
FACILITATION SKILLS

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“Failing to plan for a meeting is planning to fail.”

- Chris Schweitzer, CPT Reservist and Community Organizer

Meetings are an essential component in work for nonviolent social change. They are times when we share information, give each other support, and accomplish mutually agreed upon tasks. They are times of creativity, fun, and challenge.

Skills for effective facilitation of meetings are best developed through **observation** and **experience**, learning from mistakes and bad meetings as well as good ones. The following suggestions can help you reflect on your facilitating experiences.

A GOOD MEETING will exhibit some of the following qualities, all of which can be encouraged by good facilitation:

- commonly understood goals;
- a clear process for reaching those goals;
- a sense of involvement and empowerment (the participants feel that the decisions are their decisions; that they are able to do what needs doing);
- a high level of enthusiasm;
- a sense that it is a meeting of real people, not just of roles or recorded messages.

A GOOD FACILITATOR helps participants be aware that they are in charge, that it is their business that is being conducted, and that each person has contributions to make to the group.

A Facilitator DOES:

- help the members of the group decide what they want to accomplish in a meeting and help them carry it out.
- take responsibility to remind the group of its task, test for consensus, and in general make sure that group "task" and "maintenance" functions are being filled (see "Leadership and Group Dynamics").
- initiate process suggestions which the group may accept or reject.

A Facilitator Does NOT:

- direct the group without its consent
- make decisions for the group
- take on functions which are the responsibility of the group as a whole

FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

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There are many techniques to assist the facilitator in managing the agenda and group dynamics in a meeting. The following are just a few of the more common and frequently used. Be creative and adaptive. Different situations require different techniques. With experience will come an understanding of how they affect group dynamics and when is the best time to use them.

EQUALIZING PARTICIPATION:

The facilitator is responsible for the fair distribution of attention during meetings. Facilitators call the attention of the group to one speaker at a time. The **grammar school method** is the most common technique for choosing the next speaker – the facilitator recognized each person in the order in which hands are raised. Often, inequities occur because the attention is dominated by an individual or class of individuals, either due to socialized behavioral problems (racism, sexism, etc.) or internal dynamics (experience, seniority, fear, shyness, disrespect, ignorance of the process, etc.). Inequities can be corrected in many creative ways. For example, if men are speaking more often than women, the facilitator can suggest a **pause after each speaker**, the women counting to five before speaking, the men counting to ten. In controversial situations, the facilitator can request that a **limited number of people speak** (three speakers speak for the proposal and three speak against it). If the group would like to avoid having the facilitator select who speaks next, the group can self-select by asking the last speaker to pass an object, a talking stick, to the next.

LISTING:

To help the discussion flow more smoothly, those who want to speak can silently signal the facilitator, who would add the person's name to a list of those wishing to speak, and call on them in that order.

STACKING:

If many people want to speak at the same time, it is useful to ask all those who would like to speak to raise their hands. Have them count off, and then have them speak in that order. At the end of the stack, the facilitator might call for another stack or try another technique.

PACING:

The pace of flow of the meeting is the responsibility of the facilitator. If the atmosphere starts to become tense, choose techniques which encourage balance and cooperation. If the meeting is going slowly and people are becoming restless, suggest a stretch, or rearrange the agenda.

SILENCE:

If the pace is too fast, if energies and tensions are high, if people are speaking out of turn or interrupting one another, it is appropriate for anyone to suggest a moment of silence to calm and refocus energy.

CHECKING THE PROCESS:

If the flow of the meeting is breaking down or if one person or small groups seems to be dominating, anyone can call into question the technique being used and suggest an alternative.

TAKING A BREAK:

In the heat of discussion, people are usually resistant to interrupting the flow to take a break. However, a wise facilitator knows that, more often than not, a five minute break will save a frustrating half hour of circular discussion and fruitless debate.

SUMMARIZING:

The facilitator might choose to focus what has been said by summarizing. The summary might be made by the facilitator, the notetaker, or anyone else as appropriate (i.e. a special "listening team" chosen ahead of time). This preempts a common problem in which the discussion becomes circular and speakers repeat each other.

