

QUICK START GUIDE

Processes + tools to help move ideas quickly through communities who have demonstrated readiness

Facilitating Groups | Basic guide for group leaders

Introduction

Organizations in the U.S. today are turning increasingly to participative approaches to get work done better and faster. From strategic planning to cross-agency problem solving to getting work out of the door, success likely involves the use of groups more than ever before. With this change comes increased demand for skilled facilitators. One approach to facilitation involves the facilitator in a very limited role: serving as the group's timekeeper, "traffic cop" when discussions heat up, and recorder of the group's decisions.

However, our preferred approach, the *active facilitation approach* sees the role of the facilitator as a temporary group or team leader. The facilitator employing the *active facilitation approach* enables the group to focus on the task at hand knowing an unbiased professional is providing the structure, processes, and the *push*--probably the most distinguishing characteristic of the approach--to help the group get where it wants to go.

The Role of the Facilitator in 'Active Facilitation'

In this approach the facilitator shares responsibility with the group for getting their task accomplished. The roles and responsibilities of the facilitator are summarized as:

Neutral Servant of the Group - As in all group facilitation, the facilitator in the *active facilitation approach* has an unbiased, neutral service role, treating all participants and all ideas in the group with the same respect. The facilitator has no interest in *what* decision is made, but has a strong interest *that* a decision *is* made; no preference for one outcome over another, but a strong preference that an outcome be reached; no preference that one member or another is heard, but a clear interest in all participants having a chance to be heard.

Process Advocate - The facilitator is responsible for helping the group establish and maintain forward movement. It is this "*push*" that frequently earns the facilitator using the *active facilitation approach* the undying appreciation of groups. The facilitator is continually assessing the group's progress toward its objectives and considering and proposing:

- Group processes (ways to manage participant interactions or optional decision-making methods); *and*
- Task processes, (breaking the group into subgroups to get several tasks done concurrently, or eliciting commitments to follow-up assignments by members of the group).

Compared to conventional facilitation methods, the facilitator in the *active facilitation approach* has a more extensive role in planning for, facilitating, and following up on a work session including:

Design the meeting. Ideally the facilitator is brought in as soon as a meeting is planned to become involved in designing the work session. Planners may tend to focus mainly on the *topics* of a meeting; the facilitator instead focuses on the *process and task* and will include time for work to be done in participative and productive ways.

Prepare and circulate the agenda. The facilitator ensures that the agenda contains key information and is circulated **before** the meeting to all participants.

Facilitating a meeting

Writing ideas visibly (on a flipchart, projector or other method) respects the idea, ensures group retention and memory of it, and encourages participants to put more ideas forward. Participants are generally more willing to deal objectively with ideas that have been listed on a flipchart than they are with ideas in the moment when individuals put them forth.

Step 1: Explain the purpose of the meeting. State the outcome intended in one statement if possible. For example:

"An understanding about current activities among the various group members' organizations" or;

"An outline of the contents of a guide to be developed and a plan for its development."

Step 2: Present the objectives for the meeting. Describe specifically what participants are expected to accomplish in three or four statements. For example:

(1) *To assess current status or progress in each category of work;*

(2) *To determine priorities for the work of this group;*

(3) *To develop specific strategies for moving the collaboration forward over the next 6 months.*

Step 3: Explain the meeting and facilitation approach. State what participants can expect to happen in the meeting. For example:

"This meeting is structured so that information and ideas will be presented, discussed, and appropriate action taken."

"As a facilitator, I will help you stay on track, record your ideas and decisions on flip charts, and generally try to ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard and that agreement is reached on key points before you move forward. I'll also keep track of the time and be sure our sessions end when you have agreed they should end. If anyone has any ideas for other ways I could help or ideas for how the process should work along the way, please do not hesitate to offer suggestions."

"Please let me know of relevant ideas, stories or practices that come to you and I'll write them down for later discussion so we can stay on the topic at hand."

Step 4: Review the agenda. Participants should have received an agenda prior to the meeting. Provide a broad overview of what is planned to happen when, and how each agenda item will be handled.

Step 5: Review administrative information. Where bathrooms are located, any paperwork requirements of participants, etc.

