

MODERATING A FOCUS GROUP

I. PRINCIPLES OF MODERATING

- A. Show positive regard for participants
- B. Express respect for participant opinions
- C. Create atmosphere of openness and non-judgmentalness
- D. Exhibit a friendly manner, sense of humor
- E. Listen, don't talk (be a moderator, not a participant)
 - a. Guide discussion
 - b. Don't become actively involved
 - c. Don't participate, share views, or engage in discussion
- F. Listen and think
 - 1. Keep past-present-future perspective
 - 2. What's been discussed, what is currently being discussed, where conversation needs to go
- G. Know boundaries of discussion
 - 1. Communicate boundaries
 - 2. Refocus tangential discussion

II. MODERATING TEAM

- A. Moderator
 - 1. Directs discussion
 - 2. Keeps conversation moving
 - 3. Occasional note-taking (key ideas, future questions)
- B. Assistant Moderator
 - 1. Comprehensive notes – word-for-word, in case equipment fails
 - 2. Mechanics/logistics/equipment/refreshments
 - 3. Occasional questions, probes
 - 4. Can give the oral summary

III. MODERATOR ROLES

- A. Seeker of wisdom –
 - 1. Goal is understanding, wisdom, insight
 - 2. Assumption that wisdom is to be found in group
- B. Enlightened novice
 - 1. Seems to have less knowledge than others in room
 - 2. Willing to listen and learn
- C. Expert consultant – moderator is expert
- D. Challenger
 - 1. More combative role
 - 2. Challenges participants to explain, amplify, justify views
 - 3. Risk of alienating participants
- E. Referee

1. Moderates when strong opposing views
 2. Ensures fairness, respect for all points of view
- F. Therapist
1. Seeks information on psychological motivation
 2. Why is that? How did you feel?
- G. Writer – stands and writes on flip chart

IV. RECORDING

- A. Tape recorder
1. Set in plain view
 2. Mention briefly but avoid excessive attention
 3. Too much explaining creates inhibited atmosphere
- B. Note-taking
1. Written notes essential
 2. Back-up to tape
 3. Help identify key points on tape
 4. Use some kind of notetaking schema
 5. Write down
 - a. Quotes, paraphrased quotes
 - b. Major themes
 - c. Questions that occur to you
 - d. Ideas about study
 - e. Observations about body language, group process, atmosphere
 - f. Sketch of seating pattern
 - g. Follow-up questions

V. MODERATOR PREPARATION BEFORE FOCUS GROUP

- A. Complete familiarity with questioning route
1. Be familiar with rationale for each question
 2. Don't ever read questions from printed sheet
- B. Practice introduction and questions
- C. Prepare equipment and arrange room

VI. INITIAL STRUCTURE OF THE SESSION

- A. Opening (pre-session; 5-10 minutes)
1. Participant arrives, greeted by team, made to feel comfortable
 2. Host role
 3. Complete demographic sheet (if necessary)
 3. Small talk/social conversation
 4. Refreshments (avoid during actual discussion)
 5. Avoid key issues
 6. Name tents
- B. Beginning phase of discussion
1. Introduction (2-4 minutes)
 - a. Welcome – introduce self
 - b. Overview of topic

- c. Ground rules – suggestions to guide discussion (list on flip chart)
 - 1. No right or wrong answers, just express your opinion
 - 2. Only one person should talk at once
 - 3. Tape recording because don't want to miss any of your comments – please speak up
 - 4. First name basis
 - 5. Confidentiality – no names will be used in reports
 - 6. Moderator role is to ask questions and listen – *I won't be participating in the discussion, but I want you to talk freely to each other*
 - 6. Session will last about 1 ½ hours – *I'll be asking about a dozen questions; move from one question to the next, so don't spend too much time on any one question;* themes of questions listed on flip chart
 - 8. Tendency for some people to talk, some people not to say anything: important to hear from each of you tonight because you've all had different experiences

7. Let's begin by finding out more about each other

- d. Avoid asking participants if they have questions – time-consuming

C. First question

- 1. Ice-breaker
- 2. Gets everyone to talk
- 3. Emphasizes common background

D. Reemphasize value of differing points of view

- 1. Does anyone see it differently?
- 2. Are there any other points of view?

