Focus groups: not just empty talk

Occasionally several employees are randomly selected to share in a confidential group discussion about Georgia Power. Here's the inside story on how these sessions work—and why they're valuable to the Company and employees.

Someone called you at home last week, saying you were randomly chosen to participate in a confidential group discussion about Georgia Power. You agreed to talk; in fact, you're excited about being asked to give your opinion. But when you show up for the session, things seem a little strange. In a small conference room where the group is gathering, there's a mirror hanging on the wall and a microphone dangling overhead.

The 10 or so trusting souls who showed up just as you did are sitting nervously near the exit. Just as you imagine it's time for the door to bang shut and a giant padlock to go "click," a small, dark-haired woman introduces herself as Margaret Roller and does a pretty good job of mindreading.

"I know you're thinking, 'If this is supposed to be confidential, why is there a microphone overhead, and what's behind the mirror?'"

A few minutes into her no-nonsense introduction, tension starts to fade as Roller explains what a "focus group" is all about.
The group is hit with questions such as 'How would you improve two-way communications at Georgia Power?' or 'What's the rumor mill saying these days?' Group members may be asked to complete sentences that may read 'If I were Bill Dahlberg, I would...' or to jot down items they perceive as Company problems.

For the past eight years, I've worked with Georgia Power around the state, conducting focus groups to improve communications between employees and management. As far as I'm concerned, you don't have last names,' she tells the group. "I really don't give a hoot about who says what; that's not important to me. What's important is that you recognize this as an opportunity to improve your work environment.

"You can voice your concerns to me—a neutral, independent person; a sounding board—who has the ear of Georgia Power management. I'll report your opinions and those things you perceive as problems to upper management, but I'm not a tattletale. I won't give anyone your names. Nothing's going to come back to haunt you!"

But the microphone? "A tape is being made of this session because I'm not taking any notes," says Roller. "The tape belongs to me. I'll use it to make my report. I may or may not turn it over to the employee and external communications manager (Leslie Lamkin), the person who asked for this study to be done. You'll help me decide; you make the rules. Either way, you won't be identified in any conversations."

And the mirror? "It's a two-way mirror, but look, no one's in the room behind it," says Roller. She swings open a door to an adjoining room and leaves it open. "The facility's designed that way because it's often used for discussions among consumers. For example, I might be here with people talking about what brand of peanut butter or greeting cards they buy. Clients use it to see how customers react to their product. That's not what we're doing tonight. No one will be back there."

"Employee focus groups are extremely useful in finding out where employees stand on an issue," says Leslie Lamkin, employee and external communications manager. "As we continue to develop ways to communicate company goals, employee participation in these groups will be a crucial aspect in evaluating results. Often, when we're about to start an internal communication effort, we want to know what employees' concerns are and how we should go about addressing them."

"On other occasions, focus groups are conducted after we've tried something new. They help us decide what the Company's next step should be. If employees

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Focus continued

are disturbed about an issue, we may realize that management
needs to take action right away, or we might find out that the
things we think employees are bothered by really aren't
that big a deal after all! Focus group participants hash out issues that
they otherwise wouldn't talk about exclusively for
two hours. Group members seldom know each
other. Common barriers to communication, such as boss-subordinate or co-
worker relationships, are avoided in the selection
process. Sometimes the employee mix includes all
non-supervisory employees. On other occa-
sions, only managers and supervisors might be par-
ticipants. Because the dis-
cussion is often targeted
at upper management,
employee focus-group
discussions at Georgia
Power do not include
company policy makers.

After Roller's intro-
duction, the group is hit
with questions such as,
"How would you improve
two-way communications at
Georgia Power," or "What's the rumor mill saying these days?"
During the next two hours,
there's an oral discussion and
maybe a couple of written exer-
cises. The group may be asked to
complete sentences that
read, "If I were Bill Dahlberg, I
would...," or to jot down a list of
items they perceive as company
problems. At the end of a session,
as a small stipend is paid to cover
transportation expenses.

