

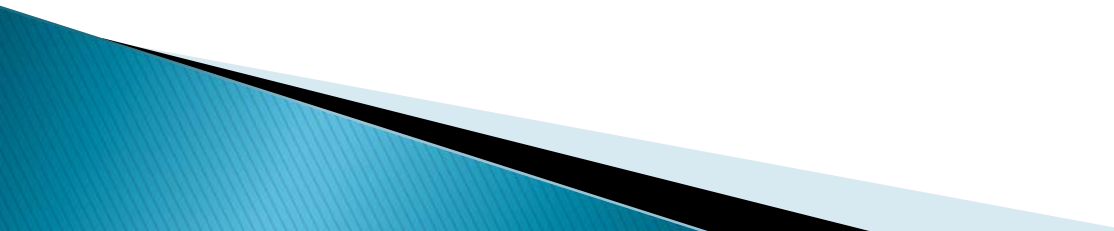


Office of Assessment  
and Evaluation  
at Virginia Tech

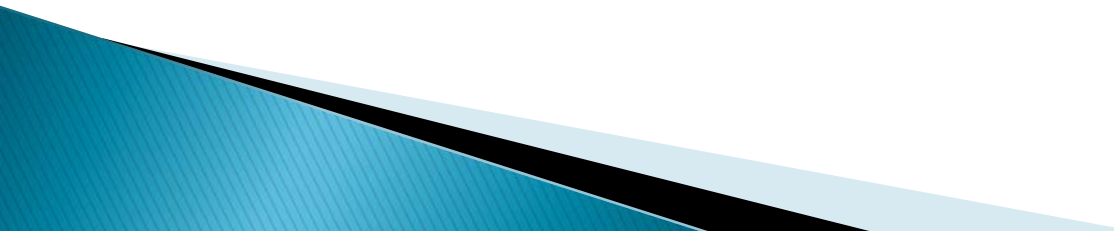
# Focus Groups

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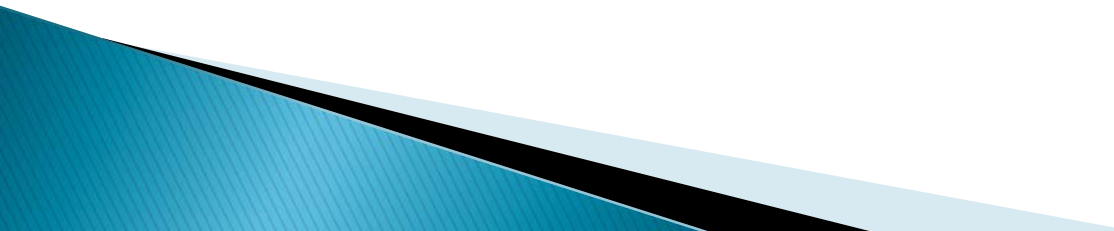
# A Focus Group Is . . .

- ▶ A controlled, carefully planned discussion
  - ▶ Gathers information about a specific topic
  - ▶ Conducted in a non-threatening environment
  - ▶ Conducted by a moderator/facilitator
  - ▶ Group members influence each other by responding to ideas, comments of others
  - ▶ 6 – 10 participants
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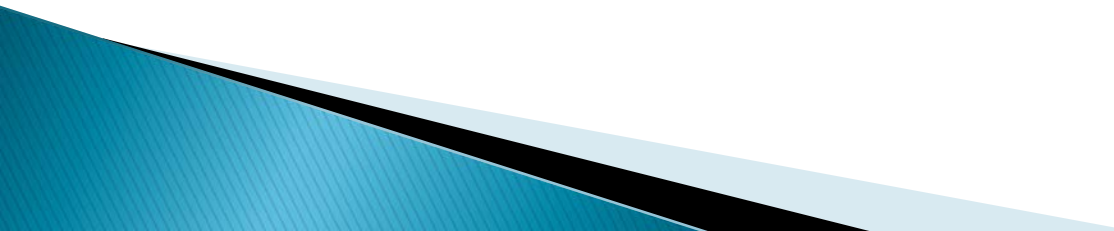
# Why a Focus Group?

