

Facilitator Tips

Facilitating a conversation with a diverse group takes practice. The tips offered here will help you prepare ahead and anticipate challenges in your role as a facilitator.

1. Understand your role

The facilitator's job is to serve the group and help people have a productive conversation. You can do that by setting a relaxed and welcoming tone, asking open-ended follow up questions, and making sure everyone has a chance to participate. Don't share your personal opinions, push an agenda or allow a few people to dominate the conversation.

2. Plan for introductions

Small Groups –If you have a group of 15 people or less asking each participant to briefly share their names, what organization they are representing and perhaps their role within the organization is a good way for everyone to get to know who's in the room. This process usually takes about 5 minutes.

Large Groups –For larger groups of 16 or more you may want to divide attendees evenly into small groups and have participants introduce themselves among fewer people. This is a good way to keep time down and allows for sharing names, organizations and perhaps more detailed information about role, why they decided to attend the event, etc. to be a bit more personal. This process can take about 5 –10 minutes.

3. Help the group establish ground rules

Establishing ground round rules at the beginning helps people have an honest, respectful, productive conversation. Possible ground rules include:

- Each person gets a chance to talk.
- Share "air time."
- Speak for yourself. Everyone is an expert on his or her own life experience.
- It's OK to disagree, but don't make it personal.
- If you feel offended, say so and say why.
- Honour confidentiality. Some of what we talk about will be very personal. We will not tell these stories to other people, unless we all say it is OK.
- Help the facilitator keep things on track.

4. Monitor the group process

Keep track of who has spoken and who hasn't. Pay attention to how engaged participants seem. If people seem quiet or disinterested, consider splitting up into pairs or groups of three for part of the dialogue. If the discussion is going well, you won't need to say much.

Hint: Don't be afraid of a little silence; it will sometimes take a while for participants to offer an answer to a question you pose. When deciding whether to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Facilitators are frequently trapped into taking too much responsibility for the group which can undermine the group experience. Encourage the group to take responsibility for the quality of their process.

5. Ask follow up questions

Sometimes it helps to ask follow-up questions to help participants clarify a point or deepen the conversation. Here are some useful questions.

What seems to be the key point or idea here?

Could you help us understand the reasons behind your
opinion? How might others see this issue?

6. Anticipate typical challenges

The quiet or shy participant

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact: it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues to see if they want to speak. You can be more direct and ask them for their opinion: "Laurie, what do you think?"

The dominator

Possible responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to help ensure one or more participants does not dominate the discussion. Once it becomes clear that a person is dominating, you must intervene and set limits. Start by reminding the group (and the individual) that you want to hear from all participants. Next, you might ask the individual to wait until everyone else has had a chance to give their opinion on the question. If the pattern continues you may need to be more direct: "Joe, please finish your point because I feel we are wandering a bit from our agreed upon agenda and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Lack of focus/wandering off track

Possible responses: Responding to this can be a hard call; After all, the discussion belongs to the group members. Yet, it is the facilitator's job to maintain group focus. You may wish to give some leeway to participants who want to explore closely-related topics. However, if only a few participants are carrying the discussion in a new direction, the others are likely to feel frustrated, resentful, and bored. The facilitator should try to refocus the discussion, perhaps by asking, "How does your point relate to the ____?" or stating, "That's an interesting point, but I'd like for us to return to the initial question."

Lack of interest/excitement

Possible Responses: When people help craft the agenda, they are more likely to engage in the discussion. However, lack of interest/excitement can happen when the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond after posing the questions. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so that everyone has a chance to respond. Another possible reason for the apparent lack of excitement in the discussion may be that the group seems to be in agreement. In this case the facilitator might check this assumption and then gain agreement for moving on to the next question or topic on the agenda.

Conflict/Tension

Possible Responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is fine and useful. You must interrupt personal attacks, name calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. Remind group/the individual that it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if the group members are bought into the ground rules, they will support you.

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