

Moderating Skills

5

WHAT LIES AHEAD

In this chapter we describe:

- What's Needed When Planning
- What's Needed Just Before the Group
- What's Needed During the Group
- Responding to Participants' Questions
- Be Ready for the Unexpected
- Concluding the Focus Group

Interviewing looks deceptively simple, but it requires mental discipline, preparation, and group interaction skills. Much of the success of the focused interview depends on well-developed questions asked of the right respondents, but another ingredient is essential: a skillful moderator.

This chapter describes techniques used by successful moderators. A to-do checklist for focus group interviews is provided at the end of the chapter as Appendix 5.1.

What's Needed When Planning

Selecting the Right Moderator

Sometimes, not much thought is given to selecting the moderator; it is automatically the principal investigator, the head researcher, the person who did focus groups last time, or the staff member who wants to gain experience with focus groups. Before choosing the moderator, consider the skills needed for the task as well as the preferences and characteristics of the participants. Here are some factors that we've found to be important.



HERE TO BE ENLIGHTENED

Empathy and positive regard are critical qualities of the moderator. This attitude must permeate the entire focus group environment. Here's a meditation developed by Jack Kornfield (1993), presented in *A Path With Heart*, that reflects the spirit of moderating focus groups. We hope that those planning to moderate might find it beneficial.

Picture or imagine that this earth is filled with Buddhas, that every single being you encounter is enlightened, except one—yourself! Imagine that they are all here to teach you. Whoever you encounter is acting as they do solely for your benefit, to provide just the teachings and difficulties you need in order to awaken.

Sense what lessons they offer to you. Inwardly thank them for this. Throughout a day or a week continue to develop the image of enlightened teachers all around you. Notice how it changes your whole perspective on life. (p. 82)

The Right Moderator Respects the Participants and Shows It

The moderator's respect for participants may be one of the most influential factors affecting the quality of focus group results. The moderator must truly believe that the participants have wisdom, no matter what their level of education, experience, or background. Indeed, participants may have limited knowledge about the topic, hold opposing values to that of the researchers, or seem to use fuzzy logic, but the moderator listens with sensitivity, trying to understand their perspectives. Moderators must believe they have something to learn from each group. After the fourth or fifth group, the moderator will have heard the topic discussed in a variety of ways. At this point, some information is old stuff to the moderator, but each group deserves the respect and active listening that was present in the first group. Lack of respect quickly telegraphs to the participants and shuts down meaningful communication. Why share your feelings when the moderator seems dismissive?

Respect can be communicated in a variety of ways. Little things let participants know that you care about them. Before the group begins, the moderator interacts informally with participants. The moderator shows interest in their lives and what is happening in their environment. At the beginning of the focus group, the moderator tells the participants that he or she is interested in hearing from each person and that everyone's input is important. During the focus group, the moderator looks at participants and shows that he or she is actively listening. Some moderators lean forward as they listen; some take notes of key points. The moderator makes an effort to listen to each person in the group. The moderator shouldn't see moderating as a job that needs to get done but as a special opportunity to better understand these individuals.

The Right Moderator Understands the Purpose of the Study and the Topic

The moderator must be fully grounded in the purpose of the study and understand enough about the topic to know what type of information will be most useful to the study. The moderator

guides the discussion, deciding where more information is needed and when to move on. The best moderators are masters at this because they understand what kind of information will be most useful to the client.

The moderator must have adequate background knowledge on the topic of discussion in order to place comments in perspective and follow up on critical areas of concern. Usually the moderator does not need to be a content expert on the topic, but it is important to get up to speed quickly on insider language and key issues. You don't need to be a special education teacher to moderate focus groups with special education teachers, but you do need to be familiar with their jargon and key issues that might arise.

Some successful moderators are able to use naïveté to an advantage by prompting participants to amplify their comments, but if used in excess it can become tiresome and inhibit complicated responses. Naïveté is a double-edged sword. In some circumstances it elicits considerable new information, and it can produce eloquent statements that place the topic of discussion into a larger context. Unfortunately, this same tactic can become infuriating to knowledgeable participants who feel the moderator has not yet earned the right to ask questions or is not qualified to lead the discussion.

The Right Moderator Communicates Clearly

The moderator must be able to communicate clearly. Sometimes participants will not immediately respond to a question. Some moderators assume the participants didn't understand the question, and in an effort to be helpful, they deviate from the questioning route and rephrase the question, give a lot of background information, or ask the question in several different ways. The moderator assumes that this strategy helps the participant, but it often does the opposite. In an effort to clarify the first question, the moderator uses different words. But these words might sound like a different question to the participant. If the questions are perceived as different, then respondents become confused about the intent. Moreover, it makes analysis difficult because you are not sure which question was actually answered.

The Right Moderator Is Open and Not Defensive

Moderating requires the ability to listen and the self-discipline to control personal reactions. We have seen focus groups fall apart because the moderators could not hold back their own opinions. Moderators need to keep their personal views to themselves and focus on understanding the perceptions of the group participants. It's hard to listen to people who don't know a program as well as you do or who criticize a program near and dear to your heart. Harder yet is to smile and say thank you after they've ripped up your sacred program. Some moderators make the mistake of trying to defend or explain rather than saying "Tell me more" and trying to understand. Once the moderator begins to explain or defend, it changes the dynamics of the discussion, and the moderator becomes the expert rather than the participants being the experts. Professional focus group moderators have a distinct advantage in this respect because they are emotionally detached from the topic of the study.

The Right Moderator Is the One Who Can Get the Most Useful Information

There is a balancing act to moderating. Participants must feel comfortable enough with the moderator to share what they think and feel and not so comfortable that they assume they don't need to explain comments or that certain things can go unsaid. So if you have a homogenous group, should the moderator share the same characteristic that makes the group homogenous? Consider gender, race, age, language, social or economic characteristics, past experiences, and technical knowledge. Each of these characteristics, depending upon the circumstances, has the potential for inhibiting communication, especially when there is a perceived power differential between the moderator and the participants.

Here are things we consider:

- How sensitive is the topic? Participants don't really care what the moderator looks like if they are discussing toothpaste. But if the topic is mammograms, women may be more comfortable talking to a female moderator.
- Are we trying to understand a culture, a role, or a behavior? If so, it may be helpful for the moderator not to share that culture, role, or behavior. That way, participants will explain more, and the moderator will ask for more amplification and examples. If the moderator doesn't share the homogeneity, he or she must clearly make the case for why the questions are being asked and how the information will be used. Often we will use a moderating team consisting of one person who matches the culture, role, or behavior and one person who does not.
- What language will the groups be conducted in? If the participants are all Spanish speakers, it is better to select a Spanish-speaking moderator and conduct the group in Spanish than to use a translator in the focus group.
- Who has a natural affinity with that type of participant? Some groups are more challenging to moderate than others. For example, when conducting groups with teenagers, we first look for moderators who have a gift for working with teens and then consider whether other factors like gender, age, or race are important.
- How gifted is the moderator? Some moderators are so good at making people feel comfortable and respected that the topic and the type of participants don't seem to matter.
- As a researcher, you may want to change the moderator to see how that influences the results. You might want to discuss this with savvy people who are familiar with the types of participants in the focus groups and ask about how the characteristics of the moderator might influence the participants.



EXAMPLE

IT'S THE DOGS!

