Be helpful if the facilitator has been drafted in from outside and is unfamiliar with your unit or section of the organisation;
- Help the facilitator to stay on track and on time

Types of Questions

Remember that you are not merely seeking oral responses to a questionnaire, it is important to encourage open exchanges and discussion. As part of your preparation you should focus on how to introduce questions and topics in a conversational manner. The set of questions should include:

- ***Introductory questions***: Questions should be designed to get participants discussing the issue of work-related stress in general before homing in on particular issues
- ***Linking questions***: Questions which enable the facilitator to move from the broad general discussion, following the introductory question, to the more specific areas of interest;
- ***Key questions***: Questions which address the key issues which the facilitator wants to cover in the focus group session.

See ***Appendix 1 Using questions in focus groups*** for more detailed information on the types of questions you can use.

Number of questions

A rule of thumb is that you will have time for no more than four or five key questions in a focus group lasting 1.5 to 2 hours.

Statement on future action

It is helpful to include at the end of your question schedule a prepared statement on what will happen next, for example:

- How results will be summarised, interpreted and reported;
- What other specific actions will be taken;
- The timescales for reporting and subsequent action;

- How participants will be kept informed of progress.

Developing a method to record the data

Before the focus groups begin it is worthwhile to consider how the discussions are to be recorded and how they will be analysed. One way is to produce a template for the facilitators to complete at the end of the session.

Planning and timetable

It is important at the start of the process to plan the focus group sessions into the project plan.

Selecting the group

The number of focus groups and employees involved in this stage will depend on the size of the organisations, the organisational structure and local circumstances.

The number and make up of focus groups that you select will be determined by such things as:

- The issues that need to be addressed as identified from the results of the analysis tool, your own survey, sickness absence data, exit interviews, or other relevant management information.
- Groups of employees who are likely to have to deal with similar types of work issues;
- Considerations of practicability and feasibility.

Experience has shown that organisations choose different approaches to select participants for focus groups. Some organisations use the demographic categories (length of service in the organisation, department, etc) that appear within the analysis tool or other surveys, to invite the different groups to attend the focus groups. Others have chosen to run focus groups for departments or groups where ‘hot spots’ have been identified. Lastly, another option taken could be to run focus groups within each directorate/department.

Choosing participants

The basic purpose in using focus groups is to hear employees’ discussions of issues of relevance to them. Thus, it is important to set up groups where participants are likely to share common interests, encounter similar kinds of sources of work-related pressure and feel comfortable in expressing their views in front of the other group members.

When groups are made up of employees of very different grade or authority levels, lower-ranking employees may feel inhibited. This can be particularly acute when supervisors and subordinates are brought together in the same group. Similarly, if groups are composed of employees who are incompatible with one another in other ways, which are important to the issues being discussed (for example, administrative and technical staff, staff from different sites or sections of the organisation) this can also inhibit discussion.

The key points are:

- Choose groups where participants are likely to be comfortable with one another.
- Avoid bringing together supervisors and subordinates in the same group.

Number of participants

The typical size of a focus group is six to ten participants. This range gives scope for a large enough range of different viewpoints and opinions, while enabling all participants to make contributions without having to compete for ‘air time’.

Invitation to participants and briefing note

You should send written (or e-mail) invitations to participants well in advance of the focus groups. Such invitations should include a briefing note that:

- Explains the purpose of the focus groups;
- Describes what taking part in the focus groups will involve for the individual employee;
- Explains how issues of confidentiality will be dealt with;
    - Makes clear that participation is voluntary and offers alternative options for expressing their views where appropriate;
- Describes how results will be analysed and reported;
- Emphasises that individual responses will not be attributable;
- Describes what will be done with outputs, suggestions for action etc;
- Offers a contact point for further information; and
- Is signed by an appropriate member of senior management to demonstrate organisational commitment.

The facilitator

The facilitator has the task of leading the focus group. This involves:

- Setting the scene, explaining the purpose of the focus group;
- Introducing participants to the topics for discussion;
- Keeping the group on time and focussed on the topics;
- Encouraging participation from all the group members;
- Summarising discussions from time to time to check appropriate understanding of participants' comments.
- Ensuring that all the key issues are addressed
- It is useful to have a note taker recording all discussions so the facilitator is freed up to give all their attention to the group.

Selecting a facilitator

Although there is no need to require an external facilitator to run focus groups, it may help in cases when employees will not perceive the internal facilitator as being neutral and independent. It may be very difficult for example for managers to fulfil a facilitator role within their section. Participants may feel uncomfortable expressing themselves freely:

- In the presence of their superiors;
- If they feel there may be a conflict of interest; or
- When they see management or particular managers as contributing to or the source of some of the problems that they wish to discuss.

A representative from the occupational health team, human resources or people from different parts of the organisation who are perceived as having ‘no axe to grind’ and being good listeners may fulfil the facilitator role.

Though they do not need to be specialist facilitators, facilitators do need to have certain skills or will need to receive some training. The most critical skills of the facilitator are those described as ‘active listening skills’. Many large organisations may be able to provide in-house training in such skills; a wide range of organisations offer suitable courses.