VII. SPECIAL TECHNIQUES

A. 5 second pause

- 1. Novice mistakes
 - a. Speed
 - b. Offering examples too quickly
- 2. Alternative: *Take a moment and think about your answer: We'll wait until you're ready to respond*
 - 1. Used after participant comment
 - 2. Prompts additional points of view

B. Probe – request for additional information

- 1. Use early to communicate importance of precision in responses, then use sparingly later in interview
- 2. Conveys desire for more detailed answers
- 3. Excessive probing time-consuming

C. Avoid asking questions in several different ways

- 1. Confusing
- 2. Time-consuming

D. Ask questions in conversational manner

E. If question not understood, switch quickly to parallel question

- F. Modify sequence of the question or eliminate a question if it has been answered in previous discussion

VIII. RESPONDING TO PARTICIPANT COMMENTS

- A. Head nodding
 - 1. Use sparingly and consciously
 - 2. Can be taken as agreement or approval
- B. Short verbal responses
 - 1. Neutral are acceptable – okay, uh huh, yes
 - 2. Avoid good, excellent, correct that imply judgment

IX. PACING

- A. Be careful early questions don't take up too much time
- B. Pace questions, monitor clock
- C. Later questions are most important

X. CONCLUDING THE FOCUS GROUP

- A. Summarize main points, ask if accurate
- B. Final question – have we missed anything
- C. Thank participants, give incentive
 - 1. Cash in envelope with participant name
 - 2. Sign list stating: *"I have received \$25 for participating in the focus group interview at (location) on (date)"*

XI. Debriefing with assistant moderator

- A. What were important themes or ideas?
- B. How did these differ from what we expected?; what occurred in earlier groups?
- C. Any especially good quotes
- D. Should we do anything differently for next focus group?

XII. CHALLENGES TO MODERATOR

- A. Passive, quiet group
 - 1. Call on individuals
 - 2. Go around group answering a specific question
 - 3. Use pauses and probes
- B.. Shy respondent
 - 1. Place directly opposite moderator – plenty of eye contact
 - 2. Ask to speak up or continue because interested in their point of view
- C. Excessively verbal group
 - 1. Polite limit-setting
 - 2. Review one-at-a-time rule
- D. Outspoken group member
 - 1. Expert – can inhibit other members in group
 - a.. Emphasize everyone's expertise,
 - b. Importance of all opinions
 - 2. Dominant talkers –
 - a. may or may not be experts
 - b. Use body language, lack of eye contact

- c. Verbal strategies – thank you, that’s one point of view; other opinions?
- d. Interrupt when necessary
- e. Avoid harsh, critical comments – curtail spontaneity from rest of group
- E. Group member who consistently goes off on tangent – rambling
 - 1. Drone on, seem to feel obligation to say something
 - 2. Discontinue eye contact after 20-30 seconds
 - 3. When speaker stops or pauses, ask for other opinions, ask next question
- F. Group which doesn’t understand questions or task
 - 1. Clarify/use parallel questions
 - 2. Revise questioning route
- G. Hostile group
 - 1. Disrespectful, personal attacks
 - 2. Reminder of ground rule to listen respectfully
 - 3. Reminder not everyone in group needs to agree
- H. Inappropriate personal disclosures
 - 1. Emphasize seeking general information, not personal stories
 - 2. Redirect back to main focus of group
- I. Inarticulate group
 - 1. More structure – switch to sentence completion, making lists
 - 2. Avoid modeling answers
- J. Nervous, tense group
 - 1. Acknowledge difficulty of task
 - 2. Use gentle humor

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