We were conducting focus groups at several Indian reservations on the topic of cardiovascular health. A state health department and the Indian Health Service were partnering to develop a new program

to encourage healthy behaviors. We were asking about diet, exercise, and the barriers and incentives to a healthy lifestyle. In this study we used different teams of moderators. Some teams were composed of American Indians from the reservation, and other teams were composed of Caucasians from outside of the reservation. When we compared transcripts, we found an interesting difference in the amount of detail on certain key points. For example, when we asked about the barriers to exercise, in the groups with American Indian moderators, one frequent answer was “the dogs.” The participants didn’t explain what they meant, and the moderator didn’t ask for more. Everyone on the reservation knew the problem, so it didn’t need explanation or amplification. However, the Caucasian moderator didn’t know about the problem with dogs so asked for an explanation, which elicited many stories. For example, “We don’t have a leash law here on the reservation. And we’ve got a lot of fierce dogs that run in packs, and they can be dangerous. The local police say that it isn’t their job to catch the dogs. And when you go walking on the roads and trails, it can be frightening to be followed by the dogs. Because we’re afraid of the dogs, we don’t exercise outside. It’s even dangerous to leave the kids outside playing.” If you are designing a program to increase exercise, this is crucial information. In this example, there were two factors that gave us the greater detail. First, when the moderator heard cryptic answers such as “the dogs,” she asked for more information, and this prompted participants to give more background information. The other factor is that they knew the outsider wasn’t familiar with the reservation and that they had to explain more about the influence of the dogs.

Using a Moderating Team

We always use a moderator team when conducting focus groups: a moderator and an assistant moderator. Each person performs certain tasks. The moderator is primarily concerned with directing the discussion and keeping it flowing. The assistant is responsible for the audio recorder, handles the environmental conditions and logistics (refreshments, lighting, and seating), responds to unexpected interruptions, and takes comprehensive notes. Near the end of the discussion, the moderator may ask the assistant to ask additional questions or follow up on topics of interest. The assistant may also be asked to give a short (two-minute) summary of the key points of the discussion. In addition, the assistant plays an important part in the debriefing session that follows the focus group. An example of assistant moderator responsibilities is included in Appendix 5.2 at the end of this chapter.

Private-sector market researchers seldom use assistant moderators due to the additional labor and travel costs and their extensive use of video and audio recording. Assistant moderators are well worth the investment in the public and nonprofit environment, particularly in situations where you do not have special rooms with one-way mirrors. A second set of eyes and ears increases both the total accumulation of information and the validity of the analysis. Furthermore, an assistant can deal with distractions (e.g., latecomers, unwanted background music, or monitoring the recording), so the moderator can concentrate on the discussion.

The assistant moderator is not a subordinate role, even though we use the term *assistant*. We think carefully about who to pair up in our teams. Sometimes a member of the community and a researcher work together. In some cases an outside moderator may work with a person within

an organization on organizational focus groups. Sometimes someone with moderating expertise works with someone who is an expert in the topic. In these cases, the assistant moderator plays a key role as content expert. If the participants get stuck and need more factual information to move forward, the moderator may ask the assistant moderator to provide the needed information. The assistant moderator gives enough information to answer the question, careful not to go on and on. The moderator then resumes the discussion. The assistant moderator can also play a key role in analysis.

Within many public and nonprofit organizations, there are individuals who want to sit in on focus groups due to curiosity or concern. These individuals may have valuable insight into the topic or program and could be assigned the role of assistant moderator. Care must be taken to ensure that these assistant moderators understand the role and responsibilities and don't inadvertently upstage the focus group. This can be solved by explicitly outlining the purpose and rules of the session. While there may be a number of people who want to sit in on the focus groups, we allow only one assistant moderator in a group. Participants get uncomfortable if there are too many people watching the group.

What's Needed Just Before the Group

Mental Preparation

Moderators must be mentally alert and free from distractions, anxieties, or pressures that limit their ability to think quickly. Moderating a group discussion requires concentration and careful listening. Therefore, plan your schedule to minimize pressures that would limit your ability to concentrate (e.g., get enough sleep, don't argue with your teenagers, and don't moderate more than two groups in one day). Moderators must be able to give their full attention to the group. They must be fully present.

The moderator should be completely familiar with the introduction and the questioning route. Practice saying the introduction and questions aloud while in the shower or while driving. Get comfortable with the questions. Know why you are asking each question. Know how much time you expect to spend on each question. Know which questions are key questions. You want to sound conversational. You don't want to sound like you have it memorized, and you don't want to read it word for word. Glancing at the questioning route to remember the next question is tolerable, but reading the question (and taking eyes off the participants) destroys the spontaneous flow of the discussion.

We recommend that a digital recorder be the only electronic device on the table. Leave your computer, tablet, and phone somewhere else. Participants pay attention to what the moderator pays attention to. If the moderator's eyes are glancing at screens, it suggests that he or she is not fully present to the conversation.

Another aspect of mental preparation is the discipline of listening and thinking simultaneously. It is just not enough to be an empty vessel, listening and absorbing the comments of participants. If you do you will end up with a fair amount of trivia. The skillful moderator listens and then knows just when to push the participants a bit farther or ask a probing question. This

skillful moderator doesn't automatically believe everything that is said, but instead he or she compares it to what was expected or to what was said by others in previous focus groups. One of the critical moderator skills is knowing when and how to seek amplification. Sometimes participants intellectualize an answer—talk about how something could or should be done or give theoretical responses instead of being based on their actual experiences. Other times participants will speak in clichés. Or, sometimes the participants' responses seem to be completely disconnected from the question. These digressions and mental detours are relatively easy to spot when you leisurely listen to the audio recording the next day, but they can be difficult to catch at the moment they are said. With practice this becomes easier.

Also consider how much energy you bring to the group. If the moderator is tired or is not excited to hear what the group has to say, the group tends to have less energy and be less conversational. If the moderator is rested, upbeat, and interested in hearing what participants have to share, then the group tends to be livelier, more talkative, and more interactive. (One of our colleagues always serves coffee and chocolate as a way to boost energy.)

Moderating is hard work. Because of the mental and emotional discipline required, we don't conduct more than two focus groups on the same day. By the third group, it is hard to remember if something was said in this group or an earlier group. Allow sufficient time between focus groups to recharge your batteries.

PRACTICE SMALL TALK

Qualities that make someone good at academic research may be different from qualities that make for good field research. Some researchers are uncomfortable and feel awkward when they meet people, and it shows. Let members of the research team practice small talk with each other. Let those who have this gift coach others who seek to develop it.



TIP

Preession Strategy

What happens before the focus group starts sets a tone for the entire discussion. Your job, from the minute the first participant steps in the door, is to make people feel welcome, comfortable, and at ease. We treat participants coming to a focus group the same way we treat guests to our house. We greet them at the door. We welcome them. We introduce ourselves. We introduce them to one another. We offer refreshments. We make small talk. We try to make them comfortable.

Sometimes the moderator and assistant moderator will split roles. One person will act as the host; the other will take care of any paperwork. Occasionally each participant is asked to fill out a short registration form that asks questions about demographic characteristics, particularly those characteristics that we don't want to discuss within the group. In some situations, we have human subjects forms for them to sign as they arrive. (See the example in Appendix 5.3.) Even if we have them filling out paperwork, the emphasis is on creating a friendly, warm, and comfortable environment.

