

Krueger & Casey 2000

# 5

## Moderating Skills

**M**uch 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. Interviewing looks deceptively simple but requires preparation, mental discipline, and group interaction skills.

### What's Needed When Planning

#### *Selecting the Right Moderator*

Who should moderate the focus groups? Sometimes it is an automatic decision. It is the principal investigator, the head researcher, the person who did focus groups last time, or a staff member who wants to gain experience with focus groups. Don't limit yourself to these choices. Consider the skills needed for the task as well as the preferences and characteristics of your target audience. Listed below are some factors that we've found to be important.

Moderators' respect for participants may be one of the most influential factors affecting the quality of focus group results. The moderator must believe that the participants have wisdom no matter what their level of education, experience, or background. Indeed, they may have limited knowledge on the topic, hold opposing values to that of the researchers, or seem to have fuzzy logic, but the moderator listens attentively with sensitivity, trying to understand their perspective. Often after the fourth or fifth group, the moderator will have heard the topic discussed in a variety of ways, and many of the concerns and key ideas will have been said several times. At this point, some information is old stuff to the moderator, but it still deserves the respect

and active listening that were present the first time it was heard. Lack of respect quickly telegraphs to the participants and essentially shuts down meaningful communication. Why share your personal feelings when the moderator seems dismissive?

We've observed hundreds of moderators over the years and found that respect can be communicated in a variety of ways. In fact, we've worked with colleagues who do, indeed, care deeply about the participants but had difficulty exhibiting signals. The signals are the little things that let participants know that you care about them. The moderator shows interest in their lives and what is happening in their environment. The moderator interacts informally before and possibly after the focus group. The moderator looks at participants and gives the appearance of active listening. Some moderators will lean forward as they listen; others will take notes of key points. The moderator is not dismissive of comments and 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 an honor that he or she gets to hear what these people have to say on the topic.

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 that reflects how we



TIP

*Show That You Care*

It is not enough that the moderator cares about the participants. This concern must be reflected in behaviors that are observable to those in the focus group. We once did a study for a large medical facility that wanted to know what patients looked for in their health care. Over and over we heard patients say they knew they received good care when they felt the doctors and nurses cared about them as people. We asked patients to tell us how they could tell when the staff cared. Patients described how caregivers would stop them in the

hallway and ask how they were doing. They took time to listen. Also, it was particularly meaningful when the caregivers remembered the patient's name and asked about family members or events in the patient's life. These concrete ways were signs to patients that their medical providers cared about them. And they felt that when the caregivers cared about them as people, then they got good health care. Moderators also need to go beyond saying they care and show it by their behavior.

try to approach 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. (Kornfield, 1993, p. 82)



The moderator must have adequate background knowledge on the topic of discussion to place comments in perspective and follow up on critical areas of concern. 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 two-edged sword. In some circumstances, it elicits considerable new information that may have been assumed—sometimes incorrectly—by the moderator. Furthermore, 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.

**CAUTION*****Keep Questions Clear***

Sometimes in an effort to be helpful, the moderator will ask a question in several different ways. The moderator usually assumes that this strategy helps the participant, but in fact, it often does just the opposite. If the questions are perceived as different, then respondents become confused with the intent. Moreover, it makes analysis difficult because you are not sure which question was actually answered.

The moderator must be able to communicate clearly in writing and orally. The questions asked by the moderator are the backbone of the focused interview, and if these questions are convoluted or confusing, or reflect fuzzy thinking, then the entire process is in jeopardy.

Moderating requires the ability to listen and the self-discipline to control your personal views. Focus groups have been jeopardized because novice moderators could not hold back their own opinions. Moderators who have a personal commitment to the topic need to be careful 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 the 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 defending or explaining rather than just listening. Professional focus group moderators have a distinct advantage in this respect because they are emotionally detached from the topic of the study. It is easier to be open and listen.