- ▶ To collect qualitative data
  - ▶ To gather feelings and perceptions regarding programs, services, products
  - ▶ To promote self-disclosure among participants, though not appropriate for emotionally charged environments
  - ▶ To stimulate interaction among participants to gather more information
  - ▶ To identify needs
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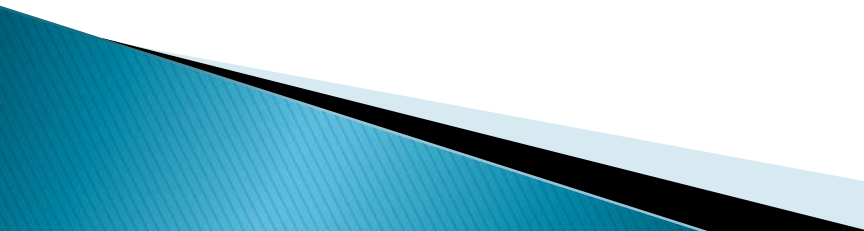
# Uses of Focus Groups

- ▶ Improve existing programs
  - ▶ Improve planning & design of new programs
  - ▶ Recruit new participants
  - ▶ Understand decision-making processes
  - ▶ Generate information for larger studies
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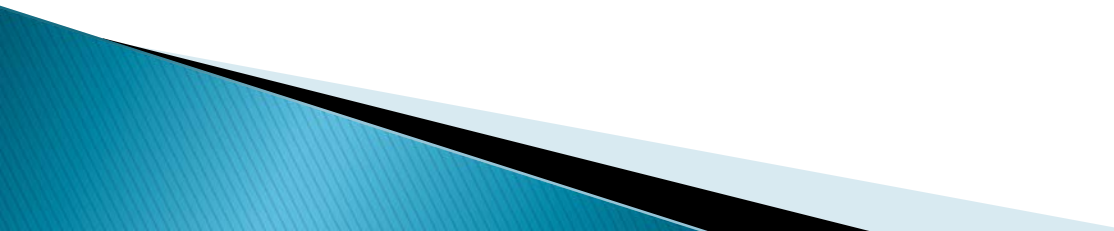
# Advantages of Focus Groups

- ▶ Socially oriented research procedure – more interesting to participants than individual interviews
  - ▶ Format allows moderator to probe, clarify
  - ▶ High face validity – easily understood
  - ▶ Can provide diverse opinions and ideas
  - ▶ Can be low cost
  - ▶ Speedy results
- 


# Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- ▶ Researcher has less control
  - ▶ Helpful to have a skilled moderator
    - Can introduce biases
    - May fail to follow up on crucial information
  - ▶ Groups can vary considerably
  - ▶ Groups may be difficult to assemble
  - ▶ Does not allow generalization of results
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# Produces Qualitative Data

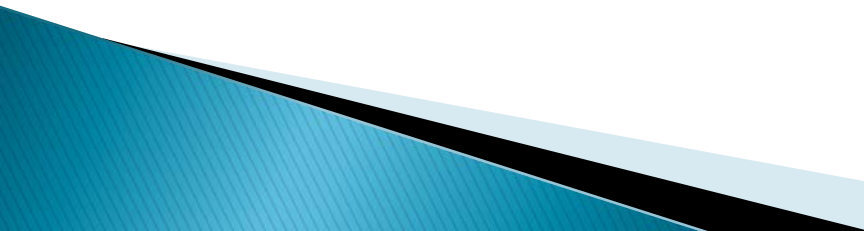
- ▶ Can precede quantitative approach
  - ▶ Can be used at the same time as a quantitative approach
  - ▶ Can follow quantitative approach
  - ▶ Can be used alone
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# Preparing for the Session

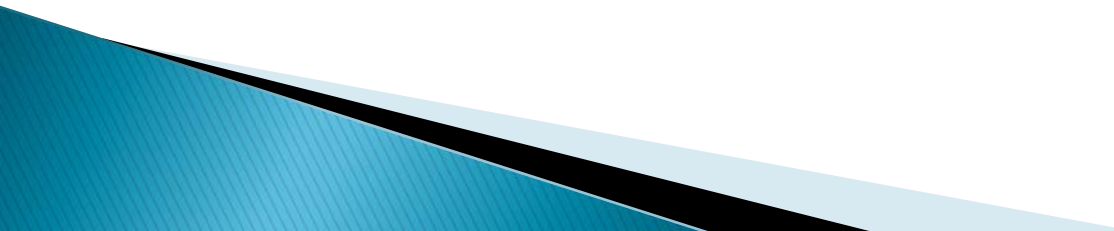
- ▶ Identify major objective(s)
  - ▶ Develop 5 or 6 questions
  - ▶ Plan session – think of maximum time for session as 1.5 hours
  - ▶ IRB approval?
  - ▶ Materials?
  - ▶ Invite participants
    - Be careful of mixing levels of education, authority, income, etc.
    - Incentives?
- 