For this to work well, everything should be set up and ready for the group when the first participant arrives. If you are still fiddling with the recorder or writing on the flip chart, it makes some people uncomfortable. You want everything ready so you can focus your attention on the participants.

Small talk helps put the participants at ease. But, avoid the key issues to be discussed later in the session. If participants explain their perceptions in the informal part of the meeting, they may be reluctant to repeat their observations during the group. Small talk avoids the focused issue and instead concentrates on common human experiences such as the weather, children, or sports. Avoid controversial topics (religion, politics, or sensitive local issues) and topics that highlight differences within the group (income, education, political influence, etc.).

Participants arrive at different times, so the small talk maintains the warm and friendly environment until enough participants are present to begin the session. In most situations this small talk period will last only 5 to 10 minutes, and the two-person moderating team should plan their welcoming strategy in advance. Often, if no paperwork needs to be taken care of, the moderator or assistant moderator meets participants at the door and brings them into the social gathering while the other person on the team visits with the group.

During this period, the moderator and assistant are observing participant interaction and noting individuals who tend to dominate the group, who consider themselves as experts, or who seem shy or quiet. Individuals who talk a lot may later dominate the conversation and should be seated to the moderator's side if possible. Then, if necessary, the moderator can turn slightly away from the domineering individuals, thereby giving a nonverbal and diplomatic signal for others to talk. Shy and quiet participants are best placed immediately across from the moderator to facilitate maximum eye contact. The moderator might expect that about 40 percent of the participants would be eager and open to sharing insights and another 40 percent would be more introspective and willing to talk if the situation presents itself. The remaining 20 percent might be apprehensive about the experience and rarely share (Kelleher, 1982).

To strategically position participants, follow these steps:

- Before participants arrive, prepare a name tent for each individual who is expected to attend. (You can easily make name tents from five-by-eight-inch index cards, folded in the middle with first names handwritten in bold marker on both sides. Last names aren't necessary. Name tents are better than name tags because they are larger and easier to read.)
- Right before the group is to be seated, the moderator will casually drop the name tents around the table in a seemingly random manner. In fact, the moderator has arranged the cards using observations from the informal pre-session and then places the name tents.

SERVE QUIET FOOD

Veteran moderators have found that some foods are noisy and make it difficult to get clear sound on the audio recorder. Recorders pick up sound from the table, and glass, china, cans, and silverware can create unwanted noise. Paper products make less noise. Also avoid single-serving potato chip bags. The crinkling will drive the transcriptionist wild.



TIP

Snacks and Meals

Food can help the focus group. Eating together tends to promote conversation and communication within the group. Most focus groups offer snacks such as cookies or pastries or fruit and vegetable trays, but full meals also can be effective. Snacks and light refreshments are typically placed on a table to the side of the room and are enjoyed during the pre-session small talk and during the discussion. Full meals require additional planning. If the focus groups are conducted in restaurants, then advance arrangements are needed to ensure speedy service. Meals can be catered or delivered (such as pizza, box lunches). Thought should be given to when the meal is served. Traditional protocol was that the meal should occur before the focus group as a way for the participants to get to know each other. This can be awkward as the moderator tries to avoid the central topic of discussion. An alternative strategy is to provide the meal after the focus group, during which time the moderator continues to listen for relevant comments concerning the study. A third strategy that works well with light meals (pizza, buffets, or box lunches) is to eat throughout the focus group. About halfway through the focus group, the meal is completed, the boxes, plates, and other items are removed, and the focus group continues.

People Who Haven't Been Invited

Sometimes people you didn't expect show up, and you have to decide quickly what to do. Do you let them in the focus group or not?

Small children can make conducting a focus group tough. Young children running in the room or babies crying can completely upstage the discussion, at least from the moderator's perspective. Ideally, you anticipate and plan for this problem. The researcher should expect that parents will need child care and provide options (e.g., providing a stipend for child care and making it clear that child care will not be provided or hiring certified child care providers to watch the children in a room near the focus group). If it wasn't planned for, there are other options. The moderator might make a quick assessment of the child's activity level and decide on the potential for interruptions. If the child is reasonably quiet and not too active, the moderator might decide to include the parent and the child in the discussion (e.g., babies who can't yet crawl are usually fine in a group.) Or the assistant moderator might function as a babysitter and take the child into another room. Puzzles, crayons, and coloring books can provide some diversions for children, but it is unreasonable to expect them to be quiet for the entire discussion.

Often a spouse, a family member, a friend who provided transportation, someone who thought it was a public meeting, or someone in a position of authority who is interested in the study shows up. What should you do? The first rule of thumb is not to let the visitor decide whether they stay. Chat with anyone who doesn't belong in the group during the pre-session. Then make a decision. If they fit the screen, we sometimes allow them in the group. When we are doing groups with seniors, we expect that couples will come together because often one is the driver. We bring along magazines and newspapers and ask the spouses to wait in the lounge

or another place while the focus group is taking place. Some people, like reporters for small-town newspapers, are told that this is a research interview and not an open meeting. We tell them we would be willing to talk to them after the group or that we can send them a written report when the study is completed.

What's Needed During the Group

Capturing the Group Discussion

The discussion in the focus group can be captured in multiple ways: memory, field notes, flip charts, audio recording, computer-based rapid transcripts, and video recording. Each added method can enhance the total body of information gathered but may also add costs. Let's examine these:

1. *Memory.* Memory has great advantages and serious disadvantages. It is invaluable when time is short and results are needed quickly, but it is the most fragile of all means of capturing data. Memory fades quickly and must be captured in writing or by audio recording before the next focus group. Usually this is done by using a procedure called the *debriefing*, which is a 15- to 20-minute oral review by the research team immediately following the focus group. This is discussed more in Chapter 6.

Be attentive to factors that limit memory, such as preoccupation with a personal issue, fatigue, or medications, as well as factors that can enhance memory, such as careful field notes and mental preparation.

2. *Field notes.* Typically, the assistant moderator takes the field notes. The moderator may take notes, but those notes are used to help guide the conversation—not for analysis. The moderator may note that Betty mentioned something related to a question that comes later in the questioning route—so when the conversation gets to that point the moderator can say, “Betty, earlier in the conversation you mentioned X. Let's spend some more time talking about that now.” Then the moderator asks that question. Or the moderator may note the topics mentioned by participants to see what gets left out. The moderator takes notes to improve moderating. The assistant moderator takes field notes for analysis.

Most people don't know how to take useful field notes. They record impressions, interesting ideas, perhaps a few choice words or notes similar to minutes of a meeting. These notes are fragmented and incomplete for analysis. Effective field notes require work. Notes are often used several days or weeks after the focus group when memories have faded; if notes are too cryptic, they are worthless. The first step is for the individual responsible for analysis to give instructions as to what needs to be captured in the field notes. Just what does the analyst want? Are you

tracking the major trends? Are you interested in knowing if and when people change their opinions? Do you want numerical tabulation on certain items? Do you want to identify and record the types of emotional responses? Do you want to capture as much of the discussion as possible as a backup to the audio recording? Or do you want to capture themes or key ideas along with some quotes?

