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Using Guidelines To Support Quality Moderation of Focus Group Interviews

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Abstract

A Focus Group Interview (FGI) involves 6-9 people guided through a pre-thought line of questioning for 1-2 hours by a trained Moderator. The Moderator gives participants the opportunity to express ideas, thoughts, and views. This is a robust qualitative data collection method IF there is a skilled FGI Moderator. The Moderator sets the tone, delivers a high quality introduction, makes the discussants feel trusting, while at the same time managing a set of unstructured questions discussed by a mix of personalities within a relatively short time. The Moderators' Code is a set of ten guidelines for moderating successful FGIs.

The literature on Focus Group Interviews (FGI) emphasizes the importance of a trained and well qualified Moderator. The Moderator is supposed to “set the tone,” deliver a “high quality introduction,” make the discussants “feel relaxed and trusting,” while at the same time managing a set of unstructured questions to be discussed by a mix of personalities within a relatively short time. This article focuses on the skills of the Moderator.

Moderators Must Be Physically Alert

Because Moderators must be physically alert it is essential that individuals be well-rested and free from other major obligations on the day of the FGI. It is not a good idea to do more than one FGI in a day, and it would be preferable to moderate no more than one FGI per week.

Practice the standard introduction and asking the questions several times before the actual interview. This can be in front of a mirror or in a car as you are traveling to the FGI site. You do not need to have everything memorized. A bulleted outline or note cards can serve as aids, but it should not appear that you are reading. The discussion must be conversational, and your introduction and question asking must not distract from that.

Using Pre-interview Strategies

Not all participants arrive at the same time. One person generally arrives twenty minutes prior, while most participants arrive less than five minutes before the appointed start time. Always, there will be one person who shows up late, and another who fails to show up at all, even though she was confirmed the day before. The Moderator must have topics to discuss during this pre-interview time that DOES NOT relate to the purpose of the FGI. The first time that you want to hear about the subject of interest is during the actual FGI because the richness of the description is better the first time, and it will be better captured.

People seated next to the Moderator will have less opportunity for eye contact with the Moderator and not be able to gain acknowledgement to speak as easily, while those seated across from the Moderator are more likely to make eye contact will more easily engage in the discussion. In the

best possible scenario, small talk prior to the focus group will help the Moderator identify the dominant talkers and the shy people. If this happens, one can appropriately seat the dominant talkers next to the Moderator, and the shy people across the table. This placement can be accomplished with ease if the Moderator creates name tents from folded 5”x 8” index cards. Once the dominant and shy people are identified right before the discussion begins, the Moderator only needs to place the name cards in the appropriate place for dominant and shy. One additional tip is to always put first names only on both sides of these name tents. Names on both sides are much easier for everyone to see, and if the name is put only on one side, about thirty percent of the time, the respondent will place the name card with the name facing them—as if it was a place card at a banquet.

In many cases the Moderator will NOT be able to identify dominant and shy individuals based on the prebriefing. There are other techniques for controlling dominant people, and encouraging the shy, and one of these is to attend to indicators in the recruitment process.

It is essential that the Moderator relate to respondents without talking up to them or down to them. Do not purposefully request the community status, financial resources, or even the job title of respondents. They should always feel on an equal plane with other respondents and the Moderator. The Moderator should not give his own title or position. It is best to say something, like, “Good afternoon, and welcome to our session. My name is Tom Archer, and assisting me is Boris Layman, and we are interested in {then state the determined purpose of the focus group project}.”

Maintain rapport with verbal and non-verbal methods. Eye contact throughout is important, especially to determine who has something to say, and that you are interested in everyone’s thoughts. Wearing clothing that is similar to the respondents is a good idea. Make attempts to illustrate how relaxed the atmosphere is by loosening one’s tie, taking off a jacket, leaning away from the table, uncrossing the arms, and using welcoming hand gestures.

The first question is designed to engage all participants, and provide usable data. The goal is to get everyone to say something early in the discussion. It is well known that after a person speaks for the first time in a group setting, subsequent participation is more likely. Some FGI literature encourages

an easy to answer question that is extraneous or demographic in nature, rather than a question concerning the topic of the group discussion. However, if a question does not relate to the topic, then valuable time is wasted and demographic responses may change the group dynamics by causing one person to think another has more knowledge. When this occurs the first person does not participate as much because she is yielding to one who is perceived as having more knowledge. For example, in a parenting discussion, if the first question is asked, "Tell me about how many children you have, and their ages:" A respondent with six children, ages 4 through 15, may be perceived to be more knowledgeable in parenting by the person who has only one five year old.

