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Seven habits of highly effective moderators

by Robert Schnee

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Fifteen years of moderating experience, including observing talented—and not so talented—moderators has helped me to identify a set of habits and skills that produce the best work.

Moderators who have these seven good habits stand the best chance of delivering what qualitative research can do best: provide rich insights, new learning, and fresh ideas.

1. Establish personal contact with each respondent early in the session.

Look each one in the eye during your introductory remarks about the mirror, taping, and purpose of the session. Call each respondent by name,

and thank them for their comments when they introduce themselves.

2. Help respondents feel relaxed early on. Humor works best.

Simple humor involving words that always get a smile is the best. I always manage to work the words “Hostess Twinkie” into my introduction, such as: “Sometimes I talk to little kids about Hostess Twinkies. Today we’ll be talking about...”

For whatever reason, Twinkies is funny.

3. Win respondents to your side.

I ask respondents to help me do my job. My job is to get their honest opinions, and I’m dependent on them to get it.

I have twin boys. Whenever the opportunity arises in the focus group room, such as if a parent of twins or two young children is attending, I say, “Oh, I have twins too. My boys are 15—it gets better once they’re out of diapers.”

4. Deal with loud respondents without intimidating the rest.

Don’t criticize or put down the too-frequent talkers, because this risks making the rest afraid to speak.

Body language works best. Don’t look at the culprit when you ask a question. Don’t acknowledge his or her raised hand. Turn your back, use one hand to wave toward the culprit in a “stay back” gesture, using the other hand in a “come closer” gesture to the others at the table.

5. Deal with inconsistent, unclear answers by mobilizing the group to help.

Once the respondents are on your side, you can say, “I don’t know what to tell the client now. You’ve got me all confused. I hear some of this and some of that. What does it all mean?”

6. Create an environment where anything a respondent wants to say is acceptable. This way you hear the surprising things that produce new insights.

The accepting, nonjudgmental

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attitude of the psychologist’s couch is a way to do this. “That’s interesting. Does anyone else feel that way? How does that relate to the product?”

7. Don’t assume you know what a respondent means by an ambiguous answer. Ask.

Assuming is leading the respondent to what you *think* you know. This means you won’t learn anything new. If the comment does mean what you think, fine. Often it does not, and then you’ll learn something new by opening the door for respondents to say the unexpected. #

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