

Preface

The need for this book became clear from our experiences as novices interested in the art of conducting focus groups. We remember the frustration and uncertainty we felt during our own attempts, nearly a decade ago, in learning how to plan and conduct focus groups. In recent years, we have watched in amazement the increased use of focus groups by schools and have been taken aback to learn that in some cases, focus groups have actually been misused. Granted, there are some good sources of information for someone who wants to know more about using focus groups. Unfortunately, almost all of these comprehensive sources are intended for researchers; none is directed specifically at school practitioners.

We wrote this book—a book that will help novice school practitioners conduct focus groups—to fulfill these deficiencies. We have based this book on two important sources of information: (a) an extensive review of literature and (b) our own experience as novices learning, the hard way, how to plan and conduct focus groups. Thus we have written the book we wish had been available when we were novices.

What is the purpose of this book?

Certainly, part of our purpose is for the readers to know more about focus groups, to know how focus groups might be used in schools, and to know how misuse of focus groups can be avoided. But our purpose goes beyond that: We want the readers to be able to actually use focus groups in ways that are practical and cost-effective *and* that will ensure the resulting information is accurate.

What are the key features of this book?

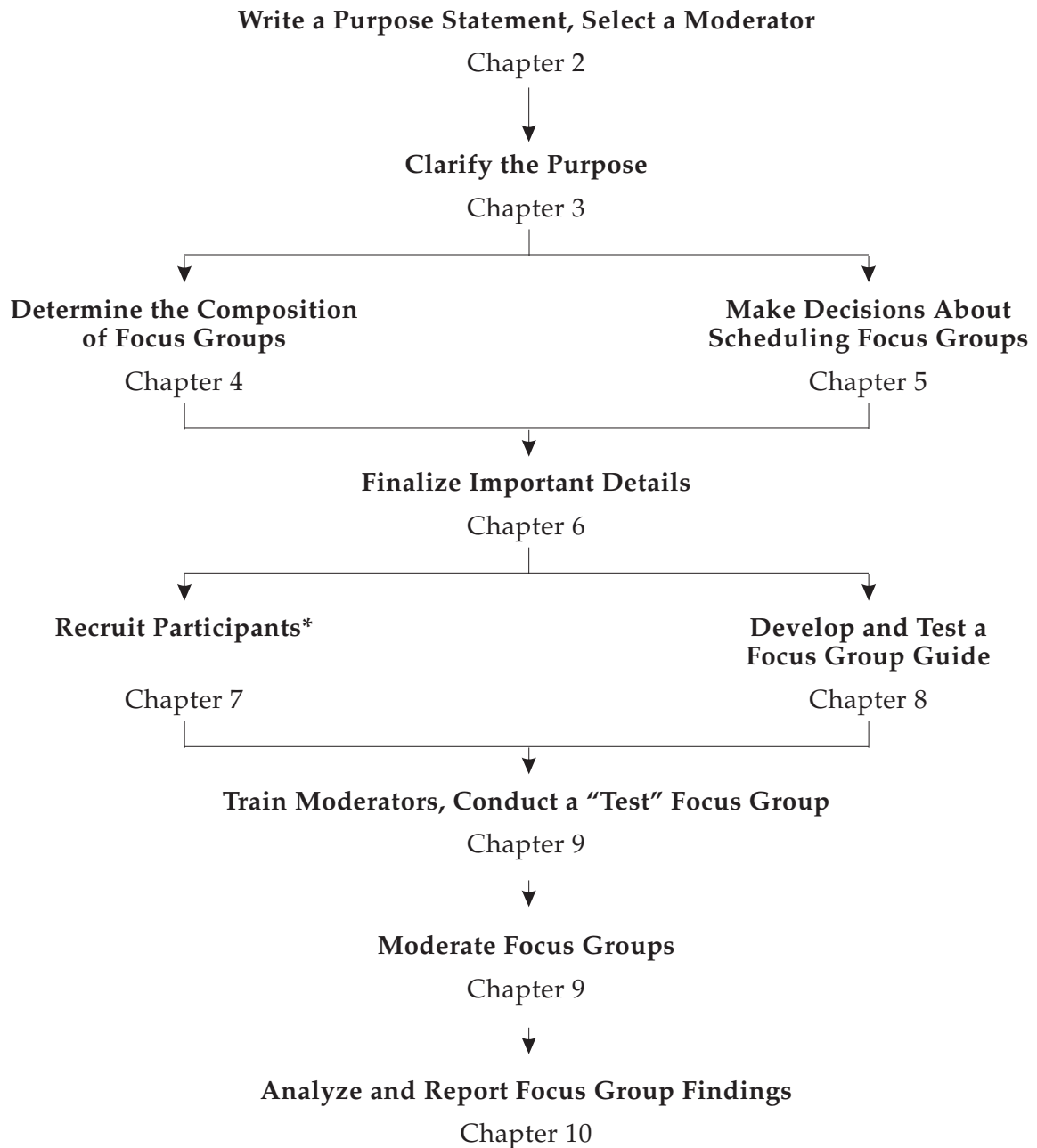
This “how-to” book is organized in a user-friendly manner to serve the needs of school practitioners. The key features of this book include the following:

- *Sequential Arrangement of Chapters:* The chapters in this book are not organized in a topical manner; instead, they are arranged sequentially to reflect the order of tasks necessary to plan and conduct a focus group project. In Figure A, this sequence of tasks has been explained by means of a flowchart.
- *Easy to Read:* The book is written in an informal style to enable the readers to grasp the information easily. We have distilled the available information on focus groups into straightforward explanations of what needs to be done and why.
- *Examples:* Several examples are included in each chapter to explain the variations and realities present in schools. These examples represent possible as well as actual uses of focus groups. In the case of the latter, the names of the schools, school districts, and people involved have been changed to maintain confidentiality. (However, in Chapter 1, we provide some examples of actual uses reported in the media: These examples are identifiable by means of the citations.)
- *Sample Material:* Samples of the forms, letters, lists, and all other materials that would be needed by the readers are included throughout this book. These samples can be modified as needed by the readers.
- *Main Points of the Chapter:* All the issues that would ever have to be considered while planning and preparing for the focus groups have been listed in the table of contents and at the beginning of each chapter in a question format. Readers will therefore not have to search the index or skim through the chapters to try to locate the desired information.
- *Reproducible Checklists:* Checklists that can be reproduced and used are included in this book. For instance, “At a Glance” checklists included at the end of the chapters summarize all the key activities that must be completed while planning and preparing for the focus groups.
- *FYI Boxes:* We present supporting information from the literature in FYI boxes. Although this information is not absolutely essential for learning how to do a particular task, it simply provides readers with additional helpful information.
- *Cross-Reference Boxes:* Information on related topics has been highlighted by means of cross-reference boxes. Again, this feature is designed to make the information in this book easily accessible.

What does each chapter cover?

There are four components to conducting a focus group: planning and decision making, recruiting, conducting a focus group, and analyzing and writing a report. In-depth guidelines for accomplishing each of these components are covered in this book.

In Chapter 1, we explain what a focus group is, discuss in general the ways schools can use focus groups, and make a case for using focus groups in schools. In Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, we explain the first component

Figure A. A Flowchart of Tasks for Focus Group Projects

*This task may continue, overlapping with the next two tasks on the flowchart. That is, especially in a project with quite a few groups planned, you may still be recruiting some participants for the later groups as you are conducting the earlier groups.

—planning and decision-making activities—in depth. Chapter 2 specifically discusses guidelines for selecting a moderator early on in the focus group project. In Chapter 3, suggestions are given to guide the reader in the task of clarifying the purpose of the focus group project. In Chapter 4, guidelines are explained for determining which participants to include in the focus group project. In Chapter 5, strategies are discussed for guiding

the reader with the task of scheduling focus groups (e.g., number of focus groups, location, or duration). Finally, in Chapter 6, the reader is alerted to all the remaining decisions that have to be made before participants can be recruited.

We explain the second component—recruiting participants—in Chapter 7. In this chapter, all the nuts and bolts of recruiting are explained. We explain the third component—conducting focus groups—in Chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8 is specifically about preparing for the actual focus group, whereas Chapter 9 is about moderating a focus group. Finally, in Chapter 10, we explain the last component—analyzing and writing a report. The mechanics of analyzing the information gathered from the focus groups and writing a report of the findings are described. Instances in which analysis and reports are not needed are also described.

How should this book be used?

Many of the guidelines and activities expounded in this book are meant to help the reader conduct large focus group projects that will lead to high-stakes decisions. High-stakes decisions involve making changes that require enormous amounts of time, effort, and resources, and that affect many people. However, please note, there will be instances when some of the suggested activities may be unessential as well as impractical. This could happen, for instance, when one or two short focus groups are being considered for purposes that will not lead to high-stakes decisions. But obviously, when the stakes are high, we recommend that all the suggested activities be performed and all the cautionary notes be taken into account.