

Fritz, Matt

From: Dautrich, Kenneth [mailto: [REDACTED]@uconn.edu]
Sent: Sunday, December 14, 2008 7:13 PM
To: Fritz, Matt
Subject: RE: Focus Group Sample



Topic Guide for
Wethersfield F...

Matt

Attached is a generic outline of the discussion questions. I plan to probe a lot on things like "what do you expect from good leaders?", and "what kinds of decisions would give you confidence in connecticut's leadership?" Let me know if there are specific questions you'd like me to add. Ken

From: Fritz, Matt [mailto: [REDACTED]@ct.gov]
Sent: Fri 12/12/2008 1:59 PM
To: Dautrich, Kenneth
Subject: RE: Focus Group Sample

Ken,

Thanks. Is there a draft script that you will be working from? I know you mentioned how you typically get the dialogue going but is there anything specific you will be touching on? I ask that knowing the obvious things you will be moving the conversation toward - budget, leadership, etc.

-----Original Message-----

From: Dautrich, Kenneth [mailto: [REDACTED]@uconn.edu]
Sent: Friday, December 12, 2008 1:39 PM
To: Fritz, Matt
Subject: FW: Focus Group Sample

Matt

Attached is a file that profiles the participants who have been recruited for Tuesday's focus group. Ken

From: Sean Harrington [mailto: [REDACTED]@.com]
Sent: Fri 12/12/2008 11:00 AM
To: Dautrich, Kenneth
Subject: Focus Group Sample

Hi Ken,

See the attached spreadsheet for a breakdown of the recruited focus group participants. I think they are planning to obtain one more to make it 10.

Sean

Memorandum

To: Lisa Moody, Matt Fritz
From: Ken Dautrich
Date: 9/8/2009
Re: Focus Group on Perception of Connecticut Budget Deficit

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this focus group was to gain insight into how Connecticut residents perceive the state budget deficit and more specifically the role of leadership in the budget crisis. For this focus group participants were chosen based on how much they have heard or read about Connecticut's budget deficit; only those who answered "some" or "a lot" were chosen. The focus group was comprised of nine registered voters of various age ranges from different areas of Connecticut. Specifically, participants were from East Hartford, Higganum, Manchester, Middletown, Newington, Rocky Hill, South Windsor, and West Hartford. The group consisted of five males and four females of which there were three Republicans, two Democrats, and four independents. This report will present the findings and recommendations from the focus group. It is important to stress that our findings and recommendations come from a single focus group. The opinions from participants only represent the participants themselves.

ELIMINATING WASTE

The most common consensus among participants was the need to eliminate government waste and "frivolous spending." When asked how much of the state budget is comprised of government waste, participants believed it could be as much as half. One participant said he did not think he could even put a number on it. When forced to propose a solution to the budget deficit, assuming that all government waste had been found and cut, participants still chose to emphasize the reduction of waste and inefficiencies.

Recommendation: Participants strongly felt that government waste is one of the largest contributors to the state budget deficit. Eliminating government waste is an issue that will likely resonate with the general public at large. Thus, we recommend emphasizing the Governor's leadership in tackling government waste and inefficiencies and highlighting what she has done at this point to better manage taxpayer dollars.

STATE EMPLOYEES

Most of the participants agreed that if cuts had to be made to the state budget, they should be to personnel and management. When probed further on whether state employees should take a pay freeze, participants agreed that while ordinary people are struggling, state workers should share in the sacrifice and take a pay freeze. As one participant stated,

“They are the state’s company and should be held accountable.”

From this discussion, another participant said that the union representatives are not going to cooperate. When asked if layoffs should be considered if the unions refuse a pay freeze, participants generally agreed that there should be layoffs. One participant said,

“Give them the pay freeze option, if they refuse, do layoffs.”

One participant commented that the Governor and her staff should be willing to sacrifice also; the governor’s office should set the precedent. There was general agreement among participants that the governor’s office should take a pay freeze if state workers have to.

Recommendation: Participants believed that if ordinary Connecticut residents are forced to make sacrifices during tough economic times, then state workers should make similar sacrifices. We recommend that the Governor ask state workers to accept a pay freeze emphasizing that they should do their part to alleviate the state budget problem and make sacrifices like ordinary Connecticut residents. Also, consider “setting an example” by announcing that the wages of senior managers in state government will be frozen.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE BUDGET CRISIS

What the public wants from a leader in tough times is a critical question. To answer this question, focus group participants were asked 1) who is to blame for the budget deficit, 2) who is the leader they could trust to lead the state out of the budget mess, and 3) what are the characteristics of someone they want to lead the state.

Participants were generally aware of the makeup of Connecticut state government. They understood that the executive and legislative branches were held by different parties with different fiscal philosophies. Therefore, with split power, participants were very reluctant to assign specific blame. They either did not know who to blame or wanted to blame everyone for the current budget deficit. When asked specifically about the Governor, participants did not immediately assign her responsibility for the budget deficit. One participant stated,

“It’s not her fault. Whatever she wants to do, the House and Senate are Democrat and go against her. She has a lot of problems because there is no agreement. The minority Republicans can’t back her on everything.”