Ground Rules

Two kinds of ground rules typically appear on facilitators' lists:

1. Process ground rules. For example:
 - Make decisions by consensus
 - Post decisions on a flipchart
 - Track follow-up or action items as we go
2. Behavioral ground rules. Include such considerations as:
 - Attend all sessions and be on time
 - Treat all ideas with respect
 - Raise differences openly and constructively

Recording the Discussion

Write participants' comments on flipcharts. This will encourage further comments and allow participants to review or summarize the discussion as needed. Be sure to:

Write down all comments, even those off-topic. Write any action items for follow-up that may come out of a discussion. Start a separate flipchart that can be added to throughout the meeting and reviewed at the end to be sure no follow-up assignments fall between the cracks.

Discussion

Your goal is to ensure everyone has a chance to participate to enable the group to have the benefit of everyone's thinking and to help form a common view of a subject. It is *not* important that *everyone* speak up a certain number of times or for participants to contribute at the same rate.

Do ask: "Does anyone who hasn't spoken up yet have any thoughts on this?"

Don't say: "What do you have to say, Anna?"

Respond to quiet participants' apparent concerns (a quizzical look or furrowed brow), but don't try to interpret them. Invite questions or comments generally:

Do ask: "It looks like there might be a few questions or comments...."

Don't say: "You look confused, Ed."

If you wish to elicit the views of all participants on a topic, you can poll the group, and ask each person to respond briefly.

"Will each person please give us your thoughts about this issue being discussed?"

Handling problem behavior: Don't over-react, just acknowledge the points the participant makes. Your goal is to ensure that the behavior of some people does not reduce the value of the discussion to the whole group. If possible, find merit in what he or she has said, agree with what you can, then move on.

Handling questions you don't know

"I don't know the answer to that question, Grace. We could check on it after the meeting and give you an answer tomorrow (or appropriate time frame)."

"I don't have the figures you need; does anyone in the group have them?"

"Let's continue with the agenda, Bryan, and if you are still concerned by the time we get to the planning step, we'll revisit your issue then."

"I appreciate your concern, Jim, but we need to go on with the meeting. If you'd like, you and I can talk about this issue some more after the close of the session."

Handling Side Conversations

Do not cause embarrassment to the participants. It's sometimes best to talk with persistently disruptive people during a break. If you feel you need to do something during the meeting, do it gently, for example, you might try:

"We need to have just one conversation at a time."

Handling Non-Relevant Comments

Sometimes a participant makes an off-topic comment or that introduces a side track you'd rather not have the group pursue. Wait for the point to be made, acknowledge it, write it down, integrate it if possible, and restate the intended subject of the discussion before you ask for the next comment from the group.

Handling a Person Who Makes Too Many Comments

Give the too-talkative participant a special job, to contribute to the session, such as assisting you by recording others' comments on a laptop. Or suggest:

"The strength of your work depends heavily upon diverse thoughts and ideas. Let me encourage you all to speak to this issue, rather than leaving the burden for solutions or ideas to just a few people."

Identifying Key Points

Ask the participants to summarize what points stand out to them:

"What key points have emerged so far in this discussion?"

"What are ideas you will take away from this discussion?"

"What should we conclude from this discussion?"

Brainstorming

Participants offer as many ideas about a particular issue as they can think of, as quickly as they can. What distinguishes brainstorming from other group interactions is there is no give and take.

That is, ideas are put out and *not* actually discussed, just listed. Because ideas are not challenged brainstorming promotes openness and creativity. **Uses:**

- To elicit participants' views on a subject about to be dealt with in greater depth, and thus build their interest in the discussion topic. For example: *"What are the main problems associated with co-location of services?"*
- To define a problem which is more appropriately defined by participants than by the facilitator. For example: *"What does the report suggest about how past disaster responses are viewed by the public?"*
- To stimulate new or creative thinking. For example: *"What are some ways to respond to this problem that have never been considered or tried before?"*
- To get participants to consider an issue from a new point of view. For example, *"How would this issue look to you if you were all working in the Governor's office instead of working in the disaster response and recovery system?"* To get participants involved in a topic.
- To enable participants to contribute a great deal with a very small investment.

