

# DEVELOPING FACILITATION SKILLS

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## WHAT ARE FACILITATION SKILLS?

Community organizations are geared towards action. There are urgent problems and issues we need to tackle and solve in our communities. That's why we came together in the first place, isn't it? But for groups to be really successful, we need to spend some time focusing on the skills our members and leaders use to make all of this action happen, both within and outside our organizations.

One of the most important sets of skills for leaders and members are facilitation skills. These are the "process" skills we use to guide and direct key parts of our organizing work with groups of people such as meetings, planning sessions, and training of our members and leaders.

Whether it's a meeting (big or small) or a training session, someone has to shape and guide the process of working together so that you meet your goals and accomplish what you've set out to do. While a group of people might set the agenda and figure out the goals, one person needs to concentrate on how you are going to move through your agenda and meet those goals effectively. This is the person we call the "facilitator."

## SO, HOW IS FACILITATING DIFFERENT THAN CHAIRING A MEETING?

Well, it is and it isn't. Facilitation has three basic principles:

- A facilitator is a guide to help people move through a process together, not the seat of wisdom and knowledge. That means a facilitator isn't there to give opinions, but to draw out opinions and ideas of the group members.
- Facilitation focuses on **how** people participate in the process of learning or planning, not just on **what** gets achieved
- A facilitator is neutral and never takes sides

The best meeting chairs see themselves as facilitators. While they have to get through an agenda and make sure that important issues are discussed, decisions made, and actions taken, good chairs don't feel that they have all of the answers or should talk all the time. The most important thing is what the participants in the meeting have to say. So, focus on how the meeting is structured and run to make sure that everyone can participate. This includes things like:

- Making sure everyone feels comfortable participating
- Developing a structure that allows for everyone's ideas to be heard
- Making members feel good about their contribution to the meeting
- Making sure the group feels that the ideas and decisions are theirs, not just the leader's. Supporting everyone's ideas and not criticizing anyone for what they've said.

## WHY DO YOU NEED FACILITATION SKILLS?

If you want to do good planning, keep members involved, and create real leadership opportunities in your organization and skills in your members, you need facilitator skills. The more you know about how to shape and run a good learning and planning process, the more your members will feel empowered about their own ideas and participation, stay invested in your organization, take on responsibility and ownership, and the better your meetings will be.

## HOW DO YOU FACILITATE?

Meetings are a big part of our organizing life. We seem to always be going from one meeting to the next. The next session in the Tool Box covers planning and having good meetings in depth. But here, we're going to work on the process skills that good meeting leaders need to have. Remember, these facilitation skills are useful beyond meetings: for planning; for "growing" new leaders; for resolving conflicts; and for keeping good communication in your organization.

## CAN ANYONE LEARN TO FACILITATE A MEETING?

Yes, to a degree. Being a good facilitator is both a skill and an art. It is a skill in that people can learn certain techniques and can improve their ability with practice. It is an art in that some people just have more of a knack for it than others. Sometimes organization leaders are required to facilitate meetings: thus, board presidents must be trained in how to facilitate. But other meetings and planning sessions don't require that any one person act as facilitators, so your organization can draw on members who have the skill and the talent.

To put it another way, facilitating actually means:

- Understanding the goals of the meeting and the organization
- Keeping the group on the agenda and moving forward
- Involving everyone in the meeting, including drawing out the quiet participants and controlling the domineering ones
- Making sure that decisions are made democratically

## HOW DO YOU PLAN A GOOD FACILITATION PROCESS?

A good facilitator is concerned with both the outcome of the meeting or planning session, with how the people in the meeting participate and interact, and also with the process. While achieving the goals and outcomes that everyone wants is of course important, a facilitator also wants to make sure that the process is sound, that everyone is engaged, and that the experience is the best it can be for the participants.

In planning a good meeting process, a facilitator focuses on:

- Climate and Environment
- Logistics and Room Arrangements
- Ground Rules

A good facilitator will make plans in each of these areas in advance. Let's look at some of the specifics.

## CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT

There are many factors that impact how safe and comfortable people feel about interacting with each other and participating. The environment and general "climate" of a meeting or planning session sets an important tone for participation.