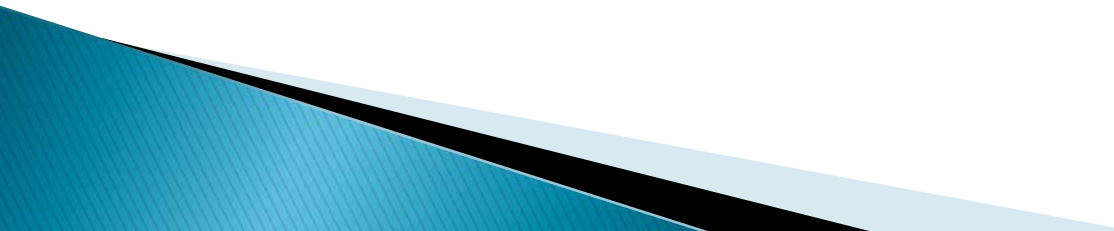
# Moderator Traits

- ▶ Informed about the topic to be discussed
  - ▶ Able to encourage all members to participate
  - ▶ Able to encourage group members to discuss in greater detail
  - ▶ Able to keep the session flowing smoothly – be adaptable
  - ▶ Sensitive to cultural and gender issues
  - ▶ Exhibit empathy, but maintain control
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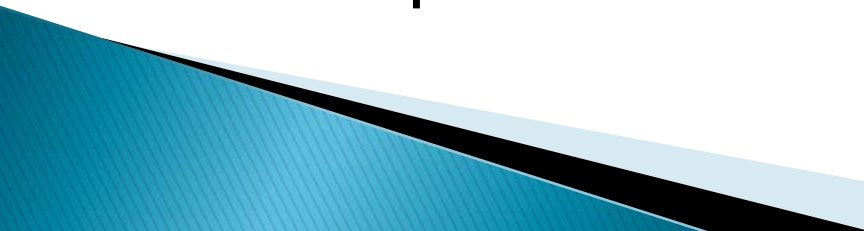
# Beginning the Focus Group

- ▶ Welcome
  - ▶ Introductions – Topic and Participants
  - ▶ Ground Rules
  - ▶ First Question
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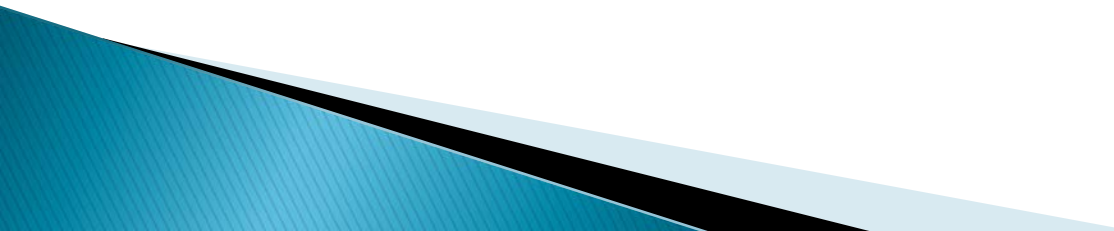
# The Welcome

- ▶ You are the host – make participants feel welcome and comfortable
  - ▶ Much of the success of a focus group is attributable to the development of an open environment
  - ▶ First few minutes of a focus group are critical
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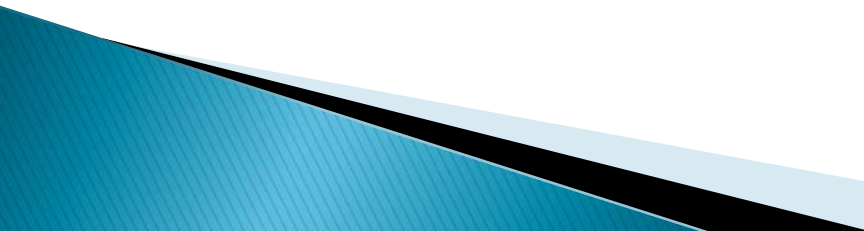
# Introduction