With the advent of stricter human subjects requirements necessitating voluntary participation, the Moderator can no longer state "For the first question, I am going to ask a question, pause for a few moments, and then start somewhere around the table. Everyone will answer the first question. After the first question, anyone may participate at anytime in any of the discussion." Now the Moderator needs to modify the opening direction to: "For the first question, I am going to ask a question, pause for a few moments, and then start somewhere around the table. Everyone will have the opportunity to respond to the first question. After the first question, anyone may participate at anytime in any of the discussion."

Moderators Need Special Skills during the Interview

Moderators should employ a number of strategies during the interview.

Give clear ground rules at outset. The most important part of a focus group interview is the standard introduction. Respondents must know that they have valuable information about the topic at hand. They must feel free to express opinions even though the opinions may differ from the opinions of others. They must know that the discussion is being audio recorded and the purposes and use of that audio recording. Respondents need to know about the creature comforts: restroom location; refreshments; and approximate ending time. Discussants should be aware that there will be no break, but that they are welcomed to leave the table if need be. It should be noted that only one person should leave the table at a time. A total group break should not be part of the discussion—it takes away valuable time, the discussion may be diverted to a topic of lesser or no interest, conversations become just between two people at a time, and it just takes longer to warm up to a group discussion atmosphere again after a break. If people are not told to take breaks one at a time, then the possibility exists of two or more people, or even the whole group, self initiating a break.

Take only minimal notes. Notes by the Moderator are generally only to help transition to a later question, or to identify an issue for further investigation. The biggest problem with the Moderator taking notes is that if she takes notes while respondent A is speaking, but not while respondent B is speaking, then respondent B is given the non-verbal signal that what he said was not as important, and then respondent B will not be as willing to speak later in the discussion. Also, there is no way possible for the Moderator to capture all of

what is said, and no one can write quotes and listen very well at the same time. The Moderator has too many other responsibilities than to take notes.

Take care to transition between questions. Generally, there are 8-12 questions in a focus group interview questioning route. These will easily fit on one side of a sheet of paper in double spaced format. These questions have been constructed in advance and written for the purpose of conducting the focus group interview project. They need to be stated to the group as near to the way that they are written, and presented to every group in similar fashion.

Sometimes it may be more appropriate to ask a later question earlier in the discussion, if discussion goes in that direction. In some cases a question or questions may not even need to be asked, because the discussion proceeds on its own to the topics of the subsequent questions. At other times, the stakeholders want more specific information about an issue that in reality would take 3-4 additional questions. Instead of adding questions that would make the total list 11-16 questions, incorporate these more specific questions as sub-questions—only to be asked if the discussion does not go there. For example, if a questioning route contained the question, "How do you receive information about employment possibilities?", the stakeholder may be specifically interested in print or web classifieds. The discussion may go to these two sub-questions without asking. If it does not, this indicates that print or web classifieds are not a noted theme, and the Moderator can decide if the sub-questions need to be asked.

It is important that all questions in the questioning route be asked in all groups. Many times, the Moderator will be on question #4 only 15 minutes into the discussion, and he will think the group will end early. Subsequently the group begins to warm up and discuss things more in depth, maybe even re-visiting the second and third questions. Then, the Moderator may find that there are only 15 minutes left, and there are still three questions to ask. At this point, the Moderator might explain that to the group something like "There are only fifteen minutes left and I still have three questions. So I am going to ask a question, and limit the discussion to just five minutes for each question. Please try to shorten your responses, but please try not to limit the number or breadth of ideas that you may have for each question."

Practice active listening (or at least appear to do so). It is difficult to do all of the time, but the Moderator must be an observer and not a participant. Even if statements are made by participants that the Moderator knows to be wrong, the Moderator cannot correct the participant. He must have a listening rather than an informing attitude. Sometimes respondents in focus groups ask questions directly to the Moderator. One category of the respondent questions is for clarification about a question asked by the Moderator. The Moderator should not interpret the question, but rather just re-read or re-state the question, or tell the respondent, "We want to know what that means to you."

