



VIEWS

BUSINESS MATTERS



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The Moderator Reimagined: Lessons from a Season Away



I did not plan to shift my focus from research. Yet, like many of us who give fully to clients, teams, and timelines—always pursuing the next insight, the next “why,” or pushing the next insight forward—I found myself craving a different kind of inquiry. What began as a part-time exploration became both a personal and professional realignment. I stepped into the world of wellness—not just as a consumer, but as a business owner and health & wellbeing coach practitioner. And in doing so, I found something I hadn’t realized I’d misplaced: the ability to apply empathy not just in research but within myself as well.

This is the story of how expanding my work beyond the traditional research space sharpened my understanding of listening—not only to others, but to myself. It’s also about what I now bring to the research table: a more human-centered approach to moderating, rooted in health coaching techniques, mindfulness, and behavioral science. These experiences have deepened my presence, broadened my empathy, and strengthened my appreciation for the human space we hold for others when we moderate.



Both coaching and moderation are acts of care disguised as inquiry.”

The Break that Wasn’t a Break

When I stepped away from full-time focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and discussion guides, I didn’t do it to escape the work! I did it to explore a long-held but dormant desire to make a more direct impact on people’s health and well-being. It wasn’t a departure from human insight; it was an immersion in it.

I founded and operated two boutique wellness studios centered on health, fitness, and behavior change. I coached clients through mindset shifts and habit formation. I led group fitness classes that demanded empathy, motivation, and adaptability. And I became a certified health & wellbeing coach, sharpening my interviewing skills and elicitation techniques based on behavioral science.

Ironically, that entire chapter was defined by listening—more deeply and intentionally than ever before. Only this time, the conversations happened in real-world settings, where people weren’t “research participants.” These were individuals navigating change, searching for relief, resilience, or reconnection. Their breath, posture, and tone often revealed more than their words.

Somewhere in those repeated exchanges and my newly acquired skill of coaching, I began listening to myself again. I noticed when I was fully present—and when I was perhaps only semi-present or just going through a conversational routine—I like to refer to this as “performing presence.” That awareness reshaped how I now enter a room, begin a conversation, or even a day. It reminded me that the kind of listening we offer others begins with the kind we offer ourselves.

Listening for the Unsaid

One of the most unexpected gifts of stepping away full-time was how much it sharpened my ability to detect emotional nuance. Today, as I look back, it isn’t clear to me when that sensitivity began to fade. After all, I had been moderating for over 15 years and had perhaps grown unconsciously accustomed to quickly phrasing or rephrasing my inquiries to achieve insights. But in a coaching or fitness session, people rarely say exactly what they mean. Their bodies tell the truth first.

I remember a high-achieving client who came to “get stronger.” Week after week, she arrived apologetic and depleted—often explaining why she hadn’t done “enough.” As her coach, I resisted the urge to prescribe or correct. Instead, borrowing from my training as a moderator, I shifted our conversation from compliance to curiosity.

Rather than asking, “Did you follow your plan this week?” I began asking questions like:

- “What was the most positive aspect of the workout last week?”
- “What felt most challenging?”
- “What was your biggest win?”

Those questions opened a different kind of dialogue—one that allowed her to examine her motivations rather than defend her actions. Gradually, she stopped framing her goals around obligation (“I have to be consistent,” “I should go to bed earlier,” “lift heavier,” or “eat more vegetables”) and began articulating what she truly wanted: to feel energized, capable, and in control of her own strength.

That shift in language—from obligation to desire—revealed the underlying motivations driving her behavior. Thereby, allowing me (her coach) to support her in a manner that was more personal, sustainable, and self-directed rather than prescribed.

In a research setting, this same evolution from “I have to” to “I want to” can be nurtured through the way we structure our conversations. Our interactions with respondents should sound like conversations, not inquisitions. Veteran moderators in our field often do this instinctively—the ability to conduct “professional conversations,” a skill that matures with experience. It starts with how we frame our introductions: not positioning ourselves as evaluators, nor stating that we’ve invited them for market-research purposes, or that we are—may I dare say—“moderators.” Instead, consider presenting as professional facilitators of trust, setting the tone early that this is a conversation, not a critique nor judgement. For example, an opening like “I’m here to listen and learn from your perspective; you’re the expert on your own experience” instantly signals that this is a space for reflection, not evaluation. That shift—from authority to curiosity—is what transforms the interaction from an interview into a dialogue.

