Facilitation tips for focus groups

A workshop facilitator is many things: a coordinator, a supporter, a summarizer, a mediator, an organizer, even a performer. Good facilitation takes practice but facilitation is a very learnable skill. Depending on the design of the day, the moderator may be facilitating a conversation on a number of question or may also be implementing some techniques and tools to get people to reflect on their experiences, opinions, etc.

The moderator is there to promote dialogue and to learn what people think—not to share her or his opinion. In the context of a focus group a facilitator needs to be as “neutral” as possible on the issues being discussed. You do not need to be neutral about the process—ensuring that people have a chance to speak and promoting as safe of an environment as you can. Be warm. Be engaging. Encourage participants to speak.

Be your own facilitator. There are many different styles of facilitation, even by the same facilitator. While there is often an element of performance (you usually need to be “up”), be yourself and the whole thing will go better. Being your own facilitator though doesn’t always apply to clothes. It is best not wear anything too formal or informal—you don’t wish the session to appear like a job interview or an unfocused chat.

Use notes. There is nothing wrong with being transparent about the use of facilitator notes. The workshop template in the design section is intended to be used during a workshop.

Pay attention to your personal presentation (body language & tone). A facilitator spends a lot of time being the focus of attention. How you present yourself is very important. Make sure people know you are listening – nod and affirm that you have heard them. Appear relaxed/calm (not the same as being calm!). Use a positive tone. Use humour (never at the expense of the group or an individual).

Name issues of tension. One of the most anxiety inducing acts a facilitator can do is not to name or bring out an obvious tension. “We are hearing a lot of passionate opinions right now. Lets remember to keep it focused on the issues and not each other” If there is an emerging conflict, name it. “There seems to be some disagreement here.” If you don’t name an issue participants may fear that you don’t see the issue, which adds to the problem. Once the issue is named it can be dealt with such as, taking a set amount of time to deal with (“lets give this 5 more minutes and then move on”), etc.

Use the process to help address conflict. You should have guidelines to participation – draw on them if people are being destructive – such as loud cross talking or being disrespectful “I’d like to remind people of our guidelines.” If emotions and conflict are beginning to run high you can use the guidelines to bring things down. In a conflict issue the facilitator may have to be a referee so that each party gets to speak and listen in a given structure.

Don’t take concern with process personally. If participants are expressing concern with the process either it hasn’t been explained well or it is not meeting their needs and desires. If your explanation hasn’t been clear, just apologize and clarify.

Don’t be afraid of silence. If you don’t get a response right away from a question resist re-asking the question or moving on right away. Let people think for a moment. Silence can mean many different things and may be reflective of a number of factors, including cultural factors. One advantage of moderators reflecting the target focus group population may be an enhanced ability to interpret group dynamics, such as “reading” silence.

Encourage participation by everyone. Sometimes a participant may be hesitant to speak or there may be a participant or two who is dominating the discussion. The moderator can say “I’d like to hear from some folks who haven’t spoken in a while” or ask for a go around and get everyone’s opinion on a question. If the problem seems difficult to overcome you can establish a rule that no one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once or “passed”.

Use probing questions. Find your inner two year old and ask questions. One of the best things a facilitator can do is ask the right questions (at the right time).