Here are four variations of taking field notes:

- A. *Record notes and quotes.* Draw a vertical line down the page and on the left side write the word *notes* and on the right side write *quotes*. The assistant moderator captures key points and concepts in the notes section using check marks to indicate when an idea or topic reoccurs. Insightful quotes are captured as completely as possible on the right side of the page. When the moderator moves to the next question, the assistant moderator draws a horizontal line and writes the number of the next question. By using this method the analyst can go back and locate comments to specific questions and identify both the key points and the notable quotes. This type of note taking works well when the study is not too complex, like pilot-testing materials or ideas.
- B. *Capture details and rich, descriptive information.* In this variation, the assistant moderator captures the conversation word for word to the extent possible. The assistant moderator essentially writes down everything that is said, putting space between speakers and a line between questions. These notes are particularly helpful if the audio recording fails. If the audio recording fails and you don't have detailed notes, there is little for the analyst to work with. This type of note taking works well when a study is complex, like trying to understand an issue or behavior.
- C. *Capture names of speakers.* If it is important to identify each speaker in a transcript, the assistant moderator may focus his or her attention on documenting who is speaking, along with the first few words said. The note taker may use a code to identify each speaker and the first few words of each speaker or the key ideas of each speaker. The transcriptionist can then use these notes to help identify who said each quote. It is almost impossible for a transcriptionist who has not been in the focus group to recognize different voices. The transcriptionist can pair the coded field notes with the audio recording to develop a transcript of quotes identified by speaker. We sometimes use these types of transcripts for academic research that is meant to be published.
- D. *Use a flip chart to capture key points.* A team member in the back of the room takes notes on a flip chart and then posts each page on the wall when completed. This gives participants a running account of the key points in the discussion and allows them to glance at the charts of the earlier discussion and build on previous comments. This note taker must be able to write legibly, quickly glean key concepts, and remain unobtrusive.



TIP

IS IT IMPORTANT TO ATTACH NAMES TO THE TRANSCRIPT?

We are often asked, “How important is it to have speakers’ names on the transcript?” There are several issues. One concern is cost. Adding names will take more time and add to the overall cost of the focus group. It is nearly impossible for a transcriptionist who has not been in the focus group to discern voices. That means you need to have a designated observer whose task is to record names of speakers along with the first few words spoken by each individual (this could be the assistant moderator but then he or she will not be taking full field notes). Then the transcriptionist uses these notes to match the names to the quotes. It will take more resources to add names to transcripts.

The second concern is how much value will be added by attaching names. Identifying speakers makes transcripts more valuable to the analyst in these situations:

- You want to track the comments of individuals to determine if they changed their views.
- You want to piece together comments to illustrate an individual’s story.
- You want to analyze based on demographics or certain characteristics. (For example, we did a study with farmers where we were asking about their farming practices. It was important to have names on transcripts because we wanted to understand how their practices varied by the type of farm they ran.)
- You want to track extensiveness.
- The analyst was not present in the groups.

In these, and in other situations, transcripts with names can be beneficial. Here are other options:

- If the moderator transcribes the recording immediately after the group, he or she will often remember who made each comment—either by name or by where the participant sat around the table—and can easily attach names.
- Or expand the debriefing at the end of the focus group to include a discussion of the group participants. Some of the dynamics that are of interest can be readily observed by the research team and should be described in the debriefing session.

Also, if you are interested in tracking changes in opinions, you might actually ask that question of the participants at the conclusion of the focus group.

Our bottom line: Attaching names to a transcript can result in improved analysis, but with thought and planning, you can often get the same results with less time and effort.

No matter what method you use, the first page of your notes for each group should include the following:

- The name of the study
- The date of the focus group

- The time of the focus group
- The location of the focus group
- The type of participants
- The number of participants
- The name of the moderator
- The name of the assistant moderator
- A diagram of the seating arrangements, including the first name of each participant or a code for each participant (for example, 1–8 or A–H).

Consider using one of these methods or creating your own strategy. Remember, the goal is to capture the results in a written form that will be useful to the analyst.

3. *Paper products: flip charts, pictures, rating sheets.* We collect all the information produced in the group, including flip charts, drawings, sketches, flow diagrams, mind maps, and rating sheets. When we use a flip chart to help guide the discussion, we always collect the sheets to be used in analysis. Be careful with flip charts so they don't slow the conversation, limit description, and bring attention back to the moderator rather than the group. We put all items in a folder and label the folder with the group's information.

4. *Audio recording.* Digital recorders offer remarkable sound quality. On most recorders you can choose what type of sound file you want. The MP3 or WMA formats are often used and tend to require a relatively small amount of space. As soon as possible after the focus group, we download the digital recording to our laptop computer and save it in several different locations. If we are on the road, we send it via e-mail back to ourselves. We recommend using professional-quality recorders instead of the low-cost options. Select a recorder that is easy to operate and download to your computer. Practice with the recorder before using it in a focus group. Also, consider using a transcription kit that attaches to your computer and allows you to use a foot pedal to prepare complete transcripts.

We don't recommend using your phone to audio record. We have heard too many horror stories about people discovering after a focus group was over that their phone only captured the first part of the discussion (again, usually the least useful part) because it ran out of power or memory. It takes so much time and effort to organize and conduct a focus group that you want to make sure you capture the data. Buy a designated digital recorder, and practice using it.

Some assistant moderators use a digital pen to capture an additional audio recording. The audio is synchronized with the notes taken on special writing paper. The audio quality tends to be less than that of the digital recorder, in part because the pen is in the hands of the recorder who is often seated slightly away from the discussion table. By contrast, the digital audio recorder is typically placed at the center of the discussion table. The beauty of this device is that it will play back the section of the recording related to the notes.

The important point is that the person responsible for analysis makes the decision about what notes are taken and the format of those notes.



TIP

GETTING CONSENT TO AUDIO RECORD

Occasionally researchers will seek the consent of the participant before beginning the audio recording. We encourage researchers to be thoughtful about this practice because the absence of an audio recording can seriously jeopardize the quality of the research. Here are several different ways to handle this situation:

Option 1: Ask for permission when the group begins. This is the most risky option because it opens the researcher to unexpected delays and potentially awkward situations. If you gather together the participants in the focus group and ask for permission, you are creating a difficult situation. If one person objects, it is often difficult to remove that person from the group, and then the discussion goes unrecorded.

Option 2: Ask for permission before the group begins. In this option the researcher asks permission before they gather together in the focus group. If an individual wishes not to be recorded, the researcher can exempt him or her from the focus group and offer an individual interview at a later time that is not audio recorded.

Option 3: Inform participants that the discussion will be recorded and it is part of the research protocol. Another option is to inform the participants that the group discussion will be recorded in order to accurately capture the key points but that no names will be attached to the comments. In this situation, the audio recording is considered a necessary part of the research, and the researcher merely informs the participants of this protocol. This option could be done in a formal manner as in an informed consent form where other aspects of the study are also cited, or it could be done in an informal manner.

In market research focus groups, the typical procedure is to announce that the discussion is being recorded and that they are being observed from behind a one-way mirror.

The decision you make will likely be based on legal, ethical, and practical aspects. Legally, in the United States this area of law is considered unsettled, and increasingly technology is pushing the boundaries and making clear decisions difficult if not impossible. The ethical aspect is rooted in the maxim of "do no harm." The researcher needs to weight the pros and cons of audio recording and its potential for causing harm to participants or the community. The practical aspect hinges on the degree to which the research can accurately capture the discussion without audio recording.

5. *Laptop computer transcripts.* In some groups we have had an individual sit close to the group and quickly transcribe the comments using a laptop computer. A fast typist can capture about 70 to 80 percent of the focus group in real time. Naturally, punctuation and spelling are less important than speed. Later, in a short amount of time, the typist can complete the transcript by listening to the audio recording.

