



## Focus groups: not just empty talk

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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.

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**S**omeone 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.

"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

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how customers react to their product. That's not what we're doing tonight. No one will be back there."

So starts another focus group in which employees take on powerful, behind-the-scenes roles in shaping Georgia Power. These small groups, representing a sample of employees, usually meet after hours in motel meeting rooms or conference rooms (away from company offices) built just for this kind of thing. They go to "tell it like it is," or as it should be, when it comes to Georgia Power. And they do it with the Company's approval.

With Roller, president of Roller Marketing Research, probing their thoughts on key company issues, employees engage in constructive, thought-provoking exchanges and send candid, useful feedback to upper management. In the past, they've tipped management to rumors that needed to be squelched, headed off concerns about the Performance Pay Plan, given frank opinions about company front-page news items, reviewed communication plans and helped develop new ones. As the Company continues to hone its competitive strategies, focus groups will be instrumental in evaluating

their effectiveness.

A popular research tool, a focus-group discussion helps sort out how and why people feel the way they do. It's not used to indicate the number of people who feel a certain way; rather, by pinpointing concerns employees consider important, focus groups help determine how deeply feelings run. That helps the Company gauge the weight of an issue and consider ways of dealing with it. Sometimes the information from a discussion is used to design a more formal survey in which the Company measures how many people have the same thoughts as the group.

"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 occasions, only managers and supervisors might be participants. Because the discussion is often targeted at upper management, employee focus-group discussions at Georgia Power do not include company policy makers.

After Roller's introduction, 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 exercises. 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, a small stipend is paid to cover transportation expenses.

*'Corporate employees are famous for their griping, but a focus group encourages them to come up with a constructive way of having their needs met,' says Margaret Roller, focus group moderator. "In these discussions, I ask questions to determine why certain attitudes have evolved. I go beyond the surface..."*

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.

"Corporate employees are famous for their griping, but a focus group encourages them to come up with a constructive way of having their needs met," says Roller. "In these discussions, I ask questions to determine why certain attitudes have evolved. Then the Company can look at my report to understand the underlying reasons that tell why people might feel so strongly about certain things. I go beyond the surface 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 discussion topic, because I don't want employees who agree to participate to go out and become experts 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 communication methods that work in the "less-than-routine" work environment. "Two focus groups were held to find out whether employees 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 management 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 evaluated 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