How long should the focus group last?

The focus group is likely to take between 1.5 to 2 hours.

Location

If possible use a location for the focus group where:

- Participants will be free from interruptions and distractions;
- Participants will be able to see each other and hear each other easily. U-shaped seating arrangements or arrangements where everyone is round one table tend to work best;
- The facilities are comfortable and make it pleasant for participants to sit and talk to each other for up to 2 hours.

Managing expectations

The expectations of participants

It is important to manage the expectations of participants to ensure that these are realistic and correspond with those of management. Key tools, which you can use to manage expectations, include:

- The invitation to participants and accompanying briefing note;
- The focus group introduction and briefing;
- The summary and any related action plans.

It is important to note that informal communication between employees (for example, feedback from participants in previous focus group sessions) is likely to have a significant effect on expectations.

RUNNING THE FOCUS GROUP

Materials you will need

The types of materials you will need to run a focus group session include:

- Notepads and pens or pencils
- Flip chart and markers
- Cards (or badges, stickers etc) for writing participants’ names on
- Watch or clock
- Results of the HSE Analysis tool or any other data for the relevant group
- Focus group questions guide

Preparation / set up

The facilitator should arrive at the location before the participants and ensure that:

- Domestic arrangements and any refreshments are in place

- The room and seating arrangements enable participants to see and hear one another
- The venue is comfortable and conducive to discussion.

Welcoming the participants and introductory briefing

After welcoming the participants to the group session, the facilitator should:

- Introduce themselves and any assistants to the group and explain their roles and such things as domestics, timescales etc;
- Ask people to introduce themselves, when not already known to one another or to the facilitator;
- Explain once more the purpose of the focus groups and re-iterate the points covered in the briefing note, particularly:
    - The fact that the main focus will be on issues that affect groups of employees and with tackling the organisational causes of work-related stress;
    - The fact that individual responses will be anonymised before being reported back (it may be helpful to say how you will ensure this);
- Explain how they will operate, that is:
    - Beginning with open discussion;
    - Focusing in on certain questions; and ideally
    - Finishing with suggestions for action/improvement;
- Ask for any questions or issues that need clarified.

TAKING ACTION AFTER THE FOCUS GROUP

Interpret and report results

Summaries

Write up a summary of your notes and / or the notes of your assistant as soon as possible after each meeting - a quick turnaround time on the transcription helps avoid memory lapses. It's easiest for the facilitator or recorder to remember what was meant by a particular acronym or shorthand immediately following the session.

Analyse the summaries

It is useful to start by reading all the focus group summaries in one sitting. Look for trends (comments that seem to appear repeatedly in the data) and surprises (unexpected comments that are worth noting). Keep in mind that context and tone are just as important as the reiteration of particular words. If a comment (or a number of comments) seemed to be phrased negatively, elicited emotional responses, or triggered many other comments, that would be worth noting in the analysis.

Write the report

The final report can take many different shapes, but it may include information about the background and purpose of the focus group, details of the sessions, results, and conclusions.

Translate results into action

The greatest failures in the use of focus groups occur in two areas; failure to report to the focus group participants and failure to apply the results to the purpose for which they were originally commissioned.

Send participants a summary from their session and include them in correspondence about how the information was used.

The following provides some suggestions for translating the results into action:

- Schedule a meeting to review the summaries and discuss their implications;
- Highlight the main themes, issues, problems, or questions that arose in the focus groups.
- Put the focus group information in context. Compare, contrast, and combine the focus group information with information gathered from other sources such as surveys, interviews, or secondary research sources;
- If there is a lot of information, prioritise it. Then decide what actions need to be taken with regard to the priority items and by when;
- Decide what issues can be tackled locally and which issues require to be tackled within a wider context (area, regional, national etc.).

Further information

For further information on the use of focus groups see Appendix 2.

APPENDIX 1: USING QUESTIONS IN FOCUS GROUPS

USING QUESTIONS TO CONTROL THE FLOW OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Sequencing and balance of questions

Rules of thumb for focus groups are as follows:

- Use general questions early in the focus group session;
- Use more specific and more focused questions later in the session, after the general questions;
- Use positive questions before negative questions; ask "what's good about working here" before asking about the downside;
- Use un-cued questions before cued questions (cued questions are questions where you present the group with a range of choices or ask them for their reactions to a number of options).

The following questions are used at different stages in focus groups.

Introductory questions

Introductory questions should be open-ended (see below). Often all participants are asked the same introductory question to encourage everyone to get an opportunity to talk at an early stage. Where possible, the introductory question should be phrased in a neutral or positive manner. For example, you might begin by asking participants something along the lines of "*what's it like to work here*?"

Linking questions

The facilitator can make use of a wide range of types of questions and techniques to move the discussion on. One of the most common approaches is to make use of probes or follow-up questions to explore in more depth the individual responses to the introductory questions and the subsequent discussions. Though facilitators do not need to prepare these in advance, you might find it is useful to look at examples of the types of questions that you can use and how you might use them (see below).