Key questions you would ask yourself as a facilitator include:

- Is the location a familiar place, one where people feel comfortable? Face it, if you're planning to have an interactive meeting sitting around a conference table in the Mayor's office, some of your

folks might feel intimidated and out of their environment. A comfortable and familiar location is key.

- Is the meeting site accessible to everyone? If not, have you provided for transportation or escorts to help people get to the site? Psychologically, if people feel that the site is too far from them or in a place they feel is "dangerous," it may put them off from even coming. If they do come, they may arrive with a feeling that they were not really wanted or that their needs were not really considered. This can put a real damper on communication and participation. Another reminder: can handicapped people use the site as well?
- Is the space the right size? Too large? Too small? If you're wanting to make a planning group feel that it's a team, a large meeting hall for only 10 or 15 people can feel intimidating and make people feel self-conscious and quiet. On the other hand, if you're taking a group of 30 folks through a meeting, a small conference room where people are uncomfortably crunched together can make for disruption: folks shifting in their seats, getting up to stretch and get some air. This can cause a real break in the mood and feeling of your meeting or planning session. You want folks to stay focused and relaxed. Moral: choose a room size that matches the size of your group.

## LOGISTICS AND ROOM ARRANGEMENTS

Believe it or not: how people sit, whether they are hungry and whether they can hear can make or break your planning process. As a facilitator, the logistics of the meeting should be of great concern to you, whether you're responsible for them or not. Some things to consider are:

- Chair arrangements: Having chairs in a circle or around a table encourages discussion, equality, and familiarity. Speaker's podiums and lecture style seating make people feel intimidated and formal. Avoid them at all costs.
- Places to hang newsprint: You may be using a lot of newsprint or other board space during your meeting. Can you use tape without damaging the walls? Is an easel available? Is there enough space so that you can keep important material visible instead of removing it?
- Sign-In sheet: Is there a table for folks to use?
- Refreshments: Grumbling stomachs will definitely take folks minds off the meeting. If you're having refreshments, who is bringing them? Do you need outlets for coffee pots? Can you set things up so folks can get food without disrupting the meeting? And who's cleaning up afterwards?
- Microphones and audio visual equipment: Do you need a microphone? Video cameras? Can someone set up and test the equipment before you start?

To build a safe as well as comfortable environment, a good facilitator has a few more points to consider. How do you protect folks who are worried their ideas will be attacked or mocked? How do you hold back the big talkers who tend to dominate while still making them feel good about their participation? Much of the answer lies in the Ground Rules.

## GROUND RULES

Most meetings have some kind of operating rules. Some groups use Robert's Rules of Order (parliamentary procedure) to run their meetings while others have rules they've adopted over time. When you want the participation to flow and for folks to really feel invested in following the rules, the best way to go is to have the group develop them as one of the first steps in the process. This builds a sense of power in the participants ("Hey, she isn't telling us how to act. It's up to us to figure out what we think is important!") and a much greater sense of investment in following the rules. Common ground rules are:

- One person speaks at a time

- Raise your hand if you have something to say
- Listen to what other people are saying
- No mocking or attacking other people's ideas
- Be on time coming back from breaks (if it's a long meeting)
- Respect each other

A process to develop ground rules is:

- Begin by telling folks that you want to set up some ground rules that everyone will follow as we go through our meeting. Put a blank sheet of newsprint on the wall with the heading "Ground Rules."
- Ask for any suggestions from the group. If no one says anything, start by putting one up yourself. That usually starts people off.
- Write any suggestions up on the newsprint. It's usually most effective to "check-in" with the whole group before you write up an idea ("Sue suggested raising our hands if we have something to say. Is that O.K. with everyone?") Once you have gotten 5 or 6 good rules up, check to see if anyone else has other suggestions.
- When you are finished, ask the group if they agree with these Ground Rules and are willing to follow them. Make sure you get folks to actually say "Yes" out loud. It makes a difference!