Participants must feel comfortable with the moderator. They should feel that the moderator is the appropriate person to ask the questions and that the answers can be openly discussed. There are few absolutes about the physical characteristics of the moderator because much depends on the situation and the past experiences of the participants. It is more than having the participants comfortable with the moderator's dress and appearance. Consideration should be given to factors such as gender, race, age, language, socioeconomic characteristics, technical knowledge, and perceived power differences. Each of these, depending on the circumstances, has the potential for inhibiting communication. A simple example is that it is probably easier for men to talk about prostate problems with a male moderator than with a female moderator.

The moderator is a person, a member of a racial group, an age category, a gender, and so on, and any one of these factors could inhibit or prompt openness within the group. A valuable asset of many nonprofit and public institutions is the ability to recruit volunteer moderators who are not researchers but who possess the characteristics essential for success.

Finally, 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.

### The Moderating Team

Consider using a moderator team: a moderator and an assistant moderator. Each has certain tasks to perform. The moderator is primarily concerned with directing the discussion, keeping the conversation flowing, and taking a few notes. The notes of the moderator are not so much to capture the total interview but rather to identify a few key ideas, to remember comments to be rewoven into the later conversation, or to jot down questions that might be asked at the end of the group. The assistant, on the other hand, takes comprehensive notes, operates the tape recorder, handles the environmental conditions and logistics (refreshments, lighting, seating, etc.), and responds to unexpected interruptions. Near the end of the discussion, the moderator may ask the assistant if he or she wants to ask any additional questions or follow up on anything. The assistant may be asked to give a short (two-minute) summary of the key points of the discussion. Also, the assistant is key during the postmeeting analysis of the session.

The assistant moderator is not usually used in private sector market research projects unless as an apprentice. This limited use of assistant moderators is due to additional labor and travel costs. We have found assistant moderators well worth the investment in the public and nonprofit environment, particularly in situations when you do not have the 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 provides a means for dealing with distracting interruptions to the focus group interview, such as latecomers, unwanted background music, or switching tapes.

Public and nonprofit organizations have a potential advantage in the use of assistant moderators. Within many organizations, individuals are willing to "sit in" on the focus group due to curiosity or concern and help with assigned functions. In some circumstances, these individuals may have background characteristics similar to those of the participants, and as a result, they may offer valuable assistance in analysis. Some care must be taken to ensure that the newly recruited assistant moderator understands the roles and responsibilities and doesn't inadvertently upstage the focus group. This can be solved by explicitly outlining the purpose and rules of the session. An example of assistant moderator responsibilities is included in Practice Hint 5.2.



#### EXAMPLE

##### *Getting the Right Moderator*

An AIDS researcher was planning on conducting focus group interviews with prostitutes who were also intravenous drug users. The topic was on the use of condoms and sterilized needles in AIDS prevention. This situation presented difficulties to the focus group researchers, who understood little of the culture or environment of the target audience. Also, the researchers would have to spend a great deal of time developing trust with the prostitutes. The best strategy in this situation may be to enlist the help of a drug-using prostitute to moderate the focus groups.

## What's Needed Just Before the Group

### *Mental Preparation*

Moderators must be mentally alert and free from distractions, anxieties, or pressures that would 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 fight with your teenagers, don't do more than two groups in one day). Moderators must be able to give their full attention to the group.

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.

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, 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—talking about how something could or should be done or giving a theoretical response instead of one based on their actual experience. Other times, participants will speak in clichés. Or sometimes the participant's response seems to be completely disconnected from the question. These digressions and mental detours are relatively easy to spot when you leisurely listen to the audiotape the next day but difficult to catch at the moment they are said. With practice, this becomes easier.

Without a doubt, the moderating process is hard work and fatiguing. Because of the mental and emotional discipline required, we don't conduct more than two focus groups on the same day. By the third



TIP

#### *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. The moderator has to be mentally alert to spot this and must bring the group back to the question.

group, it is hard to remember if something was said in this group or an earlier group. Also, allow sufficient time between focus groups to reenergize.