How to Get Brainstorming Started

Explain the process to participants with a brief explanation of the process, a clear question to be responded to, and a few ground rules. For example:

"Let's set some ground rules for brainstorming:

- *"Think of as many ideas as you can.*
- *"No debate, discussion or evaluation of ideas.*
- *"All ideas have value, however unusual they might seem."*

Report out

It is important to have reports back to the larger group so that everyone in the meeting knows the key information or ideas that were exchanged. **Tips:**

- Allow time in the agenda for reports after each round of small group discussions
- Give a time limit for reports and make it short! Few reports ever need to go beyond 2-3 minutes. Most should happen within a minute. It is critical that each be short enough that other participants can sustain their interest
- Advise reporters that they needn't provide background or commentary. Just focus on the outcomes of the discussion
- Allow participants listening to reports to respond with questions and comments, so all participants have the benefit of one another's views on the subjects

After the reports are completed lead a discussion on the reports summarizing key points.

Consensus building collective agreement

Note: in your ready-made community, this may already be inherent in your community practice or community culture.

Select which *types* of decisions should be consensus decisions. Consensus is as vital when setting the direction, method, ground rules, accountability, and outcomes of a project. During implementation of specific decisions consensus isn't necessary for each action as the roll out of a project requires personal decision-making of leads or point people.

Consensus decision-making is the heart of what makes groups more effective than individuals. Its special value is seen in the *quality* of decisions reached and the acceptance of and relative *ease of implementation* of those decisions. A few general principles:

- **Consensus reaching takes time.** Group members need time to discuss an issue thoroughly, work out their differences, and find areas of common agreement. The process can take less time with the help of a facilitator, but can be counted on to take longer than decisions made alone or between only a few people.
- **Consensus requires a commitment to decide by consensus.** Consensus decision-making is difficult if all members of a group are working in good faith toward agreement; it is impossible if one or some members of the group are not committed to the consensus process.

Define a Consensus Decision

A good, workable definition of consensus is:

"A decision in which everyone participates and which everyone can live with and publicly support."

When reviewing the definition, it is helpful to reinforce the points that *everyone* participates, and that everyone must be able to *live with* and *publicly support* the decision for it to qualify as a consensus.

In defining consensus decision-making it helps to distinguish it from other forms of decision-making. Explain to the group that what consensus is *not* includes:

Voting. *In voting, discussion may be cut short, affecting the quality of the quality of decision, and all members may not support the outcome.*

Trading off. *"You can have your idea included if you include one of mine". Trading off is efficient, but people don't generally support an idea that was included only as part of a bartering process.*

Steamrolling. *Arguing long enough to wear others down and have your idea prevail works, but discussion is suppressed and people almost certainly don't support an outcome achieved this way.*

Withholding. *It may help keep the peace, but when participants do not speak up, their ideas do not get a hearing, thus full participation doesn't occur.*

You may also want to remind the group that consensus is not:

Perfect agreement. *A consensus decision represents the common ground in the group's thinking; it is what each member of the group could live with and publicly support--that is not the same as perfect agreement.*

Easy or fast. Consensus is difficult and takes time, but is worth the effort for important decisions because it ensures both quality and support of the decision.

How to Facilitate Consensus-Reaching

Define consensus and explain the consensus reaching process. Be sure that everyone in the group is operating with the same understanding of consensus. Write the definition of what consensus is and what it's not on a flipchart. Explain the process to be used, lay out the steps described below, and refer participants to the ground rules relevant to consensus reaching. If no such ground rules were established at the beginning of the meeting, suggest some ground rules that will help consensus work, for example:

"Express your experience, opinions and logic openly."

"Be open to others' experience, opinions, and logic."

"Use 'I' statements vs. 'You' statements to express differences."

"Express differences in terms of 'concerns' and 'interests'."

"Actively seek agreement--look for common ground."

"When we have agreement, we will stop! (No revisiting a consensus decision unless the whole group decides to.)"

Agree on the issue to be decided. With the help of the group, write the decision task on a flipchart and adjust the wording as needed until everyone understands and agrees on the decision to be made, for example:

"Decision: How the group will approach the task of engaging stakeholders. 'Stakeholders' include government organizations and local health and human service agencies. For the purpose of this decision, we are not considering national or state representatives."