## FACILITATING A MEETING OR PLANNING SESSION

As we've already said, the facilitator is responsible for providing a "safe" climate and working atmosphere for the meeting. But you're probably wondering, "What do I actually do *during* the meeting to guide the process along?" Here are the basic steps that can be your facilitator's guide:

### START THE MEETING ON TIME

Few of us start our meetings on time. The result? Those who come on time feel cheated that they rushed to get there! Start no more than five minutes late, ten at the maximum and thank everyone who came on time. When latecomers straggle in, don't stop your process to acknowledge them. Wait until after a break or another appropriate time to have them introduce themselves.

### WELCOME EVERYONE

Make a point to welcome everyone who comes. Don't complain about the size of a group if the turnout is small! Nothing will turn the folks off who *did* come out faster. Thank all of those who are there for coming and analyze the turnout attendance later. Go with who you have.

### MAKE INTRODUCTIONS

There are lots of ways for people to introduce themselves to each other that are better than just going around the room. The kinds of introductions you do should depend on what kind of meeting you are having, the number of people, the overall goals of the meeting, and what kind of information it would be useful to know. Some key questions you can ask members to include in their introductions are:

- How did you first get involved with our organization? (if most people are already involved, but the participants don't know each other well)

- What do you want to know about our organization? (if the meeting is set to introduce your organization to another organization)
- What makes you most angry about this problem? (if the meeting is called to focus on a particular problem)

Sometimes, we combine introductions with something called an "ice breaker." Ice breakers can:

- Break down feelings of unfamiliarity and shyness
- Help people shift roles--from their "work" selves to their "more human" selves
- Build a sense of being part of a team
- Create networking opportunities
- Help share participants' skills and experiences

Some ways to do introductions and icebreakers are:

- In pairs, have people turn to the person next to them and share their name, organization and three other facts about themselves that others might not know. Then, have each pair introduce **each other** to the group. This helps to get strangers acquainted and for people to feel safe--they already know at least one other person, and didn't have to share information directly in front of a big group at the beginning of the meeting.
- Form small groups and have each of them work on a puzzle. Have them introduce themselves to their group before they get to work. This helps to build a sense of team work.
- In a large group, have everyone write down two true statements about themselves and one false one. Then, every person reads their statements and the whole group has to guess which one is false. This helps folks get acquainted and relaxed.
- Give each participant a survey and have the participants interview each other to find the answers. Make the questions about skills, experience, opinions on the issue you'll be working on, etc. When everyone is finished, have folks share the answers they got.

When doing introductions and icebreakers, it's important to remember:

- Every participant needs to take part in the activity. The only exception may be latecomers who arrive after the introductions are completed. At the first possible moment, ask the latecomers to say their name and any other information you feel they need to share in order for everyone to feel comfortable and equal.
- Be sensitive to the culture, age, gender and literacy levels of participants and any other factors when deciding how to do introductions. For example, an activity that requires physical contact or reading a lengthy instruction sheet may be inappropriate for your group. Also, keep in mind what you want to accomplish with the activity. Don't make a decision to do something only because it seems like fun.
- It is important to make everyone feel welcome and listened to at the beginning of the meeting. Otherwise, participants may feel uncomfortable and unappreciated and won't participate well later on. Also, if you don't get some basic information about who is there, you may miss some golden opportunities. For example, the editor of the regional newspaper may be in the room; but if you don't know, you'll miss the opportunity for a potential interview or special coverage.
- And don't forget to introduce yourself. You want to make sure that you establish some credibility to be facilitating the meeting and that folks know a bit about you. Credibility doesn't mean you have a college degree or 15 years of facilitation experience. It just means that you share some of your background so folks know why you are doing the facilitation and what has led you to be speaking up.

## REVIEW THE AGENDA, OBJECTIVES AND GROUND RULES FOR THE MEETING

Go over what's going to happen in the meeting. Check with the group to make sure they agree with and like the agenda. You never know if someone will want to comment and suggest something a little different. This builds a sense of ownership of the meeting and lets people know early on that you're there to facilitate *their* process and *their* meeting, not your own agenda.

The same is true for the outcomes of the meeting. You'll want to go over these with folks as well to get their input and check that these are the desired outcomes they're looking for. This is also where the ground rules that we covered earlier come in.

## ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

This is one of your main jobs as a facilitator. It's up to you to get those who need to listen to listen and those who ought to speak. Encourage people to share their experiences and ideas and urge those with relevant background information share it at appropriate times.

## STICK TO THE AGENDA

Groups have a tendency to wander far from the original agenda, sometimes without knowing it. When you hear the discussion wandering off, bring it to the group's attention. You can say "That's an interesting issue, but perhaps we should get back to the original discussion."

## AVOID DETAILED DECISION-MAKING

Sometimes, it's easier for groups to discuss the color of napkins than the real issues they are facing. Help the group not to get immersed in details. Suggest instead, "Perhaps the committee could resolve the matter." Do you really want to be involved in that level of detail?

## SEEK COMMITMENTS

Getting commitments for future involvement is often a meeting goal. You want leaders to commit to certain tasks, people to volunteer to help on a campaign, or organizations to support your group. Make sure adequate time is allocated for seeking commitment. For small meetings, write people's names down on newsprint next to the tasks they agreed to undertake.

One important rule of thumb is that no one should leave a meeting without something to do. Don't ever close a meeting by saying "We'll get back to you to confirm how you might like to get involved." Seize the moment! Sign them up!

## BRING CLOSURE TO EACH ITEM

Many groups will discuss things ten times longer than they need to unless a facilitator helps them to recognize they're basically in agreement. Summarize a consensus position, or ask someone in the group to summarize the points of agreement, and then move forward. If one or two people disagree, state the situation as clearly as you can: "Tom and Levonia seem to have other feelings on this matter, but everyone else seems to go in this direction. Perhaps we can decide to go in the direction that most of the group wants,

and maybe Tom and Levonia can get back to us on other ways to accommodate their concerns." You may even suggest taking a break so Tom and Levonia can caucus to come up with some options.

Some groups feel strongly about reaching consensus on issues before moving ahead. If your group is one of them, be sure to read a good manual or book on consensus decision making. Many groups, however, find that voting is a fine way to make decisions. A good rule of thumb is that a vote must pass by a two-thirds majority for it to be a valid decision. For most groups to work well, they should seek consensus where possible, but take votes when needed in order to move the process forward.

## **RESPECT EVERYONE'S RIGHTS**

The facilitator protects the shy and quiet folks in a meeting and encourages them to speak out. There is also the important job of keeping domineering people from monopolizing the meeting or ridiculing the ideas of others.

Sometimes, people dominate a discussion because they are really passionate about an issue and have lots of things to say. One way to channel their interest is to suggest that they consider serving on a committee or task force on that issue. Other people, however, talk to hear themselves talk. If someone like that shows up at your meeting, look further ahead in this chapter for some tips on dealing with "disrupters."

## **BE FLEXIBLE**

Sometimes issues will arise in the meeting that are so important, they will take much more time than you thought. Sometimes, nobody will have thought of them at all. You may run over time or have to alter your agenda to discuss them. Be sure to check with group about whether this is O.K. before going ahead with the revised agenda. If necessary, ask for a five-minute break to confer with key leaders or participants on how to handle the issue and how to restructure the agenda. Be prepared to recommend an alternate agenda, dropping some items if necessary.

## **SUMMARIZE THE MEETING RESULTS AND NEEDED FOLLOW-UPS**

Before ending the meeting, summarize the key decisions that were made and what else happened. Be sure also to summarize the follow-up actions that were agreed to and need to take place. Remind folks how much good work was done and how effective the meeting hopefully was. Refer back to the objectives or outcomes to show how much you accomplished.

## **THANK THE PARTICIPANTS**

Take a minute to thank people who prepared things for the meeting, set up the room, brought refreshments, or did any work towards making the meeting happen. Thank all of the participants for their input and energy and for making the meeting a success.

## **CLOSE THE MEETING**

People appreciate nothing more than a meeting that ends on time! It's usually a good idea to have some "closure" in a meeting, especially if it was long, if there were any sticky situations that caused tension, or if folks worked especially hard to come to decisions or make plans.



A nice way to close a meeting is to go around the room and have people say one word that describes how they are feeling now that all of this work has been done. You'll usually get answers from "exhausted" to "energized!" If it's been a good meeting, even the "exhausted" ones will stick around before leaving.

