Five Principles of Focus Group Facilitation

**Principle #1:**
The primary purpose of a focus group is to get at the ‘why’ – that is, why people feel and behave the way they do.

**Principle #2:**
A focus group is the bringing together of a relatively homogeneous group of 8-10 people (i.e., same gender, age range, cultural background, client status – for up to 90 minutes.

**Principle #3:**
A focus group is NOT about answering participants’ questions or clarifying information for participants. This principle follows from the previous in that the purpose of a focus group is to ASK questions to explore participants’ thoughts, feelings and behaviors. It is not uncommon for one or more participants to ask questions about specific topics (e.g., HIV prevention) or services with which they are not entirely familiar. In such a case, it is important to gently remind participants about the purpose of the focus group.

**Principle #4:**
The facilitator should be knowledgeable about and comfortable with the subject matter of the focus group. The more knowledgeable and comfortable the facilitator is, the greater his/her ability will be to: create an environment that evokes open and honest feedback; ‘think on his/her feet’ when challenging situations arise; probe for more detail around specific responses, etc. It is also important to consider the gender and ethnicity of the facilitator in an effort to create an open, honest environment.

**Principle #5:**
Since a focus group is conducted to collect data, a system is needed to ensure that you capture what is said at a focus group. The note taker is responsible for recording what is said, how many agreed or disagreed, and all relevant details about the group that may have impacted the results (e.g., whether one or more individuals dominated the discussion).

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Seven Practices of Focus Group Facilitation

1. **Have a plan to capture the data.**
   *This may include using a note taker. You may also want to tape record the session.*

2. **Create a safe environment**
   - Allot time for introductions
   - Establish ground rules
   - Begin with an icebreaker question
   - Provide food and drinks

3. **Good people skills are essential**
   - *Remain objective / withhold judgment (consider both verbal and nonverbal body language)*
   - *Listen carefully and paraphrase responses*
   - *Make eye contact, smile and thank participants for their input periodically throughout the group and at the end*

4. **Manage the group**
   - *Do not let one or two people dominate*
   - *Encourage feedback from all participants*
   - *Use interactive techniques*

5. **Manage the time**
   - *Keep the group on track*
   - *Let the group know up front that you may need to cut short discussions to ensure that all questions can be asked. (Although this is generally set as a ground rule, it may have to be reiterated during the group)*

6. **Hold a debriefing session** *(facilitator and note taker)*

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