

QRCA: How to collaborate and communicate your way to better study results

Collaboration and communication – a combination that can make the difference for project managers and qualitative researchers.

Most projects begin with a conversation between the project manager and the qualitative research consultant (QRC) establishing the general purpose, issues to be investigated, scope and orientation. But a successful study often takes more than that.

By the nature of qualitative research, things often change throughout the project. Valuable insights may require the research to take a different direction or change focus mid-way through the project. Without anticipating and preparing for changes, the process can lead to study findings that have limited validity or usefulness.

The Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA) reports the good news is that communication through every phase of a project is essential and achievable. Here's a short communication and collaboration checklist:

Agree On Clear Goals And Objectives. Develop a formal outline of the goals, objectives and criteria before even committing to a methodology. The QRC issues a statement of work that shows the entire process, including how the final report will look. This collaborative effort can become the blueprint for the study.

Collaborate On Study Design. Working together from the beginning ensures a shared understanding of how a research methodology and alternatives contribute to the objectives, costs and other logistical constraints. There should be open communication about what method is best for the project, the number of respondents, where to conduct the study and other study specifics. This allows the research buyer to make informed decisions and allows the QRC to deliver valuable results.

Collaborate During The Interview Stage. The power of qualitative method is being able to adapt on the fly, adjusting questions, exercises and lines of inquiry to deliver the best results within the objectives, with a plan for fielding suggestions in place at interim points during the interview. Initial premises will be exposed and new opportunities will emerge. These issues appear, at first, to be challenges. But handled appropriately, they can be one of the greatest benefits of qualitative research, producing even more insightful results.

After the Interview. In advance, the project manager and the QRC should agree on the expectations for the debrief (the conversation between the QRC and project manager that immediately follows the observation). How should it be structured? Who will lead the conversation? Where and when will it take place? What will come out of it? During the debrief, each participant will be called upon to remember the key objectives, and to listen carefully and consider how the findings can reveal insights that address the key research issues.

Agree on Reporting Requirements. Using the planning of goals and objectives early in the process, distinguish between the different elements of a report: what was said, what was the understanding of what was said and what actions should come from the understanding.

Clear communication throughout the entire study allows the project manager to understand the observations in detail, prior to receiving the report. That understanding allows the patterns, themes and subtexts to be portrayed accurately and in the right context within the report. In addition, deadlines, media (MS Word, PowerPoint, audio, video), and length are determined in advance.

Using this simple checklist, QRCA members have found that enhanced collaboration and communication has resulted in insightful and actionable research, time after time.