Often respondents ask questions to the Moderator requiring factual answers to which the Moderator may or may not have the answer. Rather than becoming the expert on that topic during the focus group, and thus becoming a participant,

the appropriate response of the Moderator is to say, "I have my questions to ask. After I ask all my questions, then we will attempt to answer your questions. I will make a note of your question and at the end we will address your question as best we can. Please remind me to do this if I forget."

Use the five second pause often. One of the most effective Moderator techniques is the five second pause. Either after asking a question, or after one of the participants makes a comment, wait at least five seconds before saying anything. Try it. Count to five seconds in silence. It seems like an eternity, especially in a group discussion setting. Most people do not like that silence, and if they have something they have been thinking about they will more likely say it before that five second pause ends. During that pause, the Moderator should scan the table, trying to make eye contact with the participants. If a participant makes eye contact, and if the Moderator makes a slight head nod towards the participant it is guaranteed that if there is something that respondent has to say it will be spoken.

An additional consideration is the use of head nodding. The example in the previous paragraph is the only time that a Moderator should nod her head. Constant head nodding is like saying, "More, More, More!" to the respondent. It is giving approval or agreement with the comments being made, and therefore making the Moderator a participant in the discussion. Also, if not used all the time, it has the same affect as a Moderator taking notes. For some people, constant head nodding is difficult to control in a Moderator role. Other people have a hard time not saying "Uh, huh, Uh, huh" to comments made, which has the same effect as head nodding.

Strategically use a probe. The probe is a request for additional information. Examples of probes are: "Would you explain further?"; "Would you give me an example of what you mean?"; "Would you say more?"; "Is there anything else?"; "Please describe what you mean."; or "I don't understand." Probes are not detailed, subject specific questions, but rather a means to acquire more detail. Generally, a probe is necessary only once or twice during the interview. It should be used early in the interview, and in doing so will send the message to all participants that more information, more detail or more descriptors are desired.

Give everyone the opportunity to participate. The most important discussion management goal that a Moderator needs to accomplish is to give everyone the opportunity to participate. It is not necessary for everyone to participate equally nor is it necessary for everyone to even participate at all, but everyone must be given the opportunity to participate.

The Moderator must control the "Dominant" and encourage the "Shy" participants

There are several non-verbal or body language cues that the Moderator can employ to help control the flow and the amount of discussion. In preceding paragraphs, eye contact, coupled with a five second pause, and maybe even a slight head nod, will generate comment from most participants. A Moderator is more likely to be able to take back control or direction of the discussion if he leans up on the table, rather than leaning back in a chair. If a Moderator does not look at the person while that

person is rambling, there is likelihood that the person will stop talking. An even more drastic method to accomplish the same end is to physically turn away from the speaker.

The Moderator can make a stop signal with a raised hand to break the monologue of a dominant speaker. Sometimes the Moderator may have to verbally limit the conversation of a dominant talker. The Moderator can interrupt and say, "Thanks for sharing. Would someone else describe their different viewpoint on the topic?" Likewise, a verbal, specific invitation for a shy person may be required. For example, "Sally, what is your reaction to this topic?" It is wise to specifically call on a shy participant only once, and usually not before the middle of the interview. It is best to have the shy person feel comfortable enough to participate in the discussion without being singled out.

Two Methods of Recording the FGI

Any focus group, to be a focus group, must be recorded. It is very common that when listening to an FGI recording, or reading an FGI transcript, there will be something that the Moderator did not hear during the discussion even though that Moderator was in that room the entire time. Often the part of the discussion heard the first time on the recording or in the transcript is significant. The Moderator has many things to manage: questions, time, shy respondents, dominant talkers, possible new issues to investigate, and the relationship between the FGI and future work. Even though the Moderator may appear to be intently listening to all the discussion all the time, it just does not happen that way. Therefore, audio recordings are a must.

Traditional cassette tapes are still probably the most common, economical, and easiest to use. Ninety minute tapes are best. Sixty minute tapes require changing the tape more often, and 120 minute tapes are much thinner and tend to break or jam more often. When using a new audio tape, fast forward it all the way through before use, and then rewind. New tapes are far less likely to break or jam if they have been cycled in this way. Most common audio cassette recorders do not have a high quality microphone, so it is a good idea to acquire a boundary microphone to use to capture a higher quality of sound in a group discussion setting. Also, if there is a voice activation feature on the recorder, make sure it is disabled because after pauses, the first word or two are always lost because of this voice activation feature.

