



Views,  
Opinions  
and Ideas  
of Citizens

in Europe on Science

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# Today's training program

- The purpose of focus groups
- General characteristics of focus groups
- Building on group interaction
- Moderator competencies

**collecting needs and desires**

**generating new ideas**

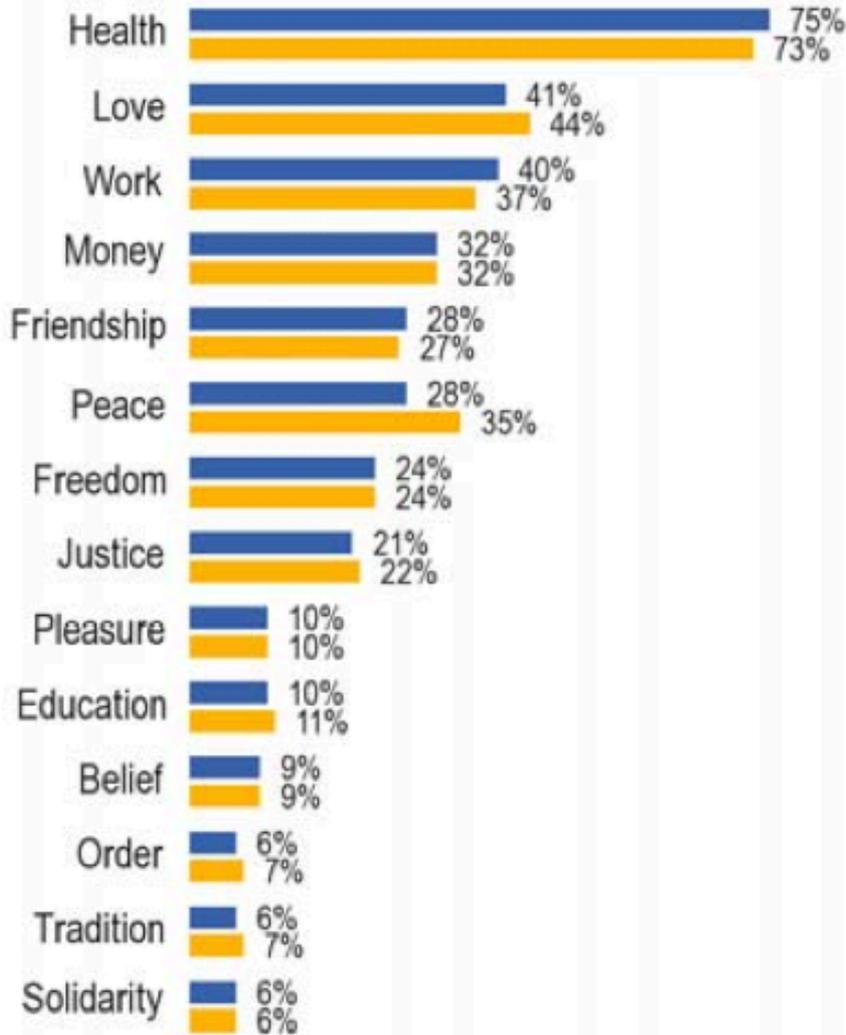
**exploring visions**

# The purpose of focus groups

**articulating values and beliefs**

**evaluation**

QE5T. Among the following values, please indicate which one is the most important for your happiness? Any others?



# Tell me why

I think daily yoga practice is important for my health

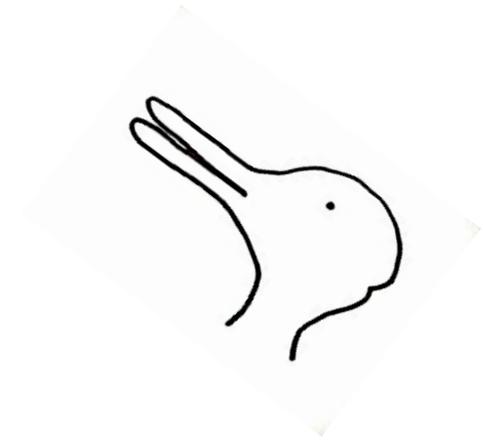


I think waste products are a significant environmental problem



# Understanding social reality

- **Our ideas, values, desires and concerns** are heavily dependent on the historical and cultural context in which we live and work
- **Open and flexible research methods are needed** understand these concepts and how they are structured to unravel intangible factors constituting social interpretations



# The invention of focus groups

bring small groups of participants together, make them feel at ease, ask them a series of questions, which slowly become more critical

**rich information about human experience and culture**



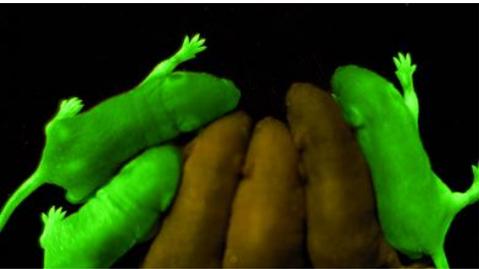
# Focus groups for research



**Collecting needs and desires  
problem perceptions, concerns**



**Involving end-users in development  
generating new ideas and hypotheses**



**Articulating values and beliefs  
Investigating views, attitudes**



**Exploring future visions  
Imagining new worlds**



URBAN  
WASTE



Views on waste  
Opinions about waste  
*Underlying concerns*

Ideas for the



**Zero-waste society**

**Participant selection and grouping**

**Qualitative research method**

**Focus group setting**

**Characteristics  
of focus groups**

**Structure of focus groups**

**Advantages and limitations**

# A qualitative research method

## Systematic, scientific inquiry

- seeking understanding of a research problem from a situated perspective
- according to a particular set of procedures