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famous for their griping,
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gages them to come up
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Roller, focus group mod-
erator. "In these discus-
sions, I ask questions to
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The success of a group
depends largely on its moderator.
Roller, who has conducted more
Georgia Power sessions than any
other focus group moderator, is a
seasoned pro. She draws on a
15-year background of marketing
research and psychology to get
honest feedback from a room of
suspicious strangers.

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Roller. "In these discussions, I ask
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tain attitudes have evolved. Then
the Company can look at my
report to understand the under-
lying reasons that tell why people
might feel so strongly about cer-
tain things. I go beyond the sur-
face to find out why people feel
the way they do and to suggest
ways the Company can make
them feel better."

By addressing the issue of
trust and confidentiality first,
Roller gets past hurdles that
might inhibit discussion. "I try to
establish a friendly, non-hostile
atmosphere where there are no
rules. The only points I insist on
are honesty and confidentiality",
says Roller. "The group decides,
in a totally democratic way,
whether any other rules should
be observed. I realize that people
are suspicious about being called
at home. Then, they may become
more suspicious because the caller
from my company doesn't say
what will be discussed.

"I intentionally avoid telling
my callers details of the discus-
sion topic, because I don't want
employees who agree to par-
ticipate to go out and become ex-
perts on the topic before we
meet," says Roller. "I want them
to come in fresh. Focus groups
aren't used to grade employees on
what they know. If the awareness
level on a particular issue isn't
high, knowing this is useful in
determining how important
employees consider the topic to
be."

A few years ago, information
from Plant Hatch focus groups
helped Lamkin and plant
management establish commun-
ication methods that work in the
"less-than-routine" work environ-
ment. "Two focus groups were
held to find out whether employ-
ees thought communication was
adequate, and whether it was
working up and down the ladder;"
says Lamkin. After the first
Hatch group pointed out the
need to touch base with manage-
ment more frequently, largely
because of shift scheduling, new
communication approaches were
tried. They included immediate
news briefings following a plant
emergency and monthly breakfast
meetings with top plant officials.
Later, a focus group involving a
different set of employees eval-
uated the changes; they gave
positive remarks about the new
approaches.
Leslie Lamkin (left) and focus group moderator Margaret Roller meet at an Atlanta facility where some sessions are held. Although the overhead microphone records comments made during the session, Roller lets group members decide whether anyone should hear the tapes.

"Last February, we conducted three focus groups, two in Atlanta and one in Rome, to see how employees felt about the Performance Pay Plan," Lamkin adds. "The groups told us that there was some concern about whether supervisors would know how to administer the new program. This feedback helped those designing the plan to develop supervisor training. Later this year, we may do follow-up focus groups on the pay plan or other issues to see if feelings have changed."

"Most of the time, serious concerns that come out of focus groups are followed up with quantitative research," says Charles Plunkett, manager of load and market research. "If nine out of 10 people in a focus group agree that something is a problem, it doesn't mean that 90 percent of the Company feels that way. It may mean that the situation requires a closer look. Although employees' comments are always valuable, focus-group comments alone aren't final decision-making criteria, but they do give us direction. Additional research helps us see how widespread the concerns may be."

"Before Margaret begins calling for focus group recruits, we will try to mention in This Week and on Answerphone that employees may be called at home and asked to take part in these discussions," says Lamkin. "Still, the employee communications section will probably receive calls from people who want to know if the call from Roller's group is legitimate. If an employee would feel better about talking to me or someone else in corporate communication before going to a session, that's fine," says Lamkin. "We just want them to recognize this as another opportunity to be heard."

"Focus groups help employees get what they want from their work environment," says Roller. "I have the luxury of taking their needs to management, and I do that without incriminating the people who have expressed their thoughts. Although some come to the group thinking, 'This is weird,' or 'It's too good to be true,' they usually leave with a pretty good feeling, knowing that what they've said can make a difference. After a session ends, invariably, some group members linger, wanting to tell me more."  

—Evelyn Bailey