A better way to record focus group sessions is to use digital recorders. Such recorders are smaller, they can record several hours without being re-set, and copies of recordings can be easily made, stored, and transmitted. The quality of sound is much better than cassette tapes. Also, there are digital recorders that produce a high quality recording without the use of a boundary microphone. With either audio tapes or digital recordings, a transcriber machine or transcribing computer program will greatly facilitate the creation of the transcript.

The Assistant Moderator:

- Maintains the audio recorder;
- Takes detailed notes of quotes, body language, and obvious themes that develop;

- Handles unexpected interruptions such as late arrivals;
- Asks questions where important and relevant—but usually only one or two during the entire interview; and
- Leads the analysis process.

The Assistant Moderator sits outside the discussion group, and tries not to draw attention to the fact that she is present.

In those situations where there is no Assistant Moderator, then there should be two recording systems. This means two recorders, two sources of power, two sets of blank tapes, and two separate microphones. There is nothing more distressing than conducting a focus group, and then discovering that the recording is blank, and there are not written notes of the discussion. The time has been virtually wasted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it will be helpful to consider Moderator factors that will support quality FGI work. One of these factors is confidentiality. Focus group interviews are confidential only to the limit that a group discussion can allow. However, if the Moderator assures the group during the interview introduction that no names will be ever associated with direct quotes in the analysis or the reporting, then the Moderator must adhere to that statement. Sometimes administrators, while reading focus group reports on topics within their organization, want to know who said what. Even if the Moderator's superior requests that kind of identification information, it cannot be shared.

It is best not even to include names of respondents as transcripts are created from the recordings. There is not that great of need to know who says what during the interview, but rather to grasp the breadth and depth of the ideas shared.

If focus groups are used as the data collection method for a research project, then all of the requirements of the Institutional Review Board and use of Human Subjects must be followed. Actually, it is relatively easy to gain and document informed consent for focus group participants, because appropriate forms can be completed during the registration and pre-interview phases of the FGI.

Another factor is Moderator involvement. Although it is not always possible, Moderators are more productive if they are involved in the entire project. If a moderator helps develop the written purpose and resultant questioning route, he is more comfortable with asking the questions in a manner that appears more conversational than memorized. If the Moderator has a grasp of the subject matter and is familiar with the jargon and terminology of the assembled group, then it is obvious that more will be understood, and there is potential for more exploration of new issues raised during the discussion. The Moderator needs sufficient knowledge about the topic area to use accurate language and pursue appropriate sub-topics.

If scheduling of times and facilities are made with the help of the Moderator, or at least involving the Moderator, then there will be less chance of scheduling conflicts and more knowledge of limitations of focus group sites such as outdated electrical outlets and potentials for interruptions. If a Moderator is familiar with the recruiting process, and has even helped recruit

participants, then he will be more familiar with each participant before they arrive, and the comfort level of the participants will be increased with the Moderator. The Moderator may even have a better idea of dominant and shy participants before the focus group. Analysis and reporting will be richer if the Moderator and the Assistant Moderator are involved. After all, they were in the room, had face to face contact, and witnessed non-verbal messages throughout the interview.

A final factor are the personal dispositions of the Moderator. Focus group interviewing is a qualitative data collection method. Things are never black and white, but the data is so much richer than numbers ever can be. The method itself allows spontaneity among participants, as they stimulate the thought processes in one another. The "Findings" also emerge in a form that virtually anyone can understand—words! There are instances of surprises, both in response and in execution of group interviews, but this method is so robust and flexible that it can address almost any unforeseen circumstance. However, the Moderator must be able to live without closure or concluding priorities. There will be no results that can be generalized to a population. If the Moderator is not comfortable with the spontaneity of the process, surprises, and the ambiguity of the results, this method will not work well.

The focus group Moderator is an individual well-grounded in real world issues. At the same time, the Moderator must be both evaluation and research savvy. Evaluators determine the value or worth of a program, while researchers seek to discover new knowledge. The Moderator should also be enough of a "people person" to deal and cooperate with stakeholders. Realizing what the stakeholder needs, helping the stakeholder define the purpose and identify appropriate questions, and reporting to the stakeholder in the best way possible, will help insure the use of the results of the focus group process.

Finally, the Moderator must be comfortable with qualitative analysis. With this method of data collection, analysis really begins when the first word hits the tape. From then on, it is up to the Moderator to navigate the discussion through the identified issues to describe the breadth and depth of the related dimensions.

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