## A meeting of a selective set of 5-12 participants

- engaged in the *collective activity* of *deliberating* a specific topic from their *own experience*

## Focused on the participants

- ensures that priority is given to the participants' perspective, *their* language and concepts, frameworks for understanding the world

## Aimed at in-depth exploration

- underlying reasons for motives and views
- in-depth structure of values and beliefs

# Selection and grouping of participants

## Representation

- Stakeholder issues
- Ideas, values, perspectives

## Maximize disclosure

- All participants should feel comfortable with each other

## Homogeneity within, heterogeneity between

- Participants share common characteristic related to discussion
- This levels the playing field and reduces inhibition



**complementary**

**vs.**

**competitive**

**interaction**



*Delegate the responsibility for competitive interaction to procedures/ exercises*



# The focus group setting

## Size and structure

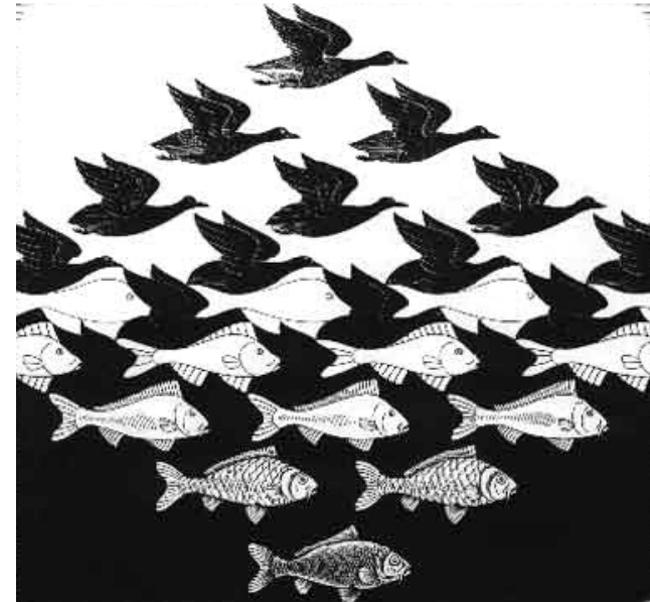
- 6- 12 participants; 2- 3 hours
- Open discussions alternate structured exercises

## Physical environment

- Noise-free
- Stimulating creativity
- Enough space to relax, walk and talk

## Social environment

- Non-threatening atmosphere
- People feel free to express ideas
- Active and positive activity



# Positive, non-threatening environment

## I feel safe and I want to contribute

- People should feel free and willing
- People should feel appreciated

## Respect

- Diversity in perspective is what we want
- All ideas potentially contribute to the group discussion

## Moderator action

- Respect and empathy
- Modelling positive atmosphere

# Advantages

**Interaction with the participants,**  
*use follow-up questions or ask  
questions that probe more deeply.*

**Reach in-depth understanding**  
*why people think that way*

**Information: non-verbal responses**  
*facial expressions/ body language*

**Highly inclusive**  
*Age groups, ethnic groups,  
cognitive level, literacy*

# Limitations

**What do focus groups represent?**  
*society, groups, diversity, ...*

**Difficult to steer and control**  
*time is lost to topics irrelevant to the  
research question*

**Peer pressure, dominant voices**  
*'desirable' answers, false consensus*

**Moderator skills influence results**  
*phrasing questions, modelling attitude*

*3 hour focus groups of 10 participants engaged in deliberating urban waste and innovation for the zero waste society*

