

## **MODERATOR Guidelines**

**First Point:** The session is not about you and what you know. It is about the participants and what they know. Even if (ESPECIALLY IF) their perspectives contradict what you know or they are factually incorrect, let them express themselves. Even (ESPECIALLY) their errors in understanding are important findings.

### **Presentation**

**Attire:** Dress “business casual,” and comfortably. Dress modestly. Typical work attire will probably suffice. Avoid t-shirts with band names, references to movies, super heroes, etc., or catchy phrases. Dress in a non-distracting, neutral fashion.

**Language (Verbal and Body):** Moderate your own verbal and non-verbal communication to be non-distracting, but encouraging to others, so that they feel safe in confiding their thoughts.

Remember that even participants’ odd responses may turn out to be significant findings, so let them have their say. However, do not let participants target others or use denigrating/inflammatory language that upsets others, and do not let them actually disrupt the session. Having said that, it’s great if they disagree with each other.

Use body language that lets them know that you are in charge of the session (so they know it is a structured, legitimate event with someone in charge). Needless to say, do not use threatening body language (including facial expressions).

### **Managing the Group**

Remember that you are the one in charge, not only of the focus group participants and the recordings, but also of the scribes/note-takers who are present. The smooth running of the session depends on the moderator.

Keep your contributions to dialogue to a minimum. Remember, it’s about what THEY have to say, not what you have to say or already know. Ask the questions, and, “get out of the way,” of the dialogue.

**Communicating with Participants:** Avoid swearing or inflammatory language of any kind, unless it is part of the actual interview instrument (survey questionnaire). Even then, such language is not recommended.

**Managing Clarity in the Dialogue:** Natural language use is very contextual. Dialogue that seems obvious at the time may not be totally clear in transcripts. Often, verbal communication is clarified by body language, glances, or hand gestures that will not show up in transcripts. Please do ask briefly for clarification, for example when dialogue references two actors of the same gender pronouns. For example, “He totally ignored him,” might seem obvious at the time of the conversation, but may be less so later, in the transcript. Who exactly ignored who?

**Leaning In To Details:** If you feel that a participant, or the group, is making an interesting point, and that more detail might be helpful, it is ok to prompt participants to elaborate on what they are saying.

**Moderating Difficult Dialogue:** Disagreement between participants can be hard to manage, but can also give some of the best findings. Participants who express that they feel offended can also provide significant details. Allow disagreements to take place in the dialogue. HOWEVER, make sure everyone is

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clear about the boundaries laid out in the consent form, and be sure to take charge of dialogue that seems headed for actual conflict.

**Minimizing Residual Conflicts:** Even if this research does not fall under IBR at your institution, do what you can to avoid outcomes that might turn into conflicts outside of/after the session. Participants are ultimately responsible for their behavior. However, our own research ethics should always guide us in the direction of doing no harm to the participants and away from engendering or exacerbating conflicts.

**Seating Arrangement:** Sit in the middle of the oblong side of the table, not at the head of the table (so you don't become the focus of conversation). You want participants to talk amongst themselves, not only to you.

Encourage people to sit in a random order around the whole table. Don't let people cluster together, and certainly don't let four people sit on one side with one lone participant sitting on the other side, as doing so might create an "us vs. them" environment. Discourage acquaintances, especially friends, from sitting next to each other.

**Time Management:** Balance between encouraging rich dialogue and covering all the questions. Remember to, "get out of the way," of the dialogue. However, be mindful that you have one warm-up exercise and five discussion questions (the majority of which have three or four follow-up questions attached). In a 60-minute period, you therefore have about ten minutes per question. With five participants, you have about two minutes for each person to tell you a detail-rich story on each topic (which is just a rough guide; however, that two minutes may end up being less time that you realize).

HOWEVER, remember that reliability is as much an issue for qualitative research as it is for quantitative research. Reliability means consistency of measurement, which (for focus group research) means that all questions should be addressed in each session.

In short, use your best judgement, but keep an eye on the time.

**Have Fun!** Enjoy the experience, and everyone will get more out of the focus group session. Remember, you are doing something (that should be) interesting, and maybe a bit out of the ordinary for everyone. Also, there is a utilitarian side to enjoying the experience: the more at ease you are, the more at ease the participants will likely feel. When they are more comfortable, they are likely to give you better dialogue.

### **FURTHER QUESTIONS?**

Please do feel free to contact me with specific questions. I can be reached at:

Joel Wright

Cell Number: 479-653-5711 (if texting, be sure to include the term FOCUS GROUP up front, so that I see who you are).

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If I don't answer, it's because I'm in a work meeting. I will call you as soon as I can manage.