DDS: Guidance for the focus group moderator

Focus group "rules"

Ideally, you can prevent some problems before they start. At the beginning of the group, you are suggested to lay out the following "rules":

- Ask participants to be respectful of one another—it is fine to disagree, but no attacks please
- Say that you would like to hear something from everyone about each question, and may invite someone to speak if they haven't spoken
- BUT... anyone can decline to answer a question, give more information, etc.
- Remind group that time is limited, moderator will sometimes ask the group to move on.
- Remind them that the questions do not have right or wrong answers! This isn't a test.

Also make sure all participant and DDS team phones are turned off!

Getting started: first discussion question

- After explaining the question/issue, pause and give people a minute to think before inviting someone to start.

- Be aware that the discussion may feel quite awkward during this question, as the group is still getting a sense of each other and how all this will work. This is OK, and happens in almost every focus group. It does not mean you are doing something wrong.

- If all goes well, people will "settle in" to the situation and you will need to speak less and less after the first few minutes of the session!

Managing the discussion: What can I do if....?

- **People drift off the topic of the question**
  - Say something like "we seem to have gotten away from the original question, which was.... (say question again)"
  - Re-direct people to an earlier on-topic contribution-- "I'd like us to go back to what X said about farmer's markets..."
  - Let them keep going, if it seems more interesting than your original question! That can be information in itself.
- **Some participants aren't talking on a certain question (or generally)**
  - Invite a specific person to speak, or to respond to something that has already been said
  - When introducing a new question or sub-question, invite that person to speak first
  - Don't push, if the person really does not want to speak or declines when invited.
- **Someone talks too much, dominates the conversation**
  - When introducing a new question, invite a less-talkative person to start off.
  - If the person misses your hints, DO remind them "X hasn't had a chance to speak yet"
- **Participants attack each others' views:**
  - Remind participants of the need to be respectful.
  - Depending on the situation, you might re-frame as a disagreement, and ask for specific information, rather than feelings: "I hear that you strongly disagree with what X said. Can you explain why you think it is such a bad idea?"
  - Switch to a completely different topic
- **Everyone seems to agree about everything, or be afraid to disagree:**

- Specifically ask for different views, or if anyone disagrees with a particular idea/statement
- Repeat that the focus group goal is to explore the issue, not to get agreement or "an answer" about it, tell participants how useful it is for the team to hear different views
- Play devil's advocate, and introduce an alternate viewpoint, perhaps from the media, or a general "Well, lots of people think/say..."

Fostering a discussion

Just because everyone is talking does not mean they are discussing. If you listen, **participants may each be sharing opinions and information, but not responding to what anyone else has said.** This is definitely a place to intervene and prompt people to respond to each other. Dialogue is a far more important source of information than what people say alone. Be as specific as you can when trying to prompt discussion. Try asking for more responses on a specific comment.
- "X said that no students in her accommodation know how to cook. Does that sound like the situation in your accommodation too?"
- "Y said that food sharing initiatives are really important, and I saw some of you nodding. Can you tell us why you agree?"
- "Let's go back to when Z said the university does not have a responsibility to help students access food. What does everyone else think?"

You can also support discussion by making things about the group, not about YOU. By your position in the room and what you say, try not to draw all the attention to yourself.
- Don't sit at the "head" of the table, but on the side.
- When inviting people to speak or probing for more information, ask people to "tell us...." or "tell everyone" not "tell me..."
- If people keep persistently turning and talking to you, it is OK to ask people to talk to the group, not only to you, remind them it is supposed to be a discussion.

DON'T FEEL A NEED TO FILL EVERY SILENCE. It's OK to have a pause-- let people think. Then let a participant be the one to continue the discussion.

Timing and moving on:

Moving people on between questions: This can feel awkward, but running out of time at the end of the group is more awkward! Try to stick to your schedule as much as you can-- this needs the timekeeper and moderator to work together. To help ease the transition, you might say things like:
- "Thank you all, you've said some really interesting things about [topic]. Unfortunately, we need to move on to the next question now."
- "I am sure we could say much more about [topic], but we still have several more questions today. Let's move on to..."
- "We don't have much time left, and it's important that we get a chance to talk about..."

Running out of time in session: Use your contingency plan! Your group may have decided that it is better to finish out the question you are on, rather than rushing ahead. If you really want to get to the last question, you might ask every participant to say one thing about it.