Equally important is how we hold space once the conversation begins. Allowing silence to linger, mirroring back a participant’s own words, or acknowledging your observation of any change in the respondent’s facial or body language (e.g., “You sighed very deeply before you answered—tell me more about that.”) communicates psychological safety. This is the researcher’s version of “permission to be heard.” When respondents sense they won’t be judged or rushed, their language softens, their stories deepen, and insights surface that might otherwise stay hidden.

In addition, instead of asking participants to “recall” or “rate,” let’s invite them to “reflect” and “relive.” For example, rather than asking, “How often do you take your medication?” we might ask, “What helps you stay on track—or gets in the way—when it comes to taking your medication?” Subtle shifts like this invite more emotional honesty, and quite possibly, more depth in the insights we provide our clients. You may have observed this already, but in essence, both coaching and qualitative moderation require us to “coach” the conversation itself—by first setting the right intentions during our introductions, then sensing when to probe, when to pause, and when to simply hold space for reflection. It’s the dance between inquiry and stillness—between guiding and yielding—that turns an interview into a dialogue.



Insight often surfaces not from the next question, but from the pause that follows.”



What Health Coaching Taught Me

Health and well-being coaching at its core is a collaborative process that helps people identify what well-being means for them and take sustainable steps toward it. It isn't about advice-giving or correction; nor is it about fixing. It is about facilitating self-discovery through empathy, open-ended curiosity, and guided reflection—so that individuals can see their patterns clearly and make more intentional and self-directed changes. In a nutshell, we create the insights necessary for shifts in perspective, choice, and ultimately behavior.

Motivational interviewing's foundation is built on three pillars:

Empathy | Autonomy | Collaboration

The coach listens for ambivalence and readiness, mirrors the client's own language, and helps them articulate their "why" out loud. The parallels to qualitative moderation are striking. Both rely on open-ended questions, reflective listening, and trust that meaning will emerge from dialogue. For example: a mid-life client came to coaching "to lose ten pounds." Through motivational interviewing we uncovered that her deeper goal was not weight loss but stability—feeling steady again after a difficult year. The insight surfaced not because I asked better questions but because I allowed space for her to find her own words. In research, I've seen the same moment when a participant pauses and says, "Actually, what really matters is ..." Whether in a health or wellness setting, or the focus-group room, insight lives in that precise pivot—from telling to realizing.

Mindfulness Is a Method

Traditional qualitative work moves at a fairly quick pace. But stillness has become my secret tool. Before every group or interview, I now take a few minutes to breathe and notice what I'm bringing into the room—fatigue, excitement, distraction. That pause and conscious breathing changes EVERYTHING. It slows the nervous system, quiets mental chatter, and allows the body to settle into presence. Sometimes I'll take four slow counts in, hold for four, exhale for four.

This method of breathing is called box breathing and is one of many accessible breathing techniques one can use to signal your brain and body to shift from doing to listening.

✔ Respondents can feel and sense when you are grounded and tuned in. They also open up more easily when you're not racing through your introduction or mentally skipping ahead to the next probe.

We know that moderation is at times a performance. However, mindful moderation isn't about perfection or performance; it's about attunement. When we start from a calm, centered place, we create the conditions for deeper dialogue. Mindfulness isn't just self-care—it's methodology. It's essentially how we clear internal noise to detect external signals efficaciously allowing us to stay both sharp and soft at the same time. The benefit of being both sharp and soft is that it allows us to listen on two levels at once: intellectually and intuitively. Sharpness keeps us focused—attuned to language, patterns, and insight—while softness keeps us human, receptive, and emotionally safe for others to open up. One without the other leaves the conversation either too surface level, too clinical, or too cloudy. But together, they create clarity with compassion—the sweet spot where honesty and trust can coexist.



Mindfulness isn't just self-care—it's methodology."

The Power of Presence (and Absence)

Stepping away didn't make me less of a researcher. It made me a better one. Our greatest asset isn't just technique, nor the discussion guide—it's ourselves, our presence. The ability to make someone feel seen, heard, and safe enough to tell the truth of their experiences and preferences is what turns data into discovery.

I've come to see research as a form of care—not in the clinical or therapeutic sense, but in how we prepare, listen, and hold space for truth to emerge. It is both practical and strategic.

