

## **The Basics**

Effective Facilitation provides process leadership so that a group has the opportunity learn together and to work on the issues they need to address. In addition to encouraging the exchange of information and creating learning experiences, facilitators assist participants as they sort through difficult choices and discuss the implications and decisions that arise from developing deeper levels of understanding. Effective facilitators provide a neutral and factual context for participants, guide and maintain the process, and work with the group to figure out how to help them achieve their objectives.

## **Session Structure and Process**

Meeting objectives drive the exact structure used, however many facilitated sessions follow a basic formula that can be customized based on the group and the subject matter.

### **Pre-session Planning**

- To the extent possible, involve participants in planning the agenda. Get ideas before the meeting and check in with the group at the start of the meeting to see if anything is missing.
- Imagine several scenarios for how the conversation might play out, and how you will respond.
- Strategize about ways to tap the resources within the group and use the knowledge, skills, and experiences of participants
- Design collaborative activities and strive to support a collegial environment

### **Session Opening**

Provide some common context for the group by answering these questions: Why is the meeting being held? What type of session will it be? What is the essence of the material to be covered? Letting participants know what to expect helps set the stage for a successful discussion by ensuring that everyone has the same basic understanding of the purpose and agenda. Stimulate interest with a noteworthy event, a personal experience, a quotation or an example.

### **Introductions/Warm-up**

Even if the group is already acquainted, have some form a warm-up to get people participating early on. A facilitator may request that participants exchange information in small groups or pairs, or use a round-robin of introductions, or brainstorm what the group hopes to achieve.

### **Explain the process of working together**

A brief discussion of the expectations for the group, the facilitator, and what each can expect from one another helps to ground the group in a shared sense of how to work together. Some groups use formal ground rules, others set broad expectations and address more specific issues later in the meeting, as needed.

### **Use active learning tools**

Experiential activities, such as opportunities to practice applying concepts, interaction with special guests, hands-on demonstrations, role plays, small group discussions, etc. all stimulate the learner to participate actively, rather than listening passively to a presentation. Adult learning research shows that adults prefer to learn by validating information based on experiences rather than simply accept concepts at face value. It takes more preparation to have a session with good experiential learning exercises, but if you are interested in having participants develop a deep understanding of the subject, it is worth the effort.

### **Focus the discussion**

Narrow the focus of the conversation to a topic that can realistically be covered in the time available. Chunk down big topics and deal with portions at a time. Ask for the group to use self-discipline to stay on track.

### **Consider Options**

Respectfully request participants consider new alternatives. Encourage group members to share new ideas, suggestions and anecdotes to help stimulate thinking about new ways to address the issues.

### **Apply the information to the real world**

Consider using a case study or testing the material on an actual issue brought forward by the group to help participants understand how to put into practice the knowledge they have gained.

### **Closing**

Consider how the group can synthesize the information session. Bring closure to the session by asking for feedback, drawing conclusions, identifying next steps, or simply sharing information about the experience of learning.

## Stages of Group Development

Stages of group development describe the process a group goes through coming together to accomplish a goal. Some stages are active and observable while others happen more internally within the members.

<b>Group Development Stages</b>		<b>How Facilitators Assist Group Transitions</b>
<b>Forming</b> —	coming together and establishing the work environment, goals, agenda, etc.	Use warm up exercises to help group members get to know one another. Explain the stages of group development so that participants can recognize the signs of each stage.
<b>Storming</b> —	dealing with issues of power, control, and conflict	Moderate conflict and help to establish roles and responsibilities
<b>Norming</b> —	resolving conflict, establishing and internalizing ground rules	Document agreements and procedures, set standards and gain agreement
<b>Performing</b> —	working effectively together, peak performance of a group	Conduct work sessions, consider small groups, etc.
<b>Adjourning</b> —	ending the period of working together	Provide time to recognize accomplishments and celebrate. Reflect on what has occurred

## What if the Group is Not Behaving the Way I Expected Them To?

There will always be challenges to facilitation. These challenges are the reason a facilitator is so valuable to a group trying to accomplish an objective. Below are issues that may come up and tips for getting back on track.

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Intervention</b>
<b>Conflict within the group</b>	Identify the signs of conflict: tone of voice, word choice, body language. Help them solve the problem rather than imposing your solution. Insist on respect for people, even though there are opposing ideas. Use role reversal between conflicting members to facilitate their understanding. Emphasize common interests and goals.
<b>Group is off track</b>	Check in with the group to see if the new track is more valid. If so, negotiate to change the agenda. If they want to keep with the original track, offer to put the new issues in the “parking lot”
<b>One member dominates discussion</b>	“Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet” or “I’d like to ask the group what they think about Joe’s comment.”
<b>Group is restless and/or unfocused</b>	Ask: “What’s going on?” Refocus conversation—what is really at issue here? Consider a break. Check-in with a few individuals and plan changes.
<b>Interruptions</b>	“I’d like to hear the rest of what Jane was saying before we respond to it,” or “Let’s give John the chance to finish his thought before we continue”
<b>Group attacks</b>	It’s not personal! Check in with the group to see if you can explore what’s behind the comments or criticism. Look for the intention. What is really at issue?
<b>Vague or incomplete input</b>	If you don’t understand the comment, it’s likely others didn’t either. Clarify by asking: “Can you say more about that?” or “What do you mean?”
<b>Silence</b>	Silence can be a GOOD THING! Use silence as a time for reflection, encourage the group to take a few minutes to jot down their thoughts at the moment, then share ideas and suggestions.