## **FACILITATOR SKILLS AND TIPS**

Here are a few more points to remember that will help to maximize your role as a facilitator:

### **DON'T MEMORIZE A SCRIPT**

Even with a well-prepared agenda and key points you must make, you need to be flexible and natural. If people sense that you are reading memorized lines, they will feel like they are being talked down to, and won't respond freely.

### **WATCH THE GROUP'S BODY LANGUAGE**

Are people shifting in their seats? Are they bored? Tired? Looking confused? If folks seem restless or in a haze, you may need to take a break, or speed up or slow down the pace of the meeting. And if you see confused looks on too many faces, you may need to stop and check in with the group, to make sure that everyone knows where you are in the agenda and that the group is with you.

### **ALWAYS CHECK BACK WITH THE GROUP**

Be careful about deciding where the meeting should go. Check back after each major part of the process to see if there are questions and that everyone understands and agrees with decisions that were made.

### **SUMMARIZE AND PAUSE**

When you finish a point or a part of the meeting process, sum up what was done and decided, and pause for questions and comments before moving on. Learn to "feel out" how long to pause -- too short, and people don't really have time to ask questions; too long, and folks will start to get uncomfortable from the silence.

### **BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR**

Take a break to calm down if you feel nervous or are losing control. Watch that you're not repeating yourself, saying "ah" between each word, or speaking too fast. Watch your voice and physical manner. (Are you standing too close to folks so they feel intimidated, making eye contact so people feel engaged?) How you act makes an impact on how participants feel.

### **OCCUPY YOUR HANDS**

Hold onto a marker, chalk, or the back of a chair. Don't play with the change in your pocket!

## WATCH YOUR SPEECH

Be careful you are not offending or alienating anyone in the group. Use swear words at your own risk!

## USE BODY LANGUAGE OF OUR OWN

Using body language to control the dynamics in the room can be a great tool. Moving up close to a shy, quiet participant and asking them to speak may make them feel more willing, because they can look at you instead of the big group and feel less intimidated. Also, walking around engages people in the process. Don't just stand in front of the room for the entire meeting.

## DON'T TALK TO THE NEWSPRINT, BLACKBOARD OR WALLS--THEY CAN'T TALK BACK!

Always wait until you have stopped writing and are facing the group to talk.

## DEALING WITH DISRUPTERS: PREVENTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

Along with these tips on facilitation, there are some things you can do both to prevent disruption before it occurs to stop it when it's happening in the meeting. The most common kinds of disrupters are people who try to dominate, keep going off the agenda, have side conversations with the person sitting next to them, or folks who think they are right and ridicule and attack other's ideas.

**Preventions.** Try using these "Preventions" when you set up your meeting to try to rule out disruption:

**Get agreement on the agenda, ground rules and outcomes.** In other words, agree on the process. These process agreements create a sense of shared accountability and ownership of the meeting, joint responsibility for how the meeting is run, and group investment in whether the outcomes and goals are achieved.

**Listen carefully.** Don't just pretend to listen to what someone in the meeting is saying. People can tell. Listen closely to understand a point someone is making. And check back if you are summarizing, always asking the person if you understood their idea correctly.

**Show respect for experience.** We can't say it enough. Encourage folks to share strategies, stories from the field, and lessons they've learned. Value the experience and wisdom in the room.

**Find out the group's expectations.** Make sure that you uncover at the start what participants think they are meeting for. When you find out, be clear about what will and won't be covered in this meeting. Make plans for how to cover issues that won't be dealt with: Write them down on newsprint and agree to deal with them at the end of the meeting, or have the group agree on a follow-up meeting to cover unfinished issues.

There are lots of ways to find out what the group's expectations of the meeting are: Try asking everyone to finish this sentence: "I want to leave here today knowing...." You don't want people sitting through the meeting feeling angry that they're in the wrong place and no one bothered to ask them what they wanted to achieve here. These folks may act out their frustration during the meeting and become your biggest disrupters.

**Stay in your facilitator role.** You cannot be an effective facilitator and a participant at the same time. When you cross the line, you risk alienating participants, causing resentment, and losing control of the meeting. Offer strategies, resources, and ideas for the group to work with, but **not** opinions.