6. *Video recording.* Video cameras are smaller than ever and can capture excellent footage of the focus group. But, we've found that video still intimidates some participants. Unless you are using a specially designed room with multiple cameras, you will get only one wide-angle shot

that has the faces of half of the participants and the backs of the other half. Video recording is rarely worth the trouble.

Moderators always inform participants at the beginning of the focus group that the discussion is being recorded. The recording process is introduced as a way to help capture everyone's comments. Avoid excessive attention to the audio recording. Occasionally a novice moderator will appear nervous at this point—avoiding eye contact, stumbling over the explanation of the recording, and commenting at length about the recording. Inadvertently the moderator creates sensitivity due to overattention to recording. It is usually best to mention the recording and confidentiality then move on to the next topic. There are some exceptions. Employees in a work setting and teenagers may need more information to feel comfortable, like who will get to listen to the recording and how it will be used. Teenagers may want to be assured that their teachers and parents won't hear the recording. The audio recording indicates that the researchers are carefully and respectfully listening to what is being said.

SAY IT OUT LOUD

Sometimes we will ask a question that doesn't require a verbal answer. We might ask, "How many of you do X? Raise your hand." It is important for the moderator to describe what he or she sees, so it can be captured on the audio recording and in the notes of the assistant moderator. "OK. Six of the eight of you do X." If the moderator doesn't say it out loud, that data can be lost.



TIP

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in a focus group discussion are critical. In this brief time the moderator must give enough information so people feel comfortable with the topic, create a permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules, and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to this three- to five-minute introduction. Being too formal or rigid can stifle interaction among participants. By contrast, too much informality and humor can cause problems because participants might not take the discussion seriously.

The recommended introduction includes these parts:

1. The welcome
2. The overview of the topic
3. The ground rules (or things that will help our discussion go smoothly)
4. The opening question

Here is a typical introduction:

Welcome

“Good evening and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion of airplane travel. My name is Mary Anne Casey, and I represent the Happy Traveler Research Agency. Assisting me is Dick Krueger, also from the Happy Traveler Research Agency.”

Overview of the Topic

“We’ve been asked by the airline industry to help them get information about how public employees feel about airline travel. The airline industry wants the information to help them improve the service they provide.

“You were invited because you’re all government employees who work here in the area and you’ve all flown at least four times in the past year. We want to tap into those experiences and your opinions about airline travel.”

Ground Rules

“There are no wrong answers. We expect that you will have differing points of view. Please share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

“We’re recording the session because we don’t want to miss any of your comments. No names will be included in any reports. Your comments are confidential.

“We have name tents here in front of us tonight. They help me remember names, but they can also help you. Don’t feel like you have to respond to me all the time. If you want to follow up on something that someone has said, you want to agree, or disagree, or give an example, feel free to do that. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about these questions. I am here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. We’re interested in hearing from each of you. So if you’re talking a lot, I may ask you to give others a chance. And if you aren’t saying much, I may call on you. We just want to make sure all of you have a chance to share your ideas.

“If you have a cell phone, please put it on the quiet mode, and if you need to answer, step out to do so. Feel free to get up and get more refreshments if you would like.”

Opening Question

“Let’s get started. Let’s find out more about each other by going around the table one at a time. Tell us your name and some of the places that you’ve flown to in the past year.”

The opening question is designed to get all participants to say something early in the conversation. It breaks the ice. After the participant has said something once, it is more likely that he or she will speak again. In addition, the first question underscores the common characteristics

of the participants and that they all have some basis for sharing information. This first question must be the type that can be answered in about 30 seconds, and as a result it will often consist of factual information. This first question should be easy for everyone to answer.

After everyone has answered the opening question, the moderator typically invites a more open discussion by saying, “We aren’t going around the table anymore, so just jump into the conversation whenever you want.” The moderator asks the second question and waits for a response. From this point on, the moderator takes on the role of questioner, listener, and guide rather than leader. The moderator gives more control to the group and encourages the group to have a conversation about each question. The moderator typically sits at the table rather than stands in front of the group, which draws attention to the moderator and away from the group.

DON'T INVITE QUESTIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FOCUS GROUP

Some moderators want to ask, “Before we begin, does anyone have any questions?” This is asking for trouble. Participants may ask, “Who really wants this information? Are you really going to use what we tell you? Who else are you talking to? Why aren’t you talking to X? What did X say?” Answering some of these questions might bias the participants or preempt the discussion. Not answering the questions makes the moderator appear defensive, less than forthcoming, and perhaps not trustworthy. To avoid this, don’t invite questions during the introduction. Instead, ask participants if they have questions when they complete the required paperwork. For more discussion of this, see the section later in this chapter on Responding to Participants’ Questions.



TIP

Anticipating the Flow of the Discussion

Group discussions are unpredictable. The discussion might flow precisely as planned, or it might take leaps and detours. Try to anticipate the various directions the discussion might take and recognize beneficial topics of discussion as opposed to dead ends. For example, in focus groups relating to community organizations, we have found that the discussion often leads to an evaluation of agency professionals—a topic that isn’t the purpose of the study. In these cases it is helpful to include a comment in the introduction about the scope of the study. “We are more interested in your opinions about programs, building facilities, and activities and less concerned about the people who deliver those services.” Often a mock discussion with colleagues familiar with the participants will help identify potential responses.

Sometimes participants will jump ahead and start talking about a question that comes later in your questioning route. They may start talking about question 7 when you are still on question 4. You need to decide whether to let the conversation move to question 7 (which may be perfectly fine, but you’ll want to return to questions 5 and 6) or whether you want to bring them back to question 4 right away. Expect these leaps. Know where you are going well enough to know if altering the flow matters.

Giving License to Expressing Differing Points of View

Participants may need to be reminded of the value of differing points of view. The introduction provides the first suggestion that all points of view are welcome. A second reminder is helpful if the moderator senses that participants are simply echoing the same concept. After several echoes on the same idea, the moderator might ask, “Does anyone see it differently?” or “Has anyone had a different experience?” or “Are there other points of view?” or “No one has mentioned it here, but in other groups we heard X. What’s your reaction to that?”

Two Essential Techniques: The Pause and the Probe

Moderators of group discussions should be familiar with two essential techniques: the five-second pause and the probe. Both techniques are easy to use and helpful in drawing additional information from group participants. The five-second pause is often used after a participant comment. This short pause often prompts additional points of view or agreement with the previously mentioned position. There is a tendency for novice moderators to talk too much or to move too quickly from one topic to another, usually because they feel uncomfortable with silence. Often the short pause will elicit additional points of view, especially when coupled with eye contact from the moderator. Practice the five-second pause on family, friends, and coworkers to become comfortable with the technique.

The second essential technique is the probe—the request for additional information. Some people may offer phrases or vague comments that could have multiple meanings, or say, “I agree.” These answers aren’t very useful and don’t give the analyst much to work with. A probe is used to draw out additional information. Common probes include questions and statements like these:

Would you explain further?

Can you give us an example?

Would you say more?

Tell us more.

Say more.

Is there anything else?

Please describe what you mean.

I don’t understand.

Use the probe a few times early in the interview to communicate the importance of elaboration. For example, if a participant indicates agreement by saying, “I agree,” then the moderator should follow up with “Tell us more” or “What experiences have you had that make you feel that way?” A few probes used in this way underscore the impression that more-detailed answers are wanted. Excessive probing, however, can be time-consuming, annoying, and unnecessary.