Explore the issue. Facilitate an open discussion of the issue to be decided. This discussion may be lightly structured with open-ended questions from the facilitator, but should be free-ranging enough to get each participant's information, concerns, and insights before the group. Sometimes it is helpful to ask the group members *not* to respond to others observations, but simply to make whatever points they want.

Develop approach (principles or beliefs) for the decision. As the group discusses the issue, points may be raised affecting the decision that seem to have general support in the group. If you hear such points, you may begin a flipchart on guiding principles. Such as:

"All options should be considered, however radical a change they may represent from past ways of doing things."

"No one involved in the planning team should be excluded from participation in the ongoing process."

"All decisions of the planning team will be communicated openly with all stakeholders."

Solicit a proposal. Ask participants if anyone would like to make a proposal that integrates key points raised in the discussion and conforms with the guiding principles. Write the proposal on a flipchart so everyone can consider it exactly as it was proposed. You may be able to make a proposal (based *entirely* on what participants have said during the discussion and the development of guiding principles), but it is usually best for the proposal to come from one or more of the participants. You may wish to take a preliminary poll of the group at this point to see how close they may be to consensus.

Refine the proposal. Ask participants to raise concerns or ideas they may have about any aspect of the proposal. Explain to participants that the goal of this step is to make adaptations to the proposal so that all participants can support it.

Ask for a show of consensus. It is important in consensus reaching that each participant makes an affirmative statement or gesture showing his or her agreement with the decision. It is *not* adequate to informally check for agreement, for example by saying something like, "*Does everyone agree...we'll take no response as implied approval of the proposal.*" Each person must make a personal commitment to the consensus decision. Some groups use a poll of the group--each participant stating his or her concurrence. Others use a show of thumbs up or thumbs down.

Consensus is often achievable on the first request for a show of sentiment. However, if one or more participants has continuing reservations and do not support the proposal as written, go back to step 6, and request further refinements to the proposal, then repeat step 7.

Helping a Large Group Reach Consensus

If the group is too large for discussions to take place fruitfully in the whole group, then the facilitator can use small group process. A group of 20 or more should be broken into small groups for consensus reaching on a subject of any difficulty.

Make the Small Groups Representative of the Whole Group

Be sure that each small group has within it representatives of each of the roles or points of view represented in the large group so a consensus reached in the small group is likely to be supported by the whole group.

Provide Discussion Guidance to the Small Groups

Offer discussion points to the small groups to help guide their discussions along similar paths to increase the likelihood of comparable proposals being developed among the small groups. For example:

"What are constraints bearing on this decision? What will make it difficult to reach the objective the decision addresses? (In the previous example, 'What constrains our ability to involve stakeholders?')"

"What supports, resources, opportunities, or players are affecting this decision ('Our ability to involve stakeholders')?"

"What are possible strategies for resolving this issue? Brainstorm options for what could be proposed as a decision on this issue."

"Which of these options best conforms with the guiding principles established for this decision?"

"What option(s) can we all agree on and support?"

Set a Time Limit

Propose a time limit and check with the group to get concurrence. You may offer a time at which you will check with the small groups to see how they are doing, for example, 30 minutes, at which point, based on the input from the small groups, you can determine how much time to give for completion of the task by all groups.

Have Small Groups Report and Seek Whole Group Consensus

If the small groups are all working on the same decision task, the chances are great that their proposals will have common elements. Usually the whole group can see right away that certain decision ideas were proposed repeatedly and quickly agree on them. If small groups were working on different decisions, the large group will usually accept their proposals with minimal changes.

Have a Sub-Group Develop a Consensus Proposal for the Whole Group's Consideration

If a satisfactory or complete consensus is not achieved during the small group report out period, set up a very small but diverse group (representing the range of views of the whole group) to work up a proposal for the whole group to consider.