“Care,” in this context, is about intention: showing up with presence, empathy, and respect for the people who share their experiences with us—regardless of who they are, a cancer patient, consumer, neurosurgeon, or the C-level executive. When we approach a session this way, participants feel safe enough to speak freely, and clients gain richer, more authentic insights. However, this kind of care begins internally. To offer it outwardly, we must first extend it to ourselves—grounding, centering, and protecting the energy it takes for us to listen well. Otherwise, we run the risk of burnout or the inability to sustain our focus or direct more productive “day-of” discussions or debriefs.



When we shift from performance to presence, we create space for truth to emerge.”

Conclusions for Our Market Research Practices

As a veteran moderator, I’ve attended more webinars, seminars, and training sessions on qualitative best practices than I can count. But renewal—my time away—has been the most effective teacher of all. Whether you’re returning from a sabbatical, entering the field for the first time, or simply catching your breath between back-to-back sessions, we can all elevate the way we show up in the room.

Because ultimately, the voice of the customer isn’t just data—it’s a heartbeat. And to truly hear it, we must also learn to listen to our own. I call this Moderator Methodology—a set of practices that help us bring more presence, empathy, and intention to every conversation:

1. Practice Mindful Presence

Travel, edits, and client calls can scatter our focus long before we enter the room. A five-minute grounding ritual—closing your eyes, steadying your breath, reviewing key objectives—can transform how you lead. Plan to center yourself before the session to arrive mentally and physically. During the discussion, release the need to perform or control. Notice your own energy before asking about theirs. That small recalibration changes everything.

2. Build Rapport Beyond the Warm-Up

Rapport isn’t built in the first five minutes—it’s sustained throughout. Keep attuning to subtle cues and micro-moments of connection. Real trust often blooms halfway through, when participants realize they’re being seen, not managed.

3. Listen Actively—and Deeply


Go beyond the script. Ask open-ended questions and listen not just to the words, but to what’s unspoken. Notice pauses, hesitations, facial or physical shifts, and emotional inflections. Sometimes the richest insight lives in the spaces between our discussion guides.

4. Hold a Space Where Honesty Feels Safe

We often tell participants, “There are no wrong answers,” but the reality is they notice how we respond far more than what we say. Small clues, such as steady eye contact, a nod of understanding, or allowing silence to breathe—all signal that every perspective is welcome. These gestures transform neutrality into trust and turn guarded responses into meaningful stories. What matters most is how we listen. In addition, your tone, timing, and presence communicate safety far more powerfully. When respondents share vulnerable stories—about illness, caregiving, or identity—your calm neutrality becomes their permission to be real.

5. Prioritize Your Own Wellbeing

Moderators pour so much into others that it’s easy to forget ourselves. Protect your energy through rest, reflection, movement, or mindfulness between sessions. A well-centered moderator is the most powerful research tool there is.

These aren’t new skills—they’re renewed ones. They remind us that listening with empathy is both art and discipline. It requires us to stay both sharp and soft, and is a muscle we strengthen every time we choose presence over performance. 

About the Author: Judithe Andre



Judithe Andre is a qualitative research consultant and founder of Verbal Clue Research, LLC, with over 20 years of experience in market research and strategic marketing. She specializes in moderating and insight generation across pharmaceutical, health, and wellness sectors, with a focus on uncovering the emotional and behavioral drivers behind decision-making. Her work is grounded in a deep belief that how people speak—and how we listen—reveals what traditional methods often miss. A National Board-Certified Health & Wellness Coach (NBC-HWC), Judithe brings a differentiated lens to her research, with expertise in behavior change across both clinical and everyday health and wellness context. Her work spans areas such as patient engagement, adherence, motivation, and habit formation—extending into how individuals navigate lifestyle change, prevention, and overall well-being. This dual foundation in coaching and research—along with her experience as a fitness professional and studio owner—provides a practical lens on how people initiate, navigate, and sustain behavior change in real-world settings.

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Mark Wheeler, Principal at Wheeler Research LLC, is a cognitive psychologist by training who applies his knowledge of behavioral and social science to healthcare moderating, reporting, and consulting. Mark has over 20 years of experience across a wide range of healthcare areas, with particular emphases on biologics, immunology, and oncology, especially when these medicines are in pre-launch phases. Mark has a Ph.D. in psychology from Rice University and a graduate certificate in management from Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania.

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