**Representation** the diversity of citizen views, opinions, ideas

**Homogeneity** direct involvement through personal experience

**Physical environment**

hosted by science centers

tables arranged for openness and interaction

**Safe social environment**

provided by moderators, assisted by the exercises and conversation rules

**General outline**

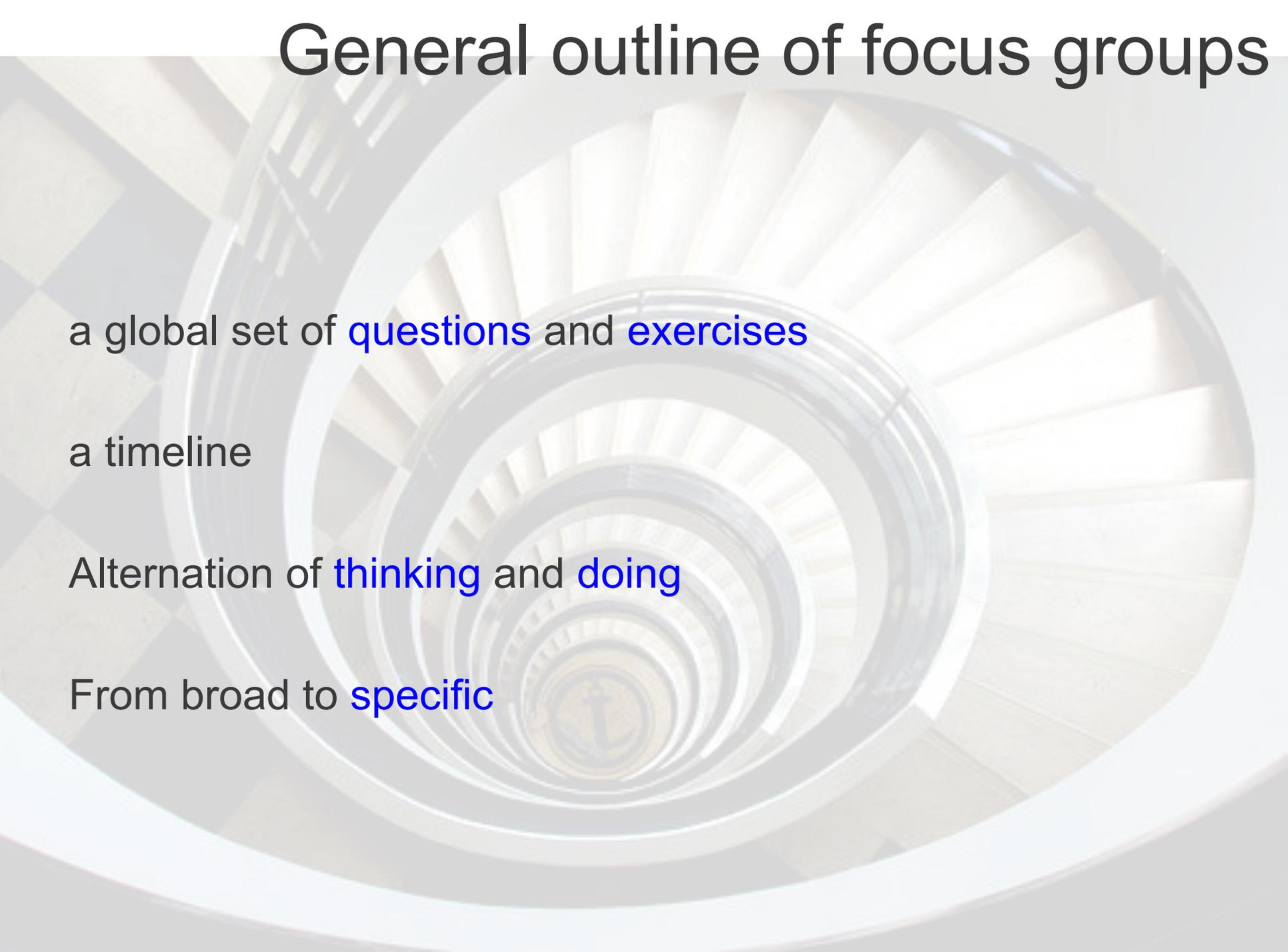
**The focus group spiral**

**Design exercises**

**The focus group structure**

**Design principles**

# General outline of focus groups

A top-down view of a spiral staircase with a wooden floor and a central circular emblem featuring an anchor.