- ▶ Provide your name and who you represent
  - ▶ Explain the purpose of the group and how the data will be collected and used
    - Obtain informed consent if applicable
  - ▶ Note that there are no right/wrong answers, but rather differing opinions, so please share your point of view even if different from what others have said
  - ▶ Confirm amount of time allotted
  - ▶ Participant introductions
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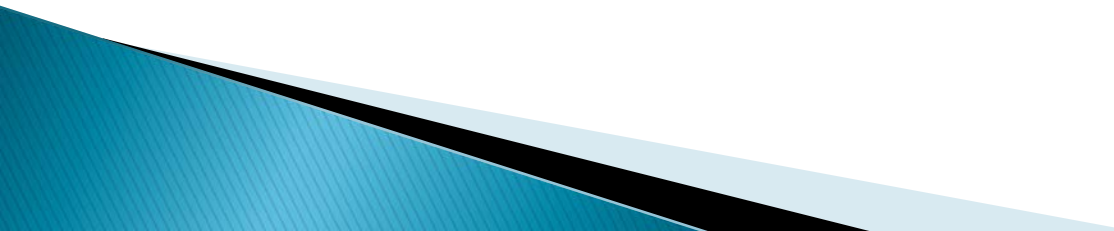
# Ground Rule Examples

- ▶ One person speaks at a time
  - ▶ We will be on a first-name basis for the discussion
  - ▶ Talk about note takers and/or audio recording if applicable
  - ▶ Confidentiality – assured from your perspective and ask participants to respect confidentiality of others when outside the group
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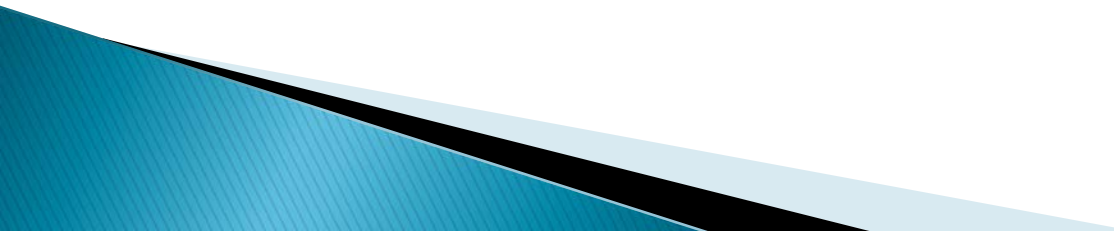
# The Questions

- ▶ Get participants involved as soon as possible
  - ▶ Use open-ended questions – be careful of phrases like “how satisfied” or “to what extent”
  - ▶ Avoid dichotomous, yes/no questions
  - ▶ Avoid “why?” questions – implies cause/effect that might not exist
  - ▶ Use “think back” questions – take people back to an experience, not forward to the future
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# Question Order

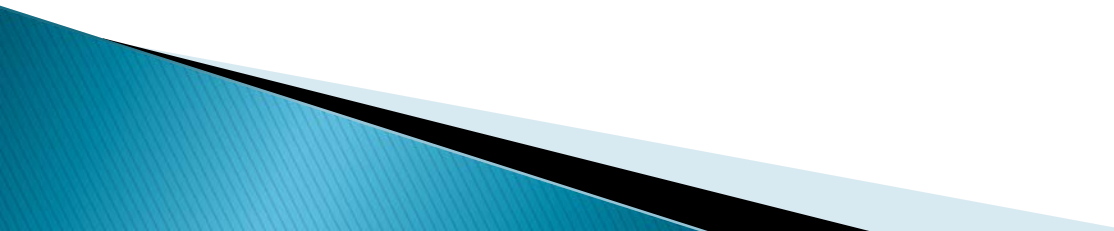
- ▶ Opening: Get people talking and feeling comfortable
  - ▶ Introductory: Introduce topic, get people thinking and connecting with the topic
  - ▶ Transition: Move conversation into key questions that guide the study
  - ▶ Key questions: Those that drive the study
  - ▶ Ending: Bring to a close. Use “What is the most important thing we talked about?” “Have we missed anything?” “Summarize; Is this an adequate summary?”
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# Keeping It Moving

