

Appendix C: Town Hall Meeting Protocol

TOWN HALL MEETING PROTOCOL

Holding a town hall meeting is an efficient way to gather qualitative data through the use of a focused group discussion. The reward for this work is dynamic information not just about what people feel, but about *why* people feel the way they do about a particular subject or idea. Group discussions have the potential to provide both accurate and in-depth data.

The town hall meeting is intended as a complement to the rest of the needs assessment. What follows is a discussion of the general system for running a town hall meeting successfully.

The Moderator

Fundamental to the town hall meeting is a moderator who facilitates the discussion. This person should feel at ease speaking in front of the group, but he or she is not a teacher. The moderator's goal is to make the participants feel comfortable in expressing themselves openly, while keeping the discussion on track.

Becoming a talented moderator takes practice. For most novices, the best strategy is to play the role of a *seeker of wisdom*. This role assumes that the participants have the wisdom you need and will share it if asked the right questions.

Most importantly, *moderators must learn to listen and not talk*.

Choosing the Participants

You can do one town hall meeting or a series of meetings. These meetings should consist of at least 10 people who either volunteer or who have been chosen specifically. Most meetings are made up of a homogeneous group of strangers, but don't be afraid to invite specific individuals to attend the meeting. Key participants may include a community member, a police officer, a parent, an adolescent, someone from your advisory council, a bar owner, and any other individuals who may have insight into the topic.

Setting the Rules

Prior to starting the discussion, the moderator should lay down a few ground rules. Generally, rules should include the following:

- only one person talking at a time;

- no side discussions among participants;
- no members should be put down because of their opinions;
- all thoughts and ideas are valued; and
- there are no wrong or right answers.

Like with selection of group members, care and creativity should be used when setting rules.

Conducting the Discussion

The discussion itself should last between 1 and 2 hours and follow a structured format. The moderator should make every attempt to find a balance between keeping the group discussion on track and allowing it to flow naturally. In order to accomplish this, a “funnel” structure is often used. This approach is best outlined as a series of questions that move from general to specific.

Opening Question

This is a round robin question that everyone answers at the beginning of the meeting. It is designed to be answered quickly and to identify those characteristics that participants have in common. It should make everyone in the group feel more at ease.

Introductory Questions

These are questions that introduce the topic for discussion. Usually, they are not critical to the research; rather, they are intended to foster conversation and interaction among the participants.

Key Questions

These are questions that drive the research. Answers to these questions provide the best data for later analysis. Key questions should be focused on the topic of interest and open-ended. The moderator’s goal with these questions is to illicit discussion among the participants. You should avoid both questions that allow for short answers and yes/no questions.

Ending Questions

These questions bring closure to the discussion and enable participants to look back upon previous comments. Once again a round robin approach is best, and participants should be asked to summarize their thoughts in some way.

SAMPLE PROTOCOL YOU MAY CHOOSE TO USE FOR YOUR TOWN HALL MEETING(S)

Opening Question:

Tell us your name and what brought you here today. (Round robin)

Introductory Questions:

What are the alcohol-related problems in our community?

What factors are causing these problems?

A number of alcohol-related concerns and possible causes for those concerns have been mentioned. Let's think about three possible causes of alcohol misuse in particular. For the remainder of this discussion, let's think about social availability, community norms, and individual factors.

Key Questions

Let's start with social availability. Social availability refers to the procurement of alcohol through social sources such as friends and family.

Where are the youths in our community getting alcohol? Give examples.

Where are high school-aged youths and younger getting alcohol?

Where are minors out of high school getting alcohol?

Where do adults in the community obtain alcohol?

Where is the alcohol consumed? By youths and adults?

What are your experiences with underage drinking at parties, or with adults providing alcohol to minors?

There's been a lot of talk about alcohol-related crashes being a problem in our community, but to what extent do you think *social availability* really contributes to the problem? (Round robin)

Next, let's talk about community norms. Community norms reflect general attitudes about alcohol use and societal expectations regarding the level and type of use that is considered appropriate.

What are the norms of our community?

What are the general attitudes about drinking in our community?

What is the alcohol culture like?

In our community, is it okay to serve alcohol to a minor and, if so, under what circumstances?

In our community, at what age is it acceptable to use alcohol?

What is our community's attitude toward drinking and driving?

What kind of groups or organizations promote the use of alcohol in our community?

Now that we've had this discussion, to what extent do you think *community norms* contribute to the alcohol-related crashes in our community? (Round robin)

Finally, let's think about individual factors. Individual factors could be biological, socio-economic, or individual attitudes.

What makes the people in our community different and unique?

What individual characteristics contribute to the alcohol-related crashes in our community?

Based on the things we've just talked about, to what degree do you think the *individual characteristics* of the people in our community contribute to alcohol-related crashes? (Round robin)

Ending Question:

Considering the three causes that we've talked about today—social availability, community norms, and individual factors—which one is the leading cause of the alcohol-related crashes in our community? (Round robin)

Our goal is to find out what is contributing to the alcohol-related crashes in our community. Have we missed anything? Do you have any final comments?

Thank you for participating.

RECORDING AND USING THE INFORMATION

Every effort should be made to record the town hall meeting by having a colleague take notes and by using a tape or video recorder. The use of recording equipment allows the meeting to be revisited when needed. This discussion can also be transcribed or at least listened to for quotes and general ideas. We suggest using a data matrix like the one found on the next page to keep track of major themes and quotes from the discussion. Feel free to expand the table as needed.

The information gathered from this meeting should be used to complement other quantitative work, using participant quotes and the grouping of ideas. The grouping of ideas refers to the categorizing of attitudes, feelings, or beliefs of the group toward the topic. This may simply involve discussions revolving around a single question. In other cases, this may involve outlining the major topics brought up by the group.

Notes for Town Hall Meeting about Alcohol-Related Crashes

Date: _____ Location: _____
Number of People in Attendance: _____ Note Taker: _____

Section	Major Ideas of Themes	Quotes	Consensus or Disagreement?
Question 1			
Question 2			
Question 3			
Other thoughts, ideas, comments, or themes that arose during the town hall meeting:			