a global set of **questions** and **exercises**

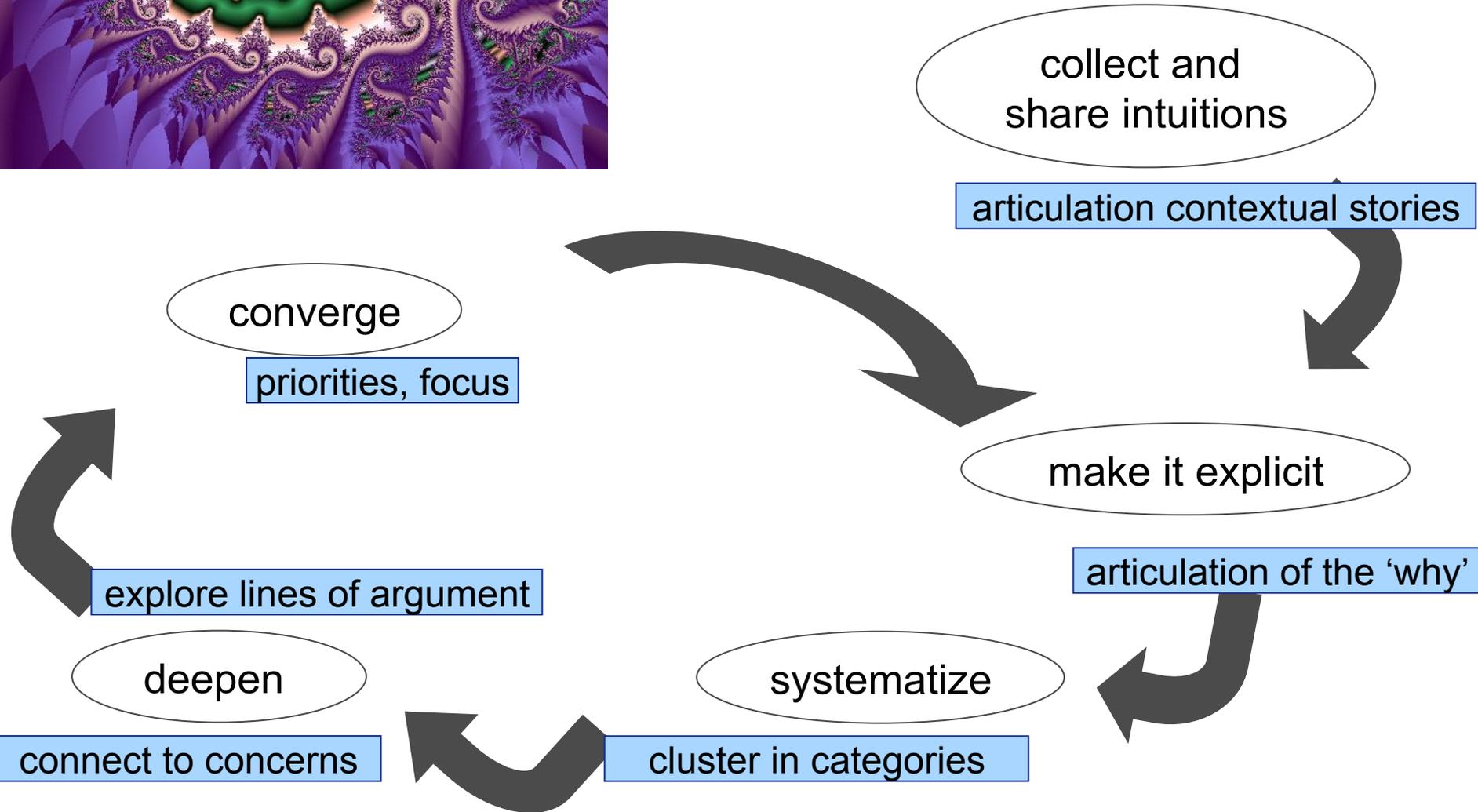
a timeline

Alternation of **thinking** and **doing**

From broad to **specific**

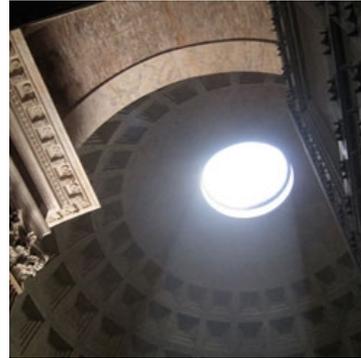


# The focus group spiral moving from general to specific



# The focus group design

- **construct a safe and trustworthy environment**  
warming-up games, icebreakers, attitude
- **engage participants in creative thinking**  
association, drawing
- **balance structure & freedom**  
games, exercises, free discussion
- **balance competitive & complementary interaction**  
group works together, exercises sharpen it