BE ALERT: ARE THEY ANSWERING THE QUESTION?

Beginning moderators are so darn glad that people are talking that they sometimes miss that people aren't answering the question they asked. Participants may be answering an earlier question. Or they may be off on a tangent. Or they may be skirting the question. It may all be fascinating, but it may not be answering the question. Moderators have to be mentally alert to spot this and must bring the group back to the question.



TIP

THINK PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Successful moderators think about what has already been discussed, what is currently being said, and what still needs to be covered. This helps them take in the whole scope of the focus group and keep the discussion on track and on schedule.



TIP

Experts, Dominant Talkers, Shy Participants, and Ramblers

One of the exciting aspects of focus group discussions is that it brings together people with different backgrounds and characteristics. However, individual characteristics can present challenges for the moderator. Four types of participants—the expert, the dominant talker, the shy participant, and the rambler—present challenges.

Self-appointed “experts” can inhibit others in the group. Participants often defer to others who are perceived to have more experience or are better informed on a topic. Some people consider themselves experts because they have had considerable experience with the topic, because they hold positions of influence in the community, or because they have previously participated in this type of session. Often the best way of handling “experts” is to underscore the fact that everyone is an expert and all participants have important perceptions that need to be expressed. In addition, the introductory question should avoid responses that would highlight participants’ levels of education, affluence, years of experience with the topic, or social or political influence.

Dominant talkers may or may not be experts, but they do like to talk. Often dominant talkers are spotted in pre-session small talk. As indicated earlier in this chapter, try to seat the dominant individual to one side of the moderator in order to exercise control by the use of body language. When this strategy does not work, then the more frontal tactic of verbally shifting attention is required; for example, “Thank you, John. Are there others who want to comment on the question?” or “Does anyone feel differently?” or “That’s one point of view. Let’s hear what others have to say” or “Claire, you look like you want to say something.” Avoid eye contact with the talker, and look at others in the group to invite them to talk. Most important, be tactful and kind because harsh comments to the talker may limit all conversation.

Shy participants and reflective thinkers tend to say little. It seems that these participants think carefully first and then speak. By contrast, others in the group are thinking and speaking

at the same time. “I don’t know what I think until I say it.” Shy and reflective participants often have great insights, but it takes extra effort to get them to elaborate their views. If possible, the moderator should place shy participants directly across the table to maximize eye contact. Eye contact often provides sufficient encouragement to speak, and if all else fails, the moderator can call on them by name. “Tom, I don’t want to leave you out of the conversation. What do you think?” “Megan, you haven’t had a chance. How do you feel about this?”

Rambling participants use a lot of words and take forever to get to the point, if they have a point. These individuals like to talk, but are offtrack a fair amount of the time, and eat up precious discussion time. As a rule of thumb, we put down our pen and discontinue eye contact with the rambler after about 20 to 30 seconds. The assistant moderator should do likewise. Look at your papers, look at the other participants, turn your body away from the speaker, but don’t look at the rambler. As soon as the rambler stops or pauses, the moderator should be ready to fire away with the next question or repeat the current question to get the conversation back on topic. In the remainder of the discussion, the moderating team may want to limit eye contact with the rambling individual. Don’t completely ignore the person, but don’t give him or her free license to talk as much as he or she would like.

Some moderators include a statement in the introduction that alerts participants to the importance of hearing from everyone. “From past experience in groups like this, we know that some people talk a lot, and some people don’t say much. We really want to hear from all of you because you’ve had different experiences. So if you are talking a lot, I may interrupt you, and if you aren’t saying much, I may call on you. If I do, please don’t be offended. We have a lot to cover here tonight, and it’s just my way of making sure we get through all the questions and that everyone has a chance to talk.”

Don’t assume that everyone should talk the same amount in a focus group. Some participants will just have more to say than others. If a participant is on track and giving helpful information, we usually let him or her continue to talk. However, if the participant is rambling or limiting the opportunity for others to talk, we will then take action.

Responding to Participant Comments

Moderators should be attentive to how they respond verbally and nonverbally to comments from participants. Often moderator responses are unconscious habits. Self-discipline and practice are needed to make sure head nodding and short verbal responses are not leading. We aren’t suggesting you sit like a block of ice or stone, totally unresponsive in fear of biasing the participants. That doesn’t contribute to a conversational environment. Just be aware that, if you were a teacher at one time, the “That’s great!” or “Excellent!” that may have worked well in the classroom might be leading here.

Head Nodding

Some moderators continually nod their head as comments are being made. If it is a slow continuous nod given to everyone, it often signals encouragement, “I’m listening. I understand.

Keep going.” However, if it is a fast head nod, it probably signals agreement and, as a result, tends to elicit additional comments of the same type. As a rule of thumb, beginning moderators should try to restrict head nodding.

Short Verbal Responses

In many of our social interactions, we have become conditioned to provide short verbal responses to signal approval or acceptance. Neutral responses such as “OK,” “Yes,” or “Uh-huh” are acceptable. But avoid responses that suggest accuracy or agreement. Avoid “Correct,” “That’s good,” or “Excellent” because they imply judgments about the quality of the comment.

Humor

A friendly manner and a sense of humor are valuable assets. Just a smile from the moderator can help people feel like this might be an OK experience. Smiles typically connote warmth, caring, and empathy and are powerful factors in promoting conversation. Humor is a powerful bonding agent, particularly when it is spontaneous and not at anyone’s expense. Excessive efforts at humor can fall flat, be misinterpreted, and be counterproductive. However, if someone says something funny, don’t hold back your laugh.

Incorrect or Harmful Advice

Sometimes participants share incorrect or harmful information in the group. We suggest that the moderator use the following procedure. When something is said that the moderator knows to be incorrect, the moderator considers whether the inaccurate information is harmful; could someone be injured directly or indirectly?

Comments may be incorrect but not harmful. If the comment is not harmful, the moderator usually takes no action. Sometimes participants will correct one another; that’s fine. Or sometimes the participants do need the correct factual information to proceed with the discussion. In that case, the moderator can interject the correct information, but the point is to try not to make the moderator the expert or to point out that some answers are wrong. Another option is to have an assistant moderator who is a content expert. The moderator can then ask the assistant moderator to give the correct information and resume the conversation.

If the comments could be harmful, the moderator waits until the end of the focus group and brings up the topic again. This time, the moderator presents the topic as a matter of fact as opposed to the opinions that were shared earlier. The moderator describes the topic, provides the answer, and cites the source. The moderator might even offer to send participants a copy of the information or facts if they are interested. This strategy removes the harmful information from the domain of opinion, resurfaces it later in the focus group when it has more attention, and provides participants with access to the source data.

Sometimes based on the topic, we know people will have lots of questions and may be sharing incorrect information. We don’t want to send people home confused or fearful, so we ask

an expert on the topic to come in for the last 15 minutes of the focus group to answer questions, share information, and provide contact information in case they have questions once they get home. For more on this, see *Questions at the Conclusion of the Group* later in this chapter.



EXAMPLE

HARMFUL INFORMATION IN FOCUS GROUPS

Occasionally participants will share advice in the focus group, and sometimes that advice has the potential for being harmful. Here are some examples we've heard:

"You know, it is really not important to use gloves, a mask, and all that stuff when you mix pesticides. My dad has been doing that for years, and it hasn't hurt him a bit."