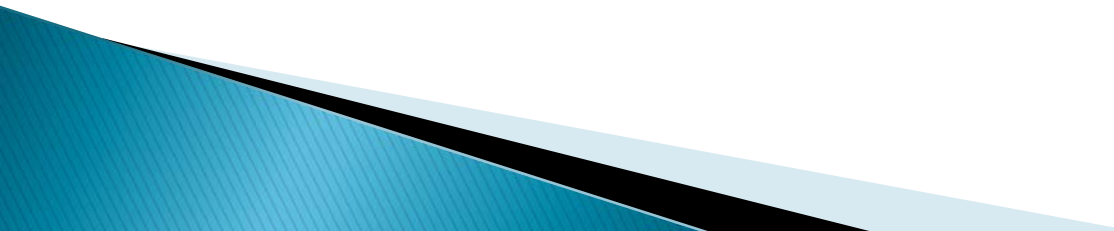
- ▶ May be helpful to think in terms of time blocks
  - ▶ Introduction: 10–15 minutes
  - ▶ Questions & discussion: 60 minutes
  - ▶ Conclusion: 10 minutes
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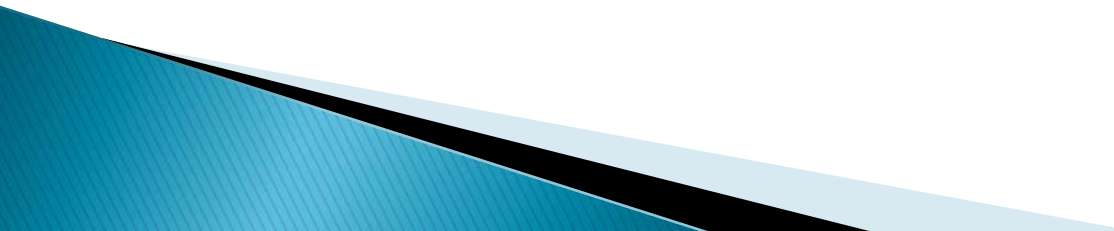
# Moderator Tips: Balancing

- ▶ Use balancing to help the group round out its discussion rather than just follow the lead of a few
  - ▶ “Are there other ways of looking at this?”
  - ▶ “What do others think?”
  - ▶ “So, we’ve heard x and y points of view, are there any others?”
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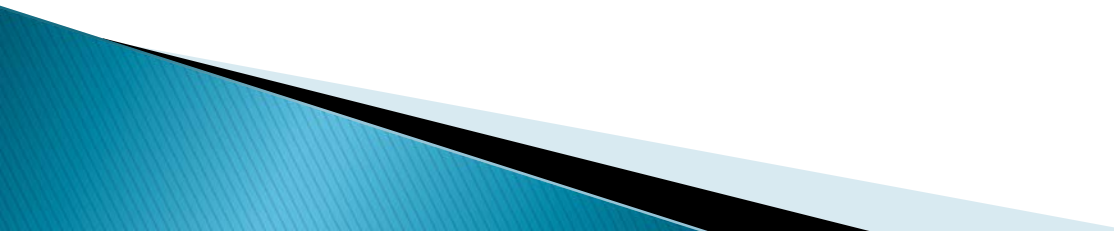
# Moderator Tips: Encouraging

- ▶ Encouraging is about creating an opening for people to participate
  - ▶ “Who else has an idea?”
  - ▶ “Is there a student perspective on this topic?”
  - ▶ “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken in a while.”
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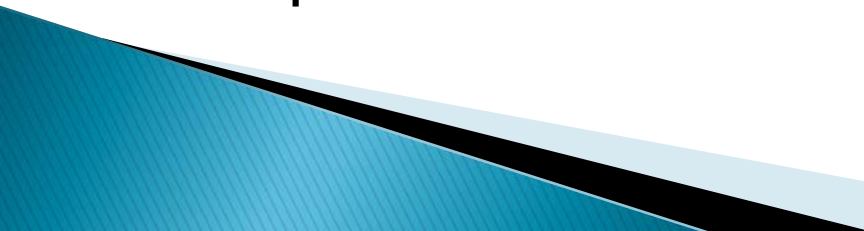
# Moderator Tips: Paraphrasing