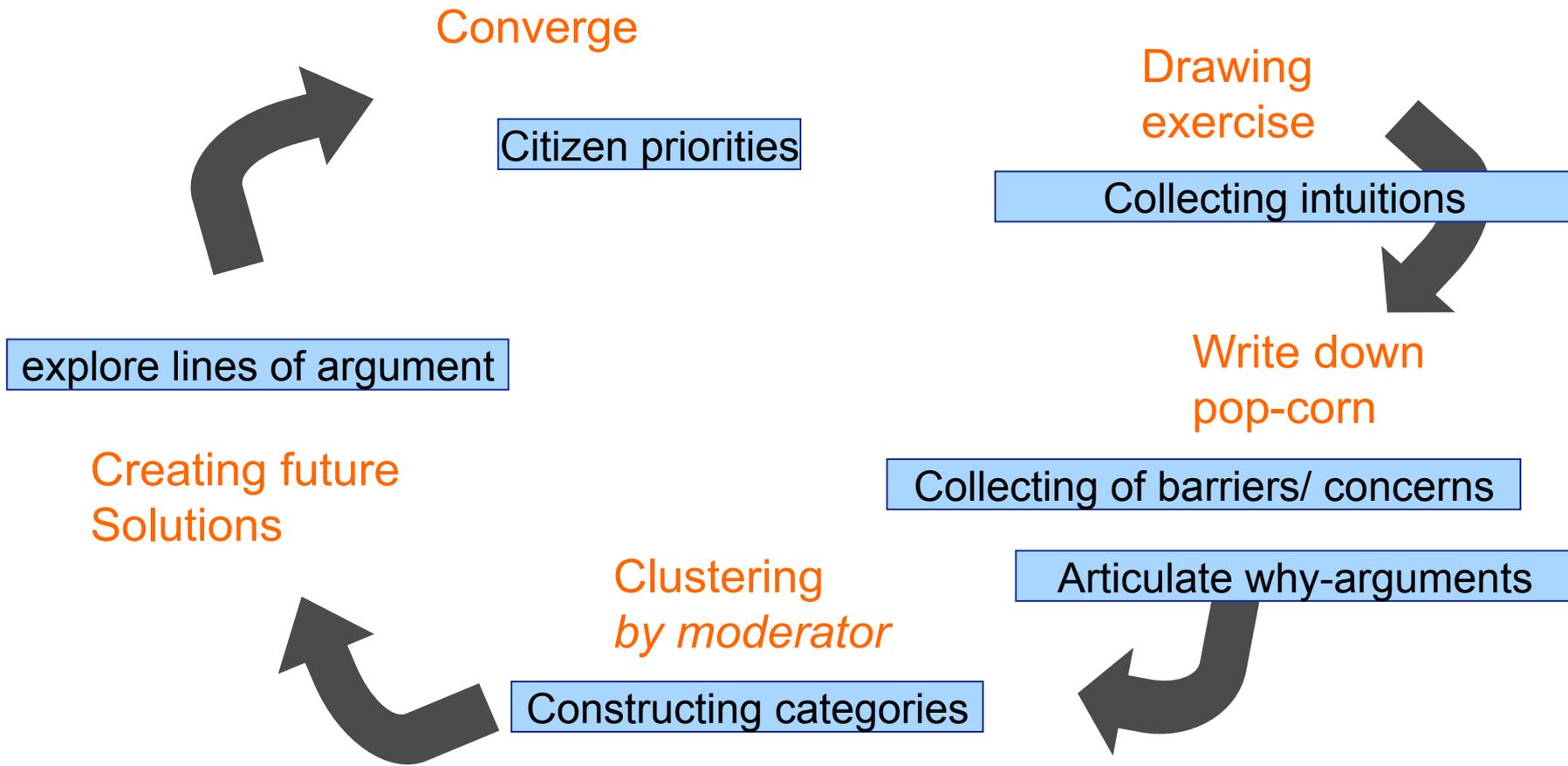


# Semi-structured design for a 3 hour focus group discussion

# VOICES

## Introduction

Waste management



**Participant selection and grouping**

**Group dynamics**

**Co-construction**

**Building on group interaction**

**Meaning is social**

**design**

# Group dynamics

## Systems theory

- Everyone influences each other
- One large entity constantly reorganizing itself (homeostasis)

## Roles

- All group members play roles in a group setting
- Frequently, reoccurring roles from the past
- Facilitating and hindering communication

## Dynamics

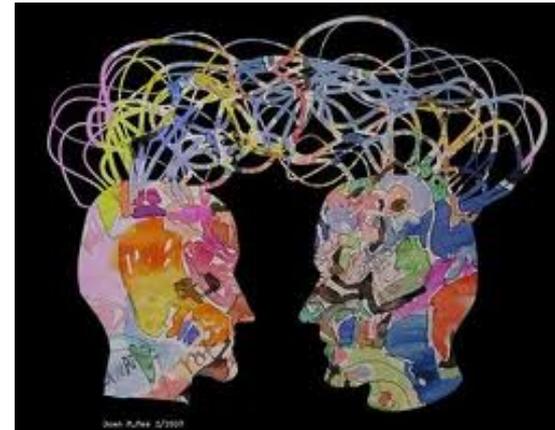
- Communication & interaction patterns
- Cohesion (what holds the group together)
- Social integration and influence
- Group culture



# Communication & interaction patterns

Communication is a process of continuous interaction

- Patterns of group interaction
  - Leader centered
  - Group centered
- Interpersonal interaction
  - Size; physical arrangements (space, distance)
  - Cues and reinforcers (pers. characteristics)
  - Emotional features (stability, bonds, tendencies)
  - Power and status



# Social influence and group culture

## Cohesion

- Positive & negative feelings are expressed
- Willingness to listen and contribute
- Satisfaction with group experience

### Enhanced by

- open interaction
- safe environment
- reward contribution

## Social integration

- Shared expectations and beliefs about how to act
- Everybody knows what role to play, which hierarchy to fulfil

### Enhanced by

- clear instruction

## Group culture

- Emerges from the mix of values, beliefs, attitudes of the group by its members

### Enhanced by

- homogeneity
- Modelling values of fairness and respect by moderator

# Building on group interaction

The conversation about values and beliefs is highly complex

Their meaning does not reside as a mental entity in the heads of people, but is actively shaped and constructed

Group dynamics managed into positive, constructive activity

The group will contribute new ideas, build on each other's ideas

Focus groups are sites of social interaction

Meaning & understanding are actively negotiated & constructed



*VOICES builds on interaction  
between participants*

# VOICES

## Starting from individual's experience

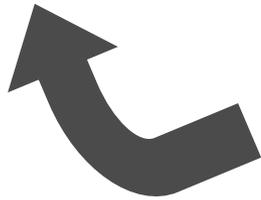
Citizens' perceptions of ~ and ideas about waste streams

## Visualizing intermediate results: flip charts, post-its, diagrams

Support participants inspiring each other; building on each other's idea

## Alternating individual thought, group discussion; working in subgroups

Realizing competitive and complementary interaction





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**Maintain focus and manage dynamics**

**Process management**

**Interpersonal communication**

**Moderator competencies**

**Process interventions**

**Understanding**

# The different tasks of the focus group facilitator

## maintain the group's focus

keep the discussion on track; ensure that key themes are covered while managing the group dynamics