"When I go camping, I purify my drinking water by adding a small amount of household bleach. Sure, it tastes a little funny, but it really kills the germs."

"At Thanksgiving time my grandmother prepares the turkey at her house and then wraps a blanket around the roaster and brings it to our house. She lives about four hours away, so we reheat it when she arrives."

Responding to Participants' Questions

Participants sometimes ask questions of the moderator. Expect this. It is natural, and it can actually be beneficial to the discussion. Questions occur before the focus group, just after the introduction to the focus group, during the focus group, or at the conclusion of the discussion. The strategy of answering may differ depending on when the question is asked.

Questions Before the Focus Group Begins

Individuals often ask questions during the recruiting process or just prior to the discussion. The strategy for answering should be to provide sufficient information to put the participant at ease but not to give information that might be leading. Often the questions are about the purpose of the focus group, about who's using the results, or about the timing or location.

Questions After the Introduction

Don't invite questions during the introduction. The moderator's introduction usually takes only a few minutes, and you should move directly into the opening question. During the introduction don't say, "Before we get started, are there any questions?" Inviting questions at this point is risky because there are a number of questions that you may not want to answer until the end of the group. This can make the moderator appear defensive, evasive, and apologetic. The rule

of thumb is not to invite questions, but if someone does ask a question, decide if it should be answered or postponed until later. If it is a straightforward question that won't bias the discussion, we answer it. But if it could influence the group (e.g., what previous participants have said), we delay, saying something like, "I'd love to answer that question at the end of our discussion. Remind me, and we'll talk about it then."

CAN I SEE A COPY OF THE FINAL REPORT?

Perhaps the most frequently asked question at focus groups, particularly for public and nonprofit organizations, is, "Can we get a copy of the results?" Be ready for this question, and have a direct answer. Rarely, if ever, are reports shared in the private market research environment because the results are proprietary. However, in the public-nonprofit environment it is wise to allow open access to final reports. Sharing results conveys that you really did listen. Sharing results conveys a sense of openness and fosters positive attitudes that all sides must work together to achieve results. So, anticipate this question, and discuss it with the sponsoring group. We recommend that you eagerly share copies of the results. To do this, be sure to maintain a list of names and addresses of all focus group participants. We do not share transcripts, audio recordings, field notes, or reports of individual focus groups because of our promise of confidentiality. What is shared is a full report or executive summary of the entire study. We encourage organizations we work with to include a cover letter that says, *We listened. Here are the three, four, or five most important things we heard. This is what we are going to do about it. Or this is why we can't do anything about it. Thanks for your input. Call us if you want to tell us anything else.*

TIP

Questions During the Focus Group

These questions can relate to a variety of topics or concerns. The moderator will need to consider each of these individually. Some should be answered, some should be deflected back to the participant or the group, and some should be postponed.

Questions at the Conclusion of the Group

These questions are welcomed and encouraged. If a question was postponed, be sure to bring it up at the end of the focus group. Here you can tell more about the study—who else you are talking to, what other groups have said, how they can get copies of the report. Questions asked at the end of the focus group can give clues about additional information that you might include in the introduction of future focus groups.

Sometimes we invite a content expert in at the end of a group to answer questions that came up during the group. This is where you can share information fully. Or we might put together a packet of information for each participant with names and phone numbers of experts to contact. For example, when we conducted focus groups with young mothers about lead exposure in the

home, we expected lots of questions. The questions were important because they helped to determine what type of information should be in new educational materials. But we didn't want to send mothers home with misinformation or unanswered questions. We invited an expert to sit in on the focus groups and listen to the questions and conversations. Then at the end of each focus group, she sat with the moms, answered their questions, handed out information sheets, and gave out her card so they could contact her later if they had more questions. We got the information we needed and got more information about lead poisoning out into the community.



TIP

ANTICIPATE RUNNING OUT OF TIME

Before you do the focus group, pretend that you've only asked half of the questions and only 10 minutes remain. (We hope this never happens to you.) Think about options that you might try to get the most useful information you can in the remaining minutes. Think about how to avoid the situation. Know which questions are the most important. Focus on those.

How to Answer Participant Questions

When participants ask questions in the focus group, there are two things that go through our minds: Is this really a question? Do I need to give an answer?

Some people use questions to make statements. It sounds like a question, but it isn't. They don't really want an answer. If you sense that the person really wants to make a point, you might respond by, "Tell me more about that," or "That's a good question; how would you answer it?" or simply "Why do you ask?"

If the question is indeed a question, then you have several strategies: answer it, ask participants to answer it or postpone the question.

If participants need an answer to the question to move forward with the conversation, answer it. Often these are factual questions related to the topic. However, as the moderator, you don't want to take on the role of expert, spending a lot of time explaining, defending, educating. When this happens, the moderator is talking, and the participants are listening—a reversal of roles. This means you aren't getting valuable data. Sometimes people have a lot of factual questions about the topic. For example, in focus groups on nutrition, participants often ask lots of questions related to proper nutrition. Rather than turning the focus group into a nutrition class, we may keep track of the questions that come up during the group and have a dietitian answer the questions at the end of the focus group.

Another strategy is to invite someone else to answer the question. "Would someone like to answer that question?" This is often a good strategy if the question is about opinions rather than facts. It is important that the moderator doesn't appear evasive. If the question is specifically directed to the moderator, then it is more difficult to give it away.

Another strategy is to postpone the answer. If the topic is going to be discussed in more detail later in the focus group, you might use a statement like this: "We're going to be talking about

that in a few minutes.” If the topic is not on the questioning route, you might use this approach: “We’ll be talking about things like that at the end. Remind me to talk about that then. But right now our topic is. . . .”

Be Ready for the Unexpected

Prepare for the unexpected by thinking about things that could go wrong and how you might deal with them. Here are some of the things that might go wrong and possible courses of action:

Nobody Shows Up

Review your letter of invitation to be certain you are at the right location, right date, right time. Telephone several participants to see if they received the invitation. Always take a list of invited participants with their phone numbers to the discussion location. Try to figure out what went wrong so you can correct it before future groups.

Only a Few Attend

Conduct the session anyway, but after the meeting check to be certain that all people received the follow-up letter and telephone reminder. Try to find out what kept people from attending.

The Meeting Place Is Inadequate

Improvise, but try to spot this early. Arrive at the interview location well in advance of the participants, especially if it is a location that you have not used before. This gives you time to improvise.

The Group Doesn't Want to Talk

Consider calling on individuals or going around the group to answer a specific question. Use pauses and probes. Take a 10-minute break and reconvene. Ask participants for advice.

The Group Gets So Involved That They Don't Want to Leave

This is a delightful problem that does occasionally occur. Stay awhile and listen to the conversation if time permits. If you absolutely must leave, then formally adjourn the focus group, pack up, and depart. If possible, let the participants remain.

Hazardous Weather Occurs Just Hours Before the Meeting

Phone each person to let him or her know the session has been canceled.

The Early Questions Take Too Much Time, Leaving Little Time to Ask the Final Questions

Pace the questions, and monitor the clock during the interview to allow enough time for your key and final questions. Often the later questions are the most important. You may have to skip some of the middle questions to have time for the key questions.