- ▶ Paraphrasing helps support people in thinking out loud, helps clarify, provides a calming effect
  - ▶ “It sounds like what you’re saying is . . . .”
  - ▶ “Let me see if I’m understanding you . . . .”
  - ▶ “What I am gathering from your description is . . . .”
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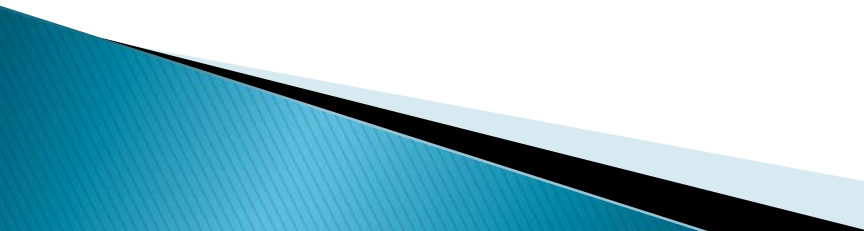
# Moderator Tips: Tracking

- ▶ Tracking lets the group see that several elements are being discussed
  - ▶ First, “I hear three conversations going on right now; I want to make sure I’m tracking them.”
  - ▶ Second, “It sounds like one conversation is about ...”
  - ▶ Third, “Am I getting it right?”
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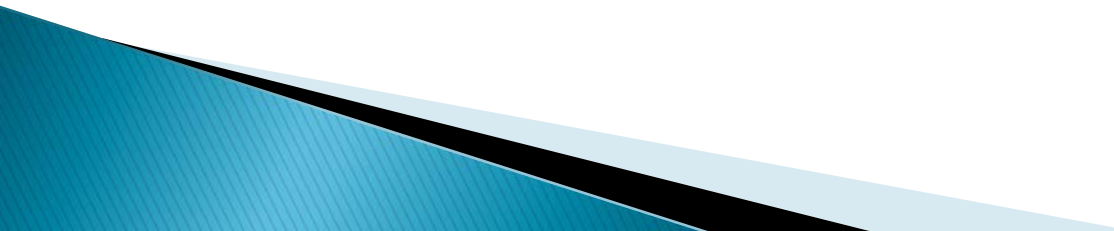
# Considerations for Analysis

- ▶ Be aware of the actual words used by the participants and the meaning of those words
  - ▶ Participant responses are triggered by a stimulus – examine responses in that light
  - ▶ Look at frequency/extensiveness of comments – some topics may be more important than others
  - ▶ Consider intensity of the comments
  - ▶ Give more weight to specific comments based on experiences rather than vague, impersonal responses
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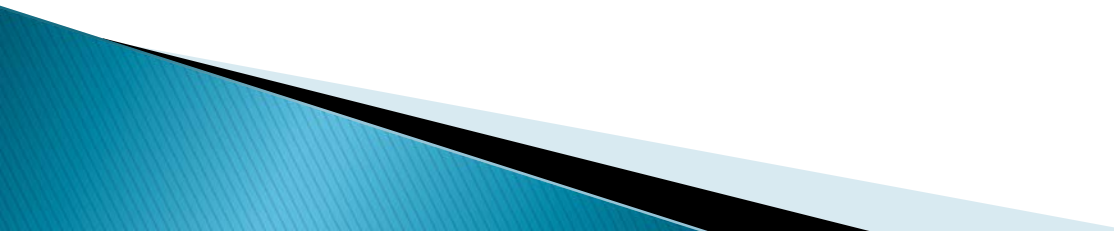
# The Analysis Process

- ▶ Begin while still in the group – listen for inconsistent or cryptic comments and probe further
  - ▶ Immediately after – diagram seating arrangement, debrief moderator and note takers, discuss initial themes
  - ▶ Later – compare/contrast results, look for emerging themes across groups, use quotes to illustrate
  - ▶ Prepare report – narrative style, format question–by–question or by theme, use quotes to illustrate, share report with the team for verification
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# Analysis Options

- ▶ Transcript-based analysis
  - ▶ Audio-based analysis
  - ▶ Note-based analysis
  - ▶ Memory-based analysis
- 

# Reporting

- ▶ Purpose is to report views of the group(s), not to generalize to larger groups
  - ▶ Statement of purpose, key questions asked
  - ▶ Participant information
  - ▶ Results / findings
  - ▶ Summary of themes / conclusion
  - ▶ Limitations
  - ▶ Recommendations
- 



# Questions?