## guide, stimulate and facilitate discussion

promote debate and interaction among participants

facilitation style depends on research objectives and group needs

## put participants at ease

establish rapport and a friendly atmosphere

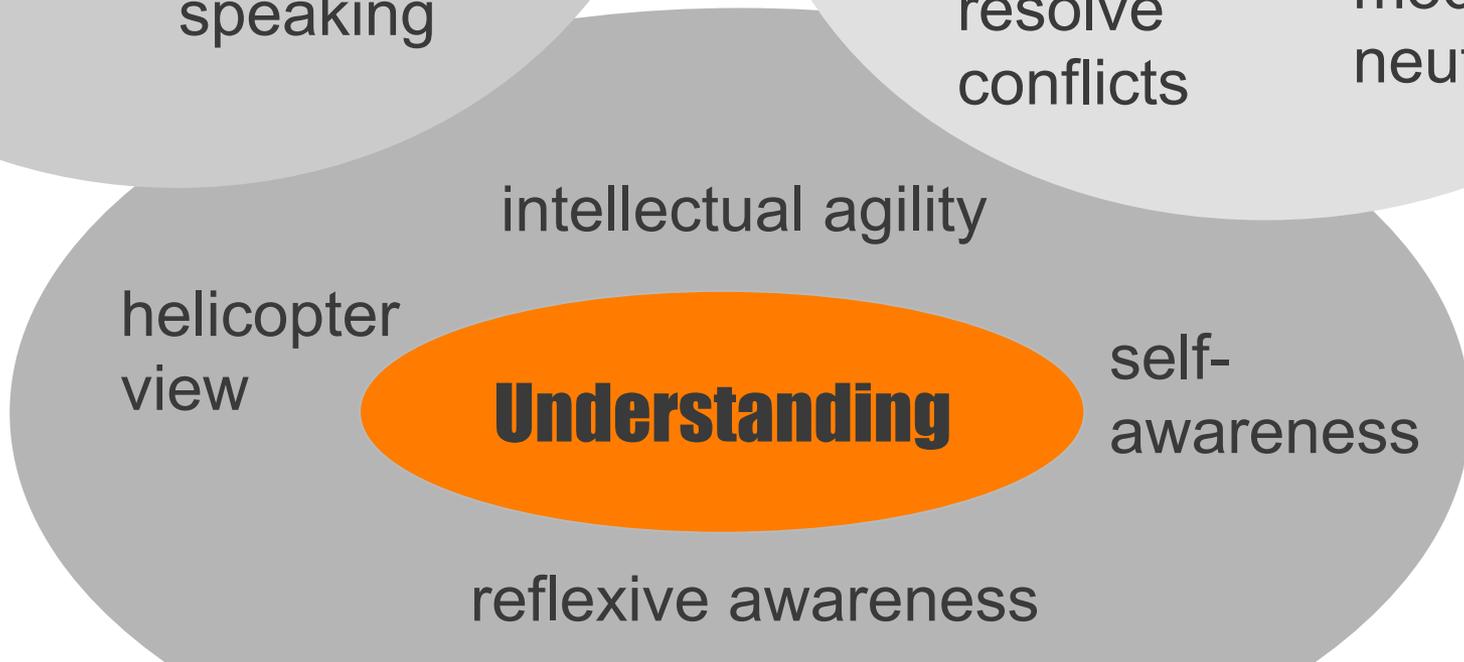
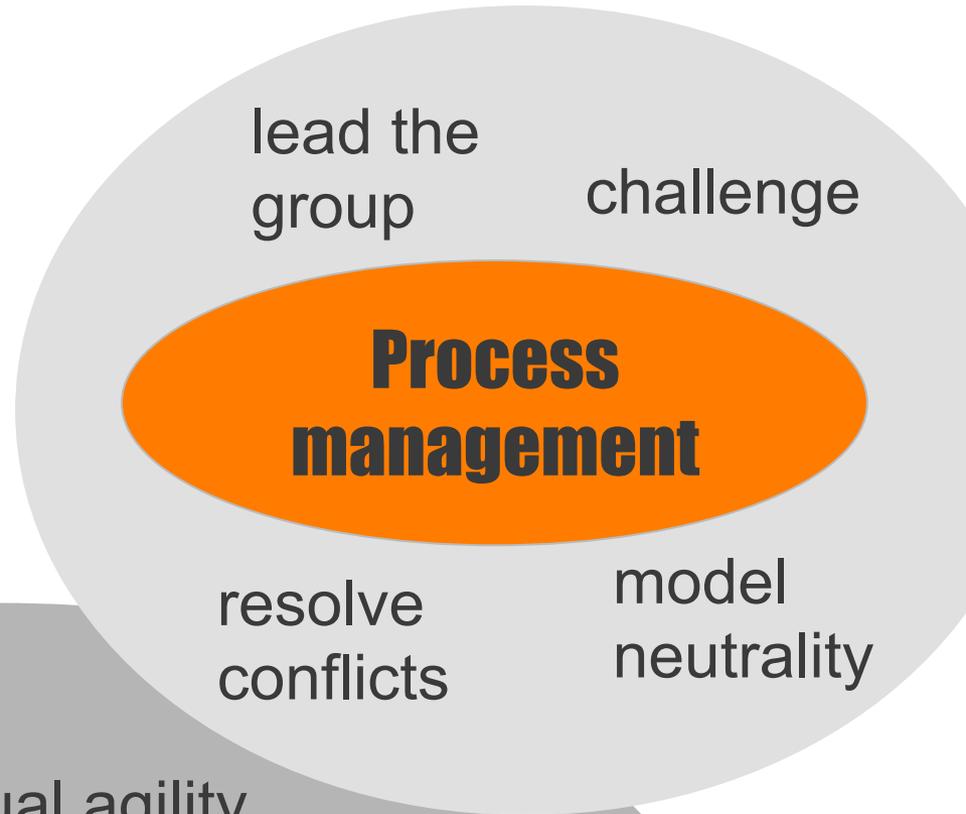
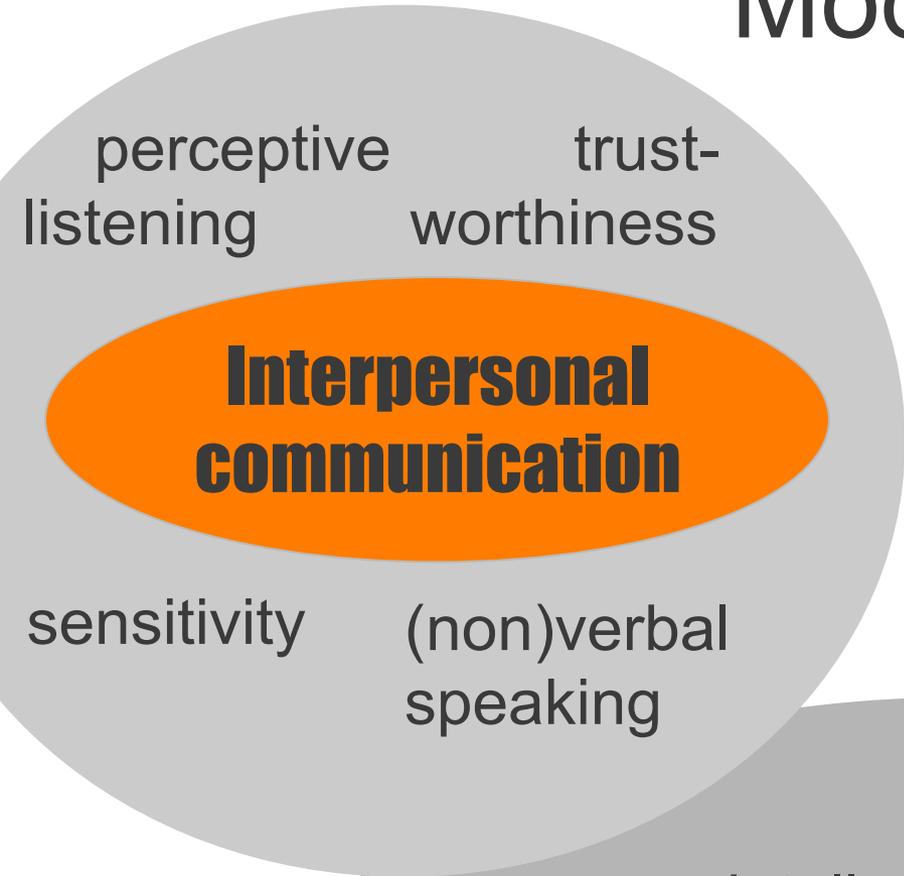
provide clear explanations of the objectives and exercises