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

The main categories of questions, which you might use in focus groups, can be broken down into:

- Questions to avoid;
- Questions to use (some of them sparingly and with discretion).

Questions to avoid

Avoid the use of the following types of questions.

Leading questions

Avoid questions which lead the respondent in a given direction and contain the implied answer. Examples of leading questions are:

- "The first part was much better than the second, wasn't it?"
- "Do you agree that the first part was better?"
- "Most people think the first part was better, what do you think?"

Loaded questions or 'value laden' questions
Avoid questions which use emotionally charged or value laden words, for example, questions such as:

- "Would you be for or against unhelpful management practices which force…."

Multiple questions or 'double-barrelled' questions
Avoid asking double-barrelled questions such as:

- "Have you ever worked in finance, and what was it like to work there?"

Ask each part of the question separately. You can frame a multiple question with a statement, for example:

- "I want to find out about the pros and cons of working here. First of all, what are the good things about working here?"

Questions to use

Open questions
Open questions, or open-ended questions, should be the most frequently used questions in focus groups. They allow the respondents as much freedom as possible in deciding how to reply. They do not constrain them to 'Yes / No' answers or a limited range of options, they don't imply the type of response that is expected. They are useful at all stages of a focus group but particularly in the early stages.
Examples of open-ended questions are:

- "What did you think about …the course?"
- "What is it like to work here?"
- "How did you feel about that?"

They are sometimes phrased as requests for information or invitations to "Tell me about.". For example,

- "Can you tell me a bit about what it felt like…..?"

When the idea is to encourage participants to be spontaneous and give 'first thoughts' rather than tell you what they think you want to hear, you can ask the question along the lines:

- "What are your first thoughts about…?"
- "What's the first thing that strikes you about …the new proposals?"

Closed questions
Closed questions have important uses but must be used with caution as they can stifle discussion. Closed questions include questions which call for 'Yes /No', 'one word' or brief answers.
For example:

- "How old are you?";
- "Are you married or single?".

They tend to close down discussions rather than open them up, so they are generally avoided early on in focus group sessions. They can be very useful later on in focus group sessions when you want to narrow down the focus of the discussion, for example:

- "Which of these issues needs tackling first?";

or to check understanding:

- "Do you mean by that that …?";

and they can be good lead-ins to open-ended questions:

- "Which is the most important …. ?";

followed by an open-ended question:

- "How do you feel about it?".

Probes
Probes are questions where the facilitator asks for more information or more detail. They can be very useful in assisting with the flow of the discussion and for encouraging participants who give brief or ambiguous contributions to say more. Examples of probes are:

- "Could you tell me a bit more about that?";
- "I'm not quite sure what you mean….?";
- "Could you explain a bit more?"
- "How does that work in practice?"
- "Can you give us an example?"

Probes usually arise relatively spontaneously in the course of the discussion, though they can also be partly pre-planned. They can help the facilitator to home in on an important issue or control the direction of the discussion. For example, the facilitator might say:

- "Peter has said that he feels strongly about X, but I didn't understand fully….Could you tell us a bit more about X …."

Follow-up questions

Follow up questions are similar to probes and can be equally useful. They are often planned into the question schedule. For example, the facilitator might ask:

- "What is the most important issue facing the organisation today?" followed by "What can we do about it?"

Closing questions
Closing questions are designed to allow participants to express their overall view or position on the topic, for example, the facilitator might ask:

- "If you were asked to advise HSE on what it should do about work-related stress. What would you say."
- "Write down on a "yellow stickie" what you think is the most important issue the organisation needs to tackle concerning work-related stress".

Summary questions
At the end of each period of discussion, and at the end of the focus group session, the facilitator can give a summary of the points to emerge. The facilitator should attempt

to express the issues raised by participants in the language in which they were expressed by participants. The facilitator can then ask:

- “How well does that capture what was said?”
- “Have I managed to adequate summarise the discussions?”;

and finish by asking:

- “Is there anything we’ve missed?”
- “Have we covered everything?”.

Appendix 2: FURTHER INFORMATION ON FOCUS GROUPS

A useful source of practical advice, helpful hints and suggestions and do's and don'ts, sample questions etc is provided by:

Morgan, D.L. and Krueger, R.A.(1998). *Focus Group Kit*. Volumes 1-6. SAGE Publications, London.

The four volumes below are the most relevant in the series:

Morgan, D.L. (1998). The Focus Group Guidebook. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit.* (Vol.1). SAGE Publications, London.

Morgan, D.L. (1998). Planning Focus Groups. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit.* (Vol.2). SAGE Publications, London.

Krueger, R.A.(1998). Developing Questions for Focus Groups. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit.* (Vol.3). SAGE Publications, London.

Krueger, R.A.(1998). Moderating Focus Groups. In D.L. Morgan and R.A. Krueger (Eds). *Focus Group Kit.* (Vol.4). SAGE Publications, London.