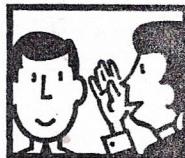
### Pre-Session Strategy

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. The moderating team then act as hosts. We think of it as what we do when we welcome people to our home. We greet them at the door. Welcome them. Introduce ourselves. We introduce them to one another. We do whatever we can to help them feel comfortable. We offer refreshments and make small talk. Sometimes we split our roles. One will act as the greeter; the other will take care of any paperwork. Occasionally participants are 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 a human subjects form for them to sign as they arrive. Even if we have them filling out paperwork, the emphasis is on creating a friendly, warm, and comfortable environment.

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. Purposeful small talk avoids the focused issue and instead concentrates on common human experiences such as 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.).

Because participants arrive at different times, the small talk maintains the warm and friendly environment until a sufficient number of participants are present to begin the session. In most situations, this small-talk period will last only five to ten 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 the 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, those who consider themselves as experts, or people who



#### TIP

##### *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 the small talk with each other. Let those who have this gift coach others who seek to develop it.

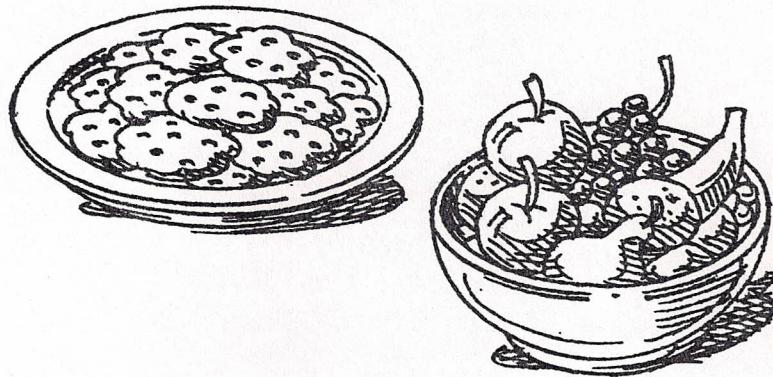
seem shy or quiet. Individuals who talk a lot may later dominate the conversation and should be seated at the moderator's side if possible. Then, if necessary, the moderator can turn slightly away from the domineering individuals, thereby giving a nonverbal and diplomatic signal for others to talk. Shy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

This strategic positioning of participants is achieved in the following manner. The moderating team will have a list of participants who are expected to attend the discussion and will prepare "name tents" to place on the table in front of group members. Name tents can easily be made from 5-by-8-inch index cards, folded in the middle with first names printed. Last names aren't necessary. Name tents are preferred because they are larger and more legible than nametags. The moderator will casually "drop" the name tents around the table in a seemingly random manner. In fact, the moderator arranges the cards using observations from the informal pre-session, quickly checks perceptions with the assistant moderator, and then places the name tents.

### *Snacks and Meals*

Food can help the focus group. Eating together tends to promote conversation and communication within the group. Most focus groups use a variety of 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 they are conducted in restaurants, then advance arrangements are needed to ensure speedy



service. Meals can be catered or delivered (e.g., 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.

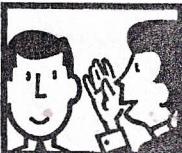
## What's Needed During the Group *Recording the Group Discussion*

Focus groups are typically recorded in two ways: by a tape recorder and with written notes. Written notes are essential. Typically the moderator will take a few notes, but note taking is really the role of the assistant who tries to capture complete statements of the participants—especially those comments that may be quotable. The note taking should not interfere with the spontaneous nature of the group interview, and only the moderator will be able to capture brief comments by participants. If the group has to wait until the moderator finishes taking notes, the discussion will hardly be free-flowing. Also, some participants wonder why the moderator takes notes on some statements and not on others.

Notes should be as complete as possible in case the tape recorder doesn't work. Tape recorders shouldn't be completely trusted. Murphy's Law dictates that the most insightful comment will be lost when the tape is being switched or when background noise drowns out voices on the tape. At times, the moderator and assistant moderator may get so involved in the discussion that they both forget to monitor the tape recorder.