However, the group believed that state leaders mismanaged their tax dollars. When pressed harder to assign blame to someone, participants generally agreed to blame the top manager—the Governor.

Participants by and large said that Attorney General Richard Blumenthal is a strong leader they would have faith in to lead them out of the budget deficit problem. He was described as a “good guy,” “the only person I have faith in,” “he’s out there and speaks his mind,” “he does not sell out to special interest,” and he “does what’s right.” One participant thought that Blumenthal was on television and “out there” as much as the Governor.

When participants were asked what are the characteristics of someone they want to lead the state their responses were:

Principled
Consistent
Integrity
Productive
Intelligent
Proactive not Reactive
Honest

One participant mentioned that what a leader states one day should be the same six months down the road.

When asked if Governor Rell or Attorney General Blumenthal fit these characteristics many of the participants agreed that Blumenthal fit the characteristics well. Several of these buzz words and catch phrases are presented in further detail below.

Recommendations: Participants were reluctant to assign any blame for the current budget mess. Most held the Governor in high regard. Ultimately, though, participants generally felt that responsibility rests with the Governor. The group was also very adamant about planning and being prepared for the future. Thus, we recommend emphasis not only on solving the budget deficit by eliminating waste, but also on the Governor's vision for the future of Connecticut. We recommend explaining the steps the Governor is taking to reorganize state government and make it work better for the residents of Connecticut. Participants were looking for someone to lead them out of these troubled times. They want someone principled, consistent, and proactive.

POSSIBLE TAX INCREASES

Focus group participants were reluctant to increase taxes to solve the budget deficit. When forced to propose a solution to the \$2.7 billion deficit, participants favored increasing taxes on goods including the Connecticut lottery, cigarette, liquor and sales taxes. Respondents were adamantly opposed to increasing the personal income tax to solve the deficit. Group members claimed Connecticut residents are unable to pay increased income taxes given the difficult economic times and growing unemployment rate. As one participant explained,

"You can't increase revenue, you can tax people but if they can't pay...and there are so many people that can't pay, collecting unemployment...you just can't up it."

When discussing revenue increases, respondents compared state government to their own households,

"When I can't afford something I'm cutting back in my house, I can't go and finance it just like that, and I have to cut back...so should the state."

Recommendation: The comparison between Connecticut state government and households was well received by group members. Participants indicated an increase in income tax as irresponsible as they suggested government should first “look with-in”. Therefore, we recommend the Governor stick by her initial stance to not raise taxes. Budget proposals that exclude changes in the income tax rate should capitalize on the public’s distaste for increases in the personal income tax, using similar analogies as stated by participants.

POSSIBLE SPENDING CUTS

In discussing potential spending cuts, participants struggled to reduce funds in the nine spending categories presented to them. When developing a proposal to reduce the deficit, participants agreed to reduce funds in judicial and correction categories. Respondents were then asked from which programs they supported decreased funding in these categories. The group reached a consensus in decreasing personnel funds for all departments. Participants focused on administrative costs and potential program consolidation as opposed to termination.

Recommendation: Public budget proposals should focus upon highlighting consolidation efforts, and decreasing administrative costs. The group was receptive to administrative reorganization, particularly in the case of public education. Generally, members were opposed to reducing spending but felt strongly that the majority of reductions could be located in areas of waste and inefficiency.

BUZZ WORDS AND CATCH PHRASES

Throughout the discussion there was a selection of words that were frequently mentioned by participants when referencing state leaders, state spending and revenue structure. The following list includes these words and phrases:

Responsible
Accountable
Visionary
Future-oriented
Proactive
Safe-guard
Watch dog
Frivolous
Cutting-fat

The first session of the discussion focused on leadership qualities important to participants, particularly in the current economic crisis. Group members emphasized the importance of responsibility and accountability among their leaders, and state employees. Respondents likened the state government to a company, arguing employees and management (the state legislature and Governor) should be held accountable when the company faces trying times. Other characteristics mentioned were visionary, future-oriented and proactive. Particular emphasis was placed on leadership reaction to the crisis. Participants felt strongly that state government has

become a reactive entity rather than planning in advance of crises. Group members also emphasized the need for “watch-dog” groups and “safe-guards” for the taxpayers.

Recommendation: As state leaders move forward in budget proposals, it is important the public receive reassurance that management is being held accountable for actions on the administrative level. Accountability was the chief concern among participants, particularly in the area of state spending. Participants were also concerned with “frivolous” benefits for state agencies across the state. Group members emphasized support for “cutting-fat”, which they identified as the state fleet and agency credit cards among other programs. State leaders must highlight existing and future efforts to guard against waste, and restrict unnecessary spending.