**Don't be defensive.** If you are attacked or criticized, take a "mental step" backwards before responding. Once you become defensive, you risk losing the group's respect and trust, and might cause folks to feel they can't be honest with you.

**"Buy-in" power players.** These folks can turn your meeting into a nightmare if they don't feel that their influence and role are acknowledged and respected. If possible, give them acknowledgment up front at the start of the meeting. Try giving them roles to play during the meeting such as a "sounding board" for you at breaks, to check in with about how the meeting is going.

## INTERVENTIONS. TRY USING THESE "INTERVENTIONS" WHEN DISRUPTION IS HAPPENING DURING THE MEETING:

- **Have the group decide.** If someone is dominating the meeting, refuses to stick to the agenda, keeps bringing up the same point again and again, or challenges how you are handling the meeting:
  - First try to remind them about the agreed-on agenda. If that doesn't work, throw it back to the group and ask them how they feel about that person's participation. Let the group support you.
- **Use the agenda and ground rules.** If someone keeps going off the agenda, has side conversations through the whole meeting, verbally attacks others:
  - Go back to that agenda and those ground rules and remind folks of the agreements made at the beginning of the meeting.
- **Be honest: Say what's going on.** If someone is trying to intimidate you, if you feel upset or undermined, if you need to pull the group behind you:
  - It's better to say what's going on than try to cover it up. Everyone will be aware of the dynamic in the room. The group will get behind you if you are honest and up -front about the situation.
- **Use humor.** If there is a lot of tension in the room, if you have people at the meeting who didn't want to be there, if folks are scared/shy about participating, if you are an outsider:
  - Try a humorous comment or a joke. If it's self-deprecating, so much the better. Humor almost always lightens the mood. It's one of the best tension-relievers we have.
- **Accept or legitimize the point or deal.** If there is someone who keeps expressing doubts about the group's ability to accomplish anything, is bitter and puts down others' suggestions, keeps bringing up the same point over and over, seems to have power issues:
  - **Try one or more of these approaches:** Show that you understand their issue by making it clear that you hear how important it is to them. Legitimize the issue by saying, "It's a very important point and one I'm sure we all feel is critical." Make a bargain to deal with their issue for a short period of time ("O.K., let's deal with your issue for 5 minutes and then we ought to move on.") If that doesn't work, agree to defer the issue to the end of the meeting, or set up a committee to explore it further.
- **Use body language.** If side conversations keep occurring, if quiet people need to participate, if attention needs to be re-focused:
  - Use body language. Move closer to conversers, or to the quiet ones. Make eye contact with them to get their attention and convey your intent.
- **Take a break.** If less confrontational tactics haven't worked, someone keeps verbally attacking others, shuffling papers, cutting others off:

- In case you've tried all of the above suggestions and nothing has worked, it's time to take a break, invite the disruptive person outside the room and politely but firmly state your feelings about how disruptive their behavior is to the group. Make it clear that the disruption needs to end. But also try to find out what's going on, and see if there are other ways to address that person's concerns.
- **Confront in the room** If all else has failed, if you're sure it won't create backlash, if the group will support you, and if you've tried everything else:
  - Confront the disruptive person politely but very firmly in the room. Tell the person very explicitly that the disruption needs to stop now. Use body language to encourage other group members to support you. This is absolutely the last resort when action must be taken and no alternatives remain!

### Contributor

Marya Axner

### Online Resources

**Facilitating Political Discussions** from the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University is designed to assist experienced facilitators in training others to facilitate politically charged conversations. The materials are broken down into "modules" and facilitation trainers can use some or all of them to suit their needs.

### Print Resources

Auvine, B., Dinsmore, B., Extrom, M., Poole, S., & Shanklin, M. (1978). *A manual for group facilitators*. Madison, WI: The Center for Conflict Resolution.

Bobo, K., Kendall, J., & Max, S., (1991). *A manual for activists in the 1990s*. Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press.

Nelson-Jones, R. (1992). *Group leadership: A training approach*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Schwarz, R. (1994). *The skilled facilitator: Practical wisdom for developing effective groups*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.