Managing Conflict in Groups

Conflict is inevitable when people work in groups to develop, explore, expand, and make decisions about subjects that matter to them. It is not only a natural human behavior, but in its positive form (differing, as opposed to arguing) it is also an important part of the creative process. Without the freedom to differ, groups may find themselves limited to only the most conventional, accepted kinds of thinking and problem solving. Furthermore, conflict is essential to critical thinking. Groups in which members do not effectively express their differences can fall into *group think*, a mode of group behavior in which ideas, even ideas which are not well thought through, may prevail despite the individual group members' ability to know the ideas are not useful, or worse, actually harmful to the goals.

There are at least three kinds of conflict. They are based on emotional responses, cognitive differences, or a combination of the two. The ideas that follow can help group members understand and work through conflict in a constructive way, regardless of its source(s).

Rational Sources of Conflict

People differ for many reasons, but rationally-based conflict generally stems from people operating with:

- Different facts
- Different experiences
- Different values
- Different assumptions
- Different constraints

Emotional Sources of Conflict

It is important to understand the emotional responses that may be called forth in meetings, and to have some ideas about how to respond to them in a positive and supportive way. People remain eminently human at work, and emotions do play a part in people's behavior. Facilitators need effective ways to recognize emotionally-based conflict and to ensure that it can be managed. Most important, facilitators need to learn to resist their *own* emotional responses when participants have reacted emotionally, a reaction that may be expressed toward the facilitator, regardless of the real focus of the participants' frustration.

Dinosaur Brains

One model for understanding human emotional responses that can cause conflict and be triggered by the prospect of conflict is described in the book Dinosaur Brains, by Albert J. Bernstein, and is summarized below:

...[I]nside each human brain lurks the brain of a dinosaur -- irrational, emotional, easily enraged -- waiting to take control. . . . [H]umans don't always act like humans. One minute they're normal, rational people; the next, they're little better than reptiles. Trouble comes when they use the Reptile Response -- their primitive thinking patterns -- instead of the rational part of their brain.

The Construction of the Human Brain

Put simply, the human brain has three parts. One part is the "new" brain of relatively recent evolution and is the center of thinking and logic. It sits on top of our "old" brain, which controls instincts and emotions. The third part is the limbic system which lies between and connects the two brains, allowing us to move between one brain and the other.

Lizard Logic

When people operate out of their dinosaur brain, they appear, and sometimes *are* irrational at least temporarily. The problem is that the dinosaur brain is programmed in a very limited way. Like the Dinosaur for which it is named, it acts in accordance with seven rules of instinctual response known as "lizard logic":

1. Get it now! (*Impulsive*)
2. Fight, flee, or freeze (*Threatened*)
3. Be dominant (*Competitive, insecure or controlling*)
4. Defend the territory (*Defensive*)
5. Get 'em! (*Competitive*)
6. If it hurts, hiss! (*Complaining*)
7. Like me, good; not like me, bad! (*Intolerant*)

Sometimes--especially in stressful situations--a short-circuit occurs and people have difficulty re-channeling their response from their dinosaur brains to their reasonable brains, and to shift from instinctual, emotional behavior to thoughtful, rational behavior.

It is important that facilitators understand and accept that everyone reacts from his or her dinosaur brains sometimes. Although it is easy for one dinosaur brain to bring forth other dinosaur brains (for one person's emotional reactions to stimulate others' emotional reactions), facilitators must avoid the temptation to respond to impulsive, threatened, defensive, or other emotionally-based behavior in like emotional ways and to respond instead in rational ways.

Team Formation

Stage 1: Forming

Where members of the team meet one another and begin exploring their roles in the team, their relationship with one another as team members, and ideas about how the team will operate. Even if the team members already know each other, if they are just beginning to work in *this* team, the forming stage still occurs. This stage is generally characterized by uncertainty: members' tentative sharing of information and ideas, polite exploration of options, and careful scrutiny of other members of the team.

Stage 2: Storming

Members of the team begin to understand their differences, encounter divergent ideas about their task, their roles, and the processes by which they will do their work. This stage is generally characterized by disharmony: competition of individuals, ideas, and approaches; conflict among members about differences; frustration about the lack of cohesion; sectionalizing of the team into differing camps, and threat of the group breaking down.

Stage 3: Norming

Members of the team begin to recognize a common interest in the team and its task, develop common goals, clarify roles, and develop strategies for working together smoothly. This stage is generally characterized by optimism: relationships deepen, tensions ease, members' concerns are resolved, and the team's task and process are clarified.

