



qualitative reflections

# True Questions

Unleash the power of asking questions with an open mind.

By Naomi R. Henderson

In my last article, I revealed one secret of successful focus groups: becoming crystal clear about the context—so that the screener, moderator’s guide, group activities, and outline for the final report are all congruent, and any content that is developed fits into the frame created by the context.

I made a promise to continue providing additional secrets. This time, I would like to focus on the power of “true questions” in focus groups, and how they can lead to stellar focus groups.

Veteran moderators have often heard respondents, back room observers, and others make this comment: “You have an easy job. All you have to do is ask some questions, sit back, and let participants talk. I sure wish I had a job like that!” And these moderators know that the easier they make it look, the more that comments like that will surface, and the more that the truth about what moderators do will be obscured. It’s like the duck we see gliding across the pond with seeming ease: No one sees those feet paddling madly under the water.

If the work of good moderators is compared to competitive ice skaters, then the illusion is illuminated. The better skaters master triple jumps and artistic spins, the easier it looks. They have great costumes and inspiring music, and they land most jumps while gliding backwards—coupled with big smiles. “How easy they make it look,” the viewer says. The difference is this: Everyone knows that to learn to do triple jumps with ease, there are years of practices and a lot of falls and injuries along the way.

Because no one sees the research rigor that moderators undergo to master their craft, it just looks like something anyone could do. “Just ask a few questions. How hard could that be?”

The secret rests in the words “a few questions.” That’s where the hidden power of successful focus groups lives. Interesting facts exist related to questions, and a few of them are outlined here.

1. A true question is one to which you don’t already know the answer.
2. Lawyers do not ask questions to which they don’t already know the answers.
3. All internal dialogue that humans have is in question-and-answer form.
4. Questions reveal something about the person who is asking them.

5. The one who asks questions in a dialogue is holding all the power.

Elements No. 1 and No. 5 are of particular interest to moderators who ask hundreds of questions, in focus groups running between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. every evening. So it would make sense to have a very clear understanding of both elements, to thereby create more effective focus groups.

**Element No. 1: A true question is one to which you don’t already know the answer.** This implies that the one asking the question needs to really hold an open mind, with no judgments about the answers that might bounce back once he or she asks the question. If there is any thought in the mind of the asker, about what the respondent might say, then that will color what the listener hears and the probe that follows. Questions that do

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not meet the true-question rule often tend to fall into either the “leading” or “judging” category. Additionally, they are weak questions that require multiple follow-up probes to get at the true issue to be discussed. And it is hard to craft those questions on the spot; they require some advance planning and practice in asking.

For example, a moderator doing a series of questions for the makers of Buick cars might say, “You like Buicks, right?” This is because respondents were recruited for not being opposed to buying a Buick in the future.

Not only is this not a true question, but also it’s a leading one—the most deadly kind for qualitative researchers. To make a question about Buicks non-leading and more of a true question, a moderator might consider one of the following.

- “What do you like about Buicks?”
- “What don’t you like about Buicks?”

The moderator has honored the rule of splitting the question so it isn’t double-barreled, and both meet the “SQLA” rule: Short questions to get long answers.

On first blush, it would appear that either of these two like/dislike questions is non-leading and moving toward a true question, because the listener would not know what kind of answers a respondent might give. In fact, question pairs such as the previous two are classics in nightly focus groups throughout America. However, there is an assumption built into each of the questions: that a respondent has a firm like or dislike for Buicks, and is willing to share either or both in the focus group room.

To make the question a true one, the moderator would have to “unload” it so there are no assumptions. Also, there must be very limited data about what the moderator is thinking, to create the opportunity for the respondent to surprise him or her with an insight. Furthermore, no part of the desired answer can be in the question.

Now we shift to the realm of a true question about Buicks. It might appear along this continuum:

- “What have you seen, read, heard, or thought about Buicks over the past several years?” This allows for a broad range of answers including: “Nothing.”
- “What can you tell me about any impressions you have of a car called Buick?” Again, the respondent can present a broad range of answers to the moderator, including: “I haven’t formed any impressions. I just have an interest in American cars in general, and would prefer an American-made car to one made overseas.”

It takes more time to craft a set of questions that are true ones. It requires thorough, strong, and solid clarity about the client purpose and desired outcomes for the research. Most importantly, it means getting the moderator’s belief system out of the way at the question design stage: thinking about questions for a long time, not just jotting something down on a file card or in a mind-map format and winging it in the focus group.

If a moderator already believes something is true, then of course that will color the direction that the questions he or she poses will take on that topic or issue. So, in addition to crafting good questions to help the client reach the study purpose, the moderator has to question himself or herself:

- “What do I believe?”
- “How might that get in the way of writing my questions?”
- “Am I asking questions that really move the group discussion along, or am I just dashing off questions that I’ve used before—which I know respondents can answer?”
- “What if my questions lead respondents to say many negative things about the client’s product, service, or idea so that the conversation bogs down into a gripefest?”

Because qualitative research is already subjective, there is a high risk that poor questions will slide into mushy thinking on the part of moderators and mushy answers from respondents. When questions are not true, there is a high probability that a poor question will (1) be illuminated in the harsh and deadly glare of focus group rooms in which a question falls flat with no response, or (2) result in that lethal reaction from the respondent at the end of the table: “What was your question again? What do you want to know?”

It might be useful to consider this internal set of moderator questions, for each respondent-oriented question is crafted for the moderator’s guide:

- “Is this a true question, one to which I don’t know the answer?”
- “Can respondents answer this question, and will those answers forward the discussion along some topic line?”
- “What does this question reveal about me as a moderator?”

**Element No. 5: The one who asks questions in a dialogue is holding all the power.** In the focus group room there is a dynamic of power that continually shifts. If it could be photographed, then one would see waves of energy flowing (1) from the moderator to the respondents and back in a rebound, (2) between respondents, and (3) from the client through the mirror to the room as a whole. To harness all that power, a moderator needs to know that asking the questions means holding the reins of power in the room. Mastery occurs when the moderator knows when to loosen the reins and when to tighten them.

It would seem to follow that if asking questions means having all the power, then the moderator should have a mighty fine set of questions to ask. And the truer the questions, the more effective the focus group.

If those who look at the role of moderators could see that moderator’s set of internal questions, then they would not be so quick to say: “I would love your job! What an easy job you have. You just have to ask a few questions and then sit back. How hard could that be?” They would begin to see the rigor that moderating takes, and begin to honor the invisible group of skills that sets apart a good moderator from one who has mastered key techniques for leading effective focus groups. And what sets apart a “master moderator” from a good moderator is the ability to ask true questions group after group and night after night, letting respondents illuminate key insights for clients. ●

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