Set up the tape-recording equipment and remote microphone before the meeting begins and in plain sight of participants. Hidden recorders and microphones are usually unwise because they create an unnecessarily secretive atmosphere. Introduce the recorder at the beginning of the discussion as a tool to help capture everyone's comments.

Avoid excessive attention to the tape recording. Occasionally, a novice moderator will appear nervous at this point—avoiding eye contact, stumbling over the explanation of taping, and commenting at length about the tape recording. Inadvertently, the moderator creates an environment that restricts the free flow of information due to

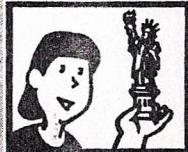


### TIP

#### *Serve Quiet Food*

Veteran moderators have found that some meals are noisy and make it difficult to get clear sound on the tape recorder. Avoid glass, china, cans, and silverware. Instead, use paper cups and plates with plastic forks and spoons.

overattention to recording. It is usually best to mention the recording and confidentiality and move on to the next topic. However, in work situations, participants may need more information, such as who will get to listen to the tape and how it will be used. In some situations, the tape recording is perceived as symbolic of careful listening.

**EXAMPLE*****The Tape Recorder Is a Signal of Listening***

A large school system conducted focus groups on merit pay of teachers—a sensitive topic to most teachers. In the planning phase, some people on the study team were concerned that tape recording would inhibit conversation. The decision was made to try it and, if necessary, turn off the recording equipment. When the teachers arrived for the first focus group, one of the first comments was, "Finally the school administration is taking the opinions of teachers seriously." The moderator asked the

teacher to comment further. The reply: "Well, you're tape recording our comments! All along the school administrators said they were listening and we knew they weren't because they didn't record, take notes, or anything. Now it looks like they are serious about listening." When topics of concern were addressed in the groups, the teachers would lean toward the microphone in the center of the table and talk slowly so that their comments would be clearly understood.

Getting great sound quality is difficult because recorders tend to pick up tapping of pencils and the hum of the ventilation system instead of the softly spoken comments of participants. Built-in microphones on cassette recorders don't pick up group discussions well, and their recordings are hard to listen to. Instead, we use an omnidirectional, pressure sensitive remote microphone placed in the center of the table. Pressure sensitive microphones pick up sound vibrations from the table. Occasionally, moderators use two microphones placed at different ends of the table, each connected to a recorder. Before people arrive for the group interview, the moderator should test recording equipment to be sure that all comments in the room will be captured, even if spoken in quiet tones.

Other ways are also being used to capture focus group results. Video cameras are more compact than ever before, but still they are obtrusive. We rarely use them. Another method is to digitally record the focus

group onto a laptop computer using special software and then mark selected choice parts for later review and analysis (Belisle, 1998, p. 18). Still another strategy is to have a fast typist transcribe the focus group in real time. Voice recognition software is steadily improving and can transcribe voices that have been "trained" to be recognized by the software. In the near future, this software may be able to distinguish between multiple voices and offer immediate transcripts.

### ***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. Veteran moderators testify that groups are unpredictable, and one group may be exciting and free-flowing, whereas another group might be low energy or cautious. Differences between groups should be expected; however, the moderator should introduce the group discussion in a consistent manner.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes the following:

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

Here is an example of a typical introduction:

Good evening and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion of airplane travel. My name is Pete Krueger, and I represent the Happy Traveler Research Agency. Assisting me is Sheree Benson, also from the Happy Traveler Agency. We have been asked by the airline industry to help them get some information about how public employees feel about airline travel. They want the information to help them improve the service they provide.

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

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

We're tape 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. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

We have name tents here in front of us tonight. They help me remember names, but they can also help you. 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. Don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time. 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 we hear from all of you.

Feel free to get up and get more refreshments if you would like. Let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Tell us your name and some of the places that you've flown to in the past year.