Stage 4: Performing

Members of the team work productively to achieve their goals and carry out their work. This stage is generally characterized by productivity: a sense of progress and achievement on the part of the team develops, bonds are formed between members, and enthusiasm and creativity for the team's work are high.

Stage 5: Adjourning

Members of temporary teams, having completed their task, prepare to disband.

Behavior in Teams

Functional team behavior includes:

- **Initiating.** Proposing tasks or goals, defining a team problem, suggesting a procedure or idea for solving a problem.
- **Seeking information or opinions.** Requesting facts, asking for expressions of feelings or concerns, soliciting expressions of values, seeking suggestions and ideas.
- **Harmonizing.** Reconciling disagreements; reducing tension; getting people to explore differences, finding common ground.
- **Listening and encouraging.** Being responsive to others, indicating by verbal or non-verbal behavior interest in the views of others, supporting others' points.

- **Compromising.** Offering or accepting a compromise, admitting error, modifying position in the interest of team cohesion or growth.
- **Consensus-testing.** Asking to see if the team is nearing agreement on a decision, sending up "trial balloon" proposals, to see if a consensus is imminent.

Dysfunctional behavior includes:

- **Being aggressive.** Asserting own interests, views, and rights above those of others; showing hostility; demeaning the contributions of others.
- **Blocking.** Interfering with the progress of the team by arguing points at length, rejecting ideas without consideration, refusing to work toward a consensus.
- **Competing.** Polarizing discussions, creating win/lose alternatives, seeking to have one's point of view adopted by the team and have others' views rejected by the team.
- **Lobbying.** Introducing or arguing for ideas related to personal or their own organizational benefit, interests, biases, or feelings.
- **Horsing around.** Disrupting discussions or work sessions with clowning, joking, or other behaviors that interfere with the concentration of the team (as distinct from appropriate and even helpful amounts of spirited good humor that can be very constructive in maintaining team morale and energy).
- **Withdrawing.** Acting indifferent or passive about participation in the team or in discussion of issues raised by the team, entering into side discussions, resorting to excessive formality.

Create feelings of inclusion. Use supportive, non-judgmental language and behavior:

- *Acknowledge and reinforce different thinking, and working styles in a positive way v. expecting all team members to adopt a particular, narrow set of beliefs, or practices.*
- *Respond to challenges in a receptive, non-defensive manner, establishing an open dialogue with all members of the team vs demeaning or closing off discussion of concerns expressed by some members.*
- *Support each person, especially when outlying views are expressed or special needs or problems emerge v. allowing any individuals to become isolated in the team.*

Evaluate Work Sessions

The purpose of evaluation is to determine the extent to which efforts achieve the goals established for it so that the facilitator, the meeting planners, and often the participants as well, can learn from the experience.

- **Ask the participants.** You can count on participants to give you honest and useful feedback so long as you ask the right questions. Questions should be simple, clear, and worded objectively.
- **Don't be afraid of "bad" feedback.** Negative feedback should be seen as *good information*. Evaluation results are valuable to you and the meeting planners whether the

information tells you that something you tried worked or that it didn't work as you had expected. Only through evaluation can you continue to develop your own capability as a facilitator and the organization's understanding of how to hold effective meetings.

- Determine the extent to which the meeting's objectives were achieved. (*Satisfaction, Effectiveness, Impact*)
- Identify what worked well, so replicable effective elements of the meeting can be considered for future meetings. (*Satisfaction, Quality, Efficiency*)
- Identify what worked less well, so ineffective elements of the meeting can be done differently in future meetings to the extent possible. (*Satisfaction, Quality, Efficiency*)

Examples of end-of-session evaluation questions are:

"What did you particularly appreciate about today's meeting?"

"What would you like to see done or done differently the next time we meet?"

"To what extent were the objectives of this meeting achieved?"

"If another meeting like this were held in the future, what should be done the same?"

"If another meeting like this were held in the future, what should be done differently?"

"What feedback do you have for the facilitator(s)?"

"All in all, how satisfied are you with the outcomes of this meeting?"

"Any other feedback?"

Acknowledgements:

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