REFORMULATING THE PROPOSAL:

After a long discussion, it sometimes happens that the proposal becomes modified without any formal decision. The facilitator needs to recognize this and take time to reformulate the proposal with the new information, modifications or deletions. Then the proposal is presented to the group so that everyone can be clear about what is being considered.

Excerpted and adapted from "On Conflict & Consensus: a Handbook on Formal Consensus decisionmaking", Food Not Bombs Publishing, 1987.

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TIPS ON AGENDA FORMATION

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1. Select a ***process to gather the group***. Are Introductions necessary? A quick round of check-ins or some directed sharing can bring everybody into the circle. Singing or a brief game might be appropriate.
2. Make tentative judgments about ***priorities for the agenda***. What could be held over to the next meeting? How should the meeting end? When should difficult items be discussed? If possible create a balance of long and short items. Deal with difficult items after the group is warmed up but before it is tired.
3. ***Estimate the time*** needed for each item and put it on the agenda chart. This will give participants an idea of the relative importance of each item; help participants tailor their participation to the time available; allow realistic decisions about which items to include and when to end the meeting; and give a sense of progress to the meeting.
4. Think about what ***breaks*** or "Attention Expanders" (light & livelies) might be needed.
5. Plan an ***evaluation*** of the meeting near the end.
6. Establish date, time and place for ***next meeting***.

PREPARATION FOR MEETINGS

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1. Be aware of the **physical arrangements** – e.g., temperature, arrangement and comfort of chairs, ability to hear.
2. Make sure that everyone is **informed** about the meeting time and place and has pre-meeting materials if necessary.
3. Think about how **late-comers** can be up-dated so the meeting can continue uninterrupted. Should someone take them aside? Who? Can the agenda be clear enough to inform them as to what has happened?
4. Arrange in advance for someone to **present each agenda item**, preferably the person who submitted the item. Be prepared to give background information as to why the item is on the agenda, if necessary.
5. If an item is expected to be complicated or produce tension, consider ahead of time **processes for its discussion**. Breaking the item into several parts, which can be discussed one at a time, may be helpful.
6. **Gather necessary materials** such as written presentations, paper, pencils, markers, newsprint, and chairs.
7. Have an **alternate ready to facilitate** in case of an emergency, or if the facilitator becomes tired or needs to participate actively in the discussion.
8. For most meetings it will be necessary to **collect agenda items** and plan a tentative agenda beforehand. Write a proposed agenda on a large wall chart or chalkboard that will be visible to everyone, or distribute individual copies to participants. This will be helpful both during the meeting and in democratizing the process of agenda formation.

FACILITATION: GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

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Bring out Opinions:

1. encourage the expression of various viewpoints – the more important the decision, the more important it is to have all pertinent information (fact, feelings, and opinions).
2. call attention to strong disagreements. When handled forthrightly, differences of opinion yield creative solutions.
3. ask people to speak for themselves and to be specific. Don't allow statements like, "Some people seem to feel..." or "What s/he is trying to say is..."
4. help to make it safe for people to share the feeling behind their opinions.

Help Everyone Participate:

1. don't let two or three people monopolize the discussion. Ask for comments from those who have not yet spoken.
2. some people might need to be asked to speak more briefly or less frequently. Sometimes it is appropriate for the group to agree on a 1 or 2 minute time limit for each person's contributions to a discussion. If many people want to speak at once, make a list and call on each person to take their turn in order.
3. when there is need for a lot of discussion or clarification involving everyone, small groups may be used to increase participation and to bring back proposals for further discussion and decision.

Keep the Role of Facilitator Neutral:

1. if you have personal opinions to offer, do so outside of your role as facilitator. For example say, "Stepping out of my role as facilitator, I think..."
2. if you find yourself drawn into the discussion in support of a particular position, it would be preferable to step aside as a facilitator until the next agenda item. If you have not already planned for an alternate, ask for a volunteer to facilitate so you may participate.

Keep Discussion Relevant:

1. point out to the group when discussion is drifting off the topic or becoming trivial.
2. cut off discussion when repetition occurs or when people become weary.
3. summarize main