The first question is designed to get all participants to say something early in the conversation. It breaks the ice. After the participant has said something, 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 thirty seconds and, as a result, will often consist of factual information. Furthermore, this first question cannot demand excessive reflection or long-past memories.

### *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

**CAUTION*****Don't Invite Questions at the Beginning of the Focus Group***

It is risky to ask the participants if they have questions when you begin the focus group. Unfortunately, these early participant questions may preempt the discussion and place the moderator in a defensive position. When confronted by certain questions, the moderator will appear apologetic and uncertain of the study. Examples include the following: "Who really wants this information? Are you really

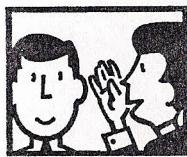
going to use what we tell you? Who else are you talking to? Why aren't you talking to X? What did X say? Can we see copies of the report?" Instead, don't invite questions at the beginning. If someone does ask a question, the moderator might indicate that the topic will come later in the discussion. For more ideas, see the section later in this chapter on "Participant Questions."

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 some of the varieties of 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.

### ***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

**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.

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. It allows you to become comfortable with this technique.

The second essential technique is the probe—the request for additional information. In most conversations and group discussions, there is a tendency for people to make vague comments that could have multiple meanings or to say “I agree.” When this occurs, the probe is an effective technique to elicit additional information. Typically, probing involves comments such as the following:

- Would you explain further?
- Would you give me an example of what you mean?
- 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 precision in responses. 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.

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 needed and wanted. 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?”

### *Experts, Dominant Talkers, Shy Participants, and Ramblers*

One of the exciting aspects of focus group discussions is that they bring 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 present special problems in focus groups. What they say and how they say it 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 sometimes consider themselves to be experts, but much of the time, they are unaware of how they are perceived by others. Often dominant talkers are spotted in pre-session small talk. As indicated earlier in this chapter, try to seat the dominant individual beside the moderator 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 wish to comment on the question?” or “Does anyone feel differently?” or “That’s one point of view. Does anyone have another point of view?” Other nonverbal techniques also can be used, such as avoiding eye contact with the talker. Most important, be tactful and kind, because harsh comments may curtail spontaneity from others in the group.

Shy respondents 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. 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 respondents 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?"

Rambling respondents use a lot of words and take forever to get to the point, if they have a point. These individuals like to talk. Unfortunately, the rambling respondent is off track a fair amount of the time and can eat up precious discussion time. As a rule of thumb, we usually discontinue eye contact with the rambler after about twenty to thirty 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 being discussed. In the remainder of the discussion, the moderating team may want to limit eye contact with the rambling individual.

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. It is important that we 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 feel bad about it. It is 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, we will take action if he or she is rambling or limiting the opportunity for others to talk.

### *Responding to Participants' Comments*

Moderators should be attentive to how they respond to comments from participants—both verbal and nonverbal. Often moderator responses are unconscious habits. Self-discipline and practice are needed to overcome habits such as head nodding and short verbal responses.

### *Head Nodding*

Some moderators will 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, 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.

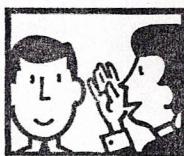
### ***Short Verbal Responses***

In many of our social interactions, we have become conditioned to provide short verbal responses that signal approval or acceptance. Many of these are acceptable within the focus group environment such as "OK," "Yes," or "Uh huh," but others should be avoided if they communicate indications of accuracy or agreement. Responses to avoid include "Correct," "That's good," or "Excellent" because they imply judgments about the quality of the comment.

### ***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 far better alternative is for the assistant moderator or the moderator to briefly summarize the main points and ask if this summary is accurate. 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 body language of 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.



#### **TIP**

#### ***Anticipate Running Out of Time***

Before you do the focus group, pretend that you've only asked half of the questions and only ten minutes remain. (We hope this never really happens to you.) Think about options that you might try and how to avoid the situation in the future.