A focus group moderator is like the conductor of an orchestra



obtain your research objectives  
get the best out of every person

# Moderator competencies



# 7 important things to do and show

A moderator..

**Establishes a safe environment**

**Responds in a positive accepting way**

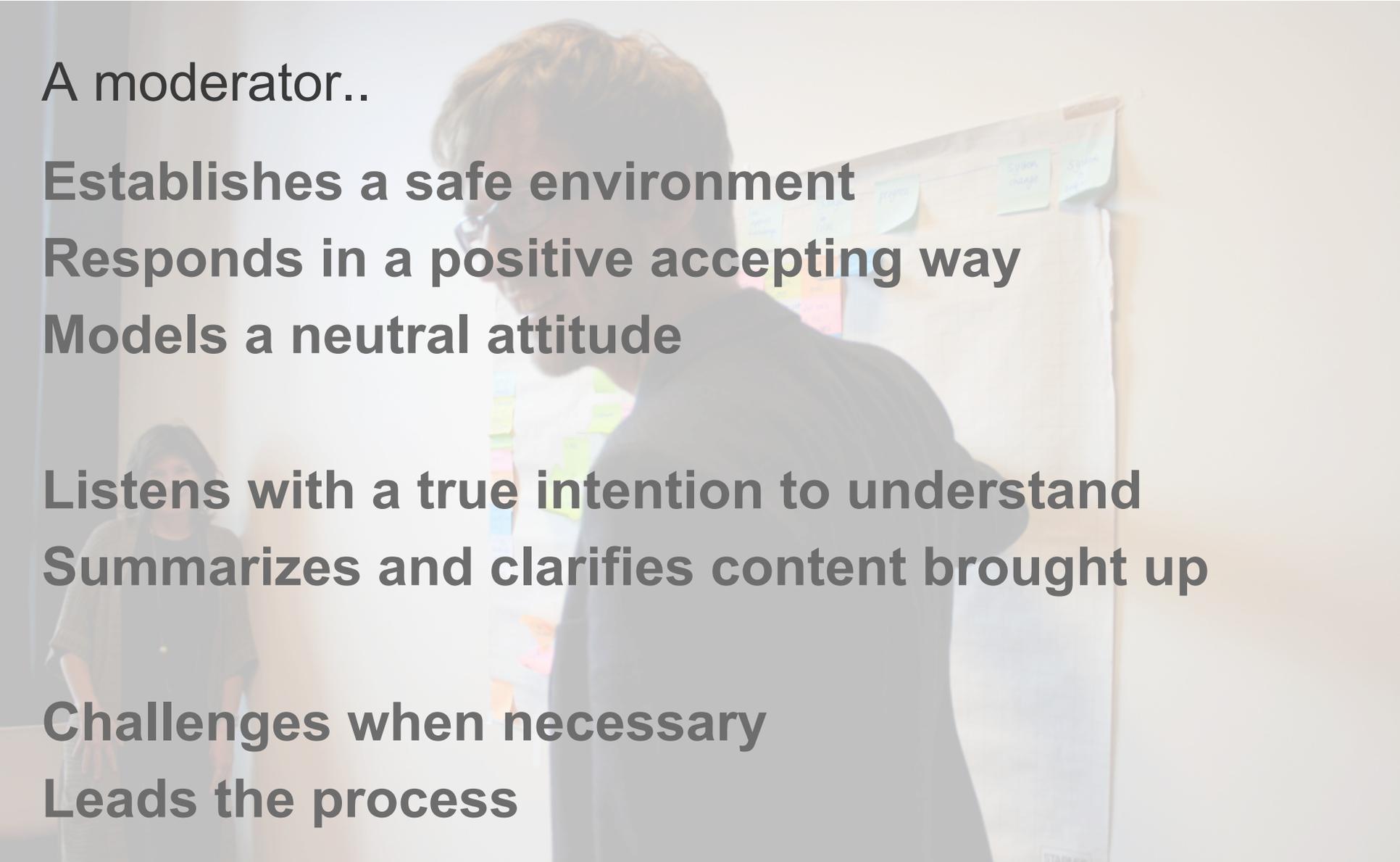
**Models a neutral attitude**

**Listens with a true intention to understand**

**Summarizes and clarifies content brought up**

**Challenges when necessary**

**Leads the process**



# modelling neutrality/ positive accepting

## Modelling neutrality

Listen with curiosity and postpone judgment/ critique

It's not about you, or your ego, its about the ecosystem of the focus group reaching its goal

## Positive accepting

Approach every idea as a potential contribution to the session output. All ideas are valuable.

Always say 'yes' in your mind to what is brought up. Be aware when to use 'yes-but' responses (aimed at sharpening ideas) and 'yes-and' responses (aimed at building on ideas).  
Be in the moment. Add to what is there.

# Empathic vs. analytical listening

## Empathic listening

Listening with the sincere intention to understand the other person. Engage in the other's way of thinking, understanding the other's frame of reference. "Standing in other people's shoes".

## Analytical listening

Listening in order to structure the heard information, recognizing concepts central to the theme of discussion, establishing connections to what has been said already and the direction in which the conversation should be heading.



# The LSC model

## *listen, summarize, clarify*

- **Listen** carefully to what a participant has to say. It is important just to focus on what is said, postponing judgment or critique.
- **Summarize** what has been said to check whether you have got it. Always let the decision of what a statement means and how it should be put down with the participants.
- **Clarify** with questions to gain an in-depth understanding of a participant's view. Ask 'get- questions' ("what do you mean") and 'why-questions' ("why do you think that").

# Summarizing

## Purpose of summarizing

- Check your interpretations of the participants' story
- Show the participant that you take her seriously

## How to do it

- Repeat what is said/ integrate in in your own words
  - **content**: 'if I understand it right, your objective is to reduce CO2 emissions by 80% in 2020'.
  - **emotion**: 'I hear you're really enthusiastic about this project'
  - **relationship**: 'I get the idea you're not totally at ease with what happens with the data after this interview'

# Clarification

## Purpose of clarification

- Explore underlying levels of beliefs, values and concerns

## Probing is also about

Relevance, purpose, completeness, examples, evaluation

## Probing questions

“Tell me more about..”

“What makes you think that..?”

“What is it that you find important in this..”

“Please explain to me how..”

“If you compare this to..?”

“If you think about..., what is your idea on..?”

“Can you think of an example?”

“What do you mean by?”

**What**  
**How**

No explicit  
‘Why’

# Process intervention

# Dealing with resistance

## Questions about the nature and background of the project

Out of curiosity: postpone until after the session

Out of distrust: deal with it clear and short, but immediately

## Questions that concern the session itself

Resolve issues direct, clearly and to the group as a whole

## Questions that seek your opinion

Explain that it is not about what you think, but that you're interested in what they think. Reward their attempt.

## Questions reflecting the participant's desire to do it right

Explain there's no right/ wrong. All ideas are valuable. Reward.

# Dealing with resistance

## **Passivity**

a participant drops out of the discussion, sits back, unfocused and drifts away.

## problematic because

active engagement in the focus group conversation is important for the research results, but also more directly for the group atmosphere. It is the moderator's job to make every participant actively and enthusiastically engaging in the discussions.

# Dealing with resistance

## **Dominance**

a participant dominates the conversation, lectures the other participants and obstructs the flow of ideas in all directions

## problematic because

Dominance can be produced by overly enthusiasm or aggression. The effect of this behaviour is that it creates an unpleasant and hostile atmosphere which inhibits other types of participants to actively participate.

# Dealing with resistance

Intervention	What
acknowledge & zap	acknowledge the participant's input (people want to be heard) but then move on directly to another participant
summarize & zap	acknowledge even more by summarizing (making sure that you got it) and then move on to another participant
explain procedures	explain that you want to collect the ideas of every participant in the group. Explain that this is why you want everybody to have a say.
address behaviour directly	describe what you observe. Explain how this interferes with the group process. Ask the participant to adjust behaviour.

# Room shuffle

Group Jacqueline	8.183
Group Frank	7.183
Group Janneke	6.183
Group Coffee	8.182