Concluding the Focus Group

The moderator has several options for closing the focus group. Perhaps the most common procedure is simply to thank the group for participating, provide them with the gift or cash if promised, and wish them a safe journey home. A better alternative is for the assistant moderator or the moderator to briefly summarize the main points and ask if this summary reflects what they heard in the group. This is helpful in the subsequent analysis process. It is the first opportunity the research team has to pull together a summary of the group discussion. When presenting the brief summary, the researchers should watch the participants for signs of agreement, hesitation, or confusion. When the two- to three-minute summary is completed, the moderator invites comments, amendments, or corrections.

An additional tactic for closure is asking the final question that was described in Chapter 3. The moderator provides an overview of the study and then asks the participants, "Have we missed anything?" A variation of this strategy is useful if participants are reluctant to talk because of sensitivity to the recording equipment. An alternative is to turn off the recording equipment, indicate that the discussion is now completed, thank them for their assistance, and then ask, "Do you think we've missed anything in the discussion?" This closure may uncover some avenues of thought that were not anticipated.

SUMMARY

There is a lot to think about in preparing to moderate a focus group interview. The logistics and equipment should be checked out in advance and then crossed off your worry list. Some novice moderators worry about too many things just before the group session and consequently begin the discussion with high anxiety and ignore critical social skills. The best advice for beginning moderators is to over prepare several days before the focus group and then relax just before the discussion.

It's hard to predict in advance how a focus group will go. Groups vary greatly, and flexibility is essential. Throughout the discussion the moderating team should remember that they are visitors in the world of the participants, and for a brief time they are sharing the reality of the participants' environment. The permissive moderator allows the discussion to flow, and topics may be introduced in a different sequence from what was originally anticipated. Anticipate things that can go wrong. Practice pauses and probes and interrupting participants to move the conversation along. Consider the various strategies for bringing closure to the discussion.

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APPENDIX 5.1

Checklist for Focus Group Interviews

Advance Notice

- Select locations, dates, and times that are convenient for participants.
- Contact participants two weeks (or more) before the session.
- Slightly over recruit the number of participants.
- Send each participant written confirmation of the time, date, and place.
- Give the participants a reminder phone call prior to the session.

Questions

- Questions should flow in a logical sequence.
- Key questions should focus on the critical issues of concern.
- Estimate how much time you will spend on each question.
- Use follow-up questions as needed.
- Limit the use of why questions.

Logistics

- Arrive early.
- Make sure the room is satisfactory (size, tables, comfort, etc.).
- Check background noise so it doesn't interfere with audio recording.
- Have name tents for participants.
- Place the digital recorder or a remote microphone on the table.
- Bring extra batteries, name tents, lists of questions.
- Bring pens and copies of handouts and visual aids.
- Arrange food.
- Plan topics for small-talk conversation.

Moderator Skills

- Practice the introduction without referring to notes.
- Practice the questions. Know the key questions.

- ___ Be well rested, alert, and fully present.
- ___ Welcome participants.
- ___ Create a comfortable, open atmosphere.
- ___ Use probes and pauses.
- ___ Manage the time.
- ___ Make sure everyone has a chance to share.
- ___ Avoid head nodding.
- ___ Avoid verbal comments that signal approval.
- ___ Avoid giving personal opinions.

Immediately After the Session

- ___ Check to see if the recorder captured the comments.
- ___ Download the digital audio files to your computer.
- ___ Debrief with the research team and audio record the debriefing.
- ___ Prepare a brief written summary of key points if needed.

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APPENDIX 5.2

Responsibilities of Assistant Moderators

1. **Take responsibility for all equipment and supplies.** Make sure you have enough of all the items needed. Consider designating a focus group box or briefcase to hold all the necessary equipment and files.

List of participants with phone numbers

Consent forms (if needed)

Extra sets of the questioning route

Visuals or handouts

Name tents

Extra five-by-eight-inch cards

Honorariums

Receipts for honorariums

Audio recorder

Microphone (if needed)

Marking pens

Pens, pencils, crayons, paper

Notepaper, tablet

Spare batteries

Flip chart

2. **Take responsibility for refreshments.** Arrange for the refreshments, and set them up in the room.

3. **Arrange the room.** Arrange chairs and table so everyone can see each other. Be attentive to background noises that would affect the audio recording.

4. **Set up the equipment, and verify that it is working properly.**

5. **Welcome participants as they arrive.**

6. **Sit in a designated location.** Sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator, and close to the door. If participants arrive after the session begins, meet them at the door, take them outside of the room, and give them a short briefing as to what has happened and the current topic of discussion. Then bring the late participant into the room and show him or her where to sit.

7. **Take notes throughout the discussion.** Be attentive to the following areas of concern.
 - *Well-said quotes.* Capture word for word as much of the statement as possible. Listen for sentences or phrases that are particularly enlightening or eloquently express a particular point of view. Place quotation marks around the statement or phrase and indicate name of speaker. Place your opinions, thoughts, or ideas in parenthesis to keep them separate from participant comments. If a question occurs to you that you would like to ask at the end of the discussion, write it down in a circle or box.
 - *Nonverbal activity.* Watch for the obvious such as head nods, physical excitement, eye contact between certain participants, or other clues that would indicate level of agreement, support, or interest.
 - Make a sketch of the seating arrangement.
8. **Monitor recording equipment.** Occasionally glance at the recorder to see if the recording light is on.
9. **Do not participate in the discussion!** You can talk only if invited by the moderator. Control your nonverbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.
10. **Ask questions when invited.** At the end of the discussion, the moderator will invite you to ask questions of amplification or clarification.
11. **Give an oral summary.** At the end of the discussion, the moderator or assistant should provide a brief summary (about two minutes) of responses to the important questions. Invite participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.
12. **Hand out the honorariums.** Be sure that participants sign that they have received the payment and then thank the participants for attending.
13. **Debrief.** Following the focus group, participate in the debriefing with the moderator. Record the debriefing.
14. **Provide feedback on analysis.** Read and provide feedback on the analysis.

APPENDIX 5.3*Example of a Focus Group Consent Form*

Name of Sponsoring Organization

Address of Organization

Name of Research Study

Name of Principal Investigator

Information on the Focus Group Discussions

What Is the Research?

You have been asked to take part in a research study sponsored by (name of organization). The purpose of this study is to find out (describe goal of the study). This study will benefit others in the community in the following ways: (cite direct and indirect benefits to participants and organizations).

Why Have I Been Asked to Take Part?

You have been invited to participate because you have important insights about this topic (e.g., you have observed or participated in the program, you have experience with the topic, someone close to you has experience with the topic, etc.).

Voluntary Participation

This discussion is voluntary—you do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do not take part, it will have no effect on services or opportunities provided by local organizations and agencies. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. You may leave the group at any time for any reason.

Risks and Benefits

We do not think any risks are involved in taking part in this study. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time. There are no personal benefits for taking part in this research. Your insights and that of others may be helpful to researchers as they seek insights on this topic.

Audio Recording

The discussion will be audio recorded to ensure that we have accurately captured the comments of each individual. Your privacy will be protected. No names will be used in any report. The discussion will be kept strictly confidential. The audio recording will only be available to the research team. The recordings will be stored in a secure location and will be erased when the analysis is completed.

Payment (if applicable)

For participating in the discussion, you will receive (state the incentive).

Questions

Do you have any questions regarding this study? If you have any additional questions about the study, you may call (cite the phone number).

If you agree to these procedures, please check the box and sign your name in the space below.

Yes, I agree to take part in the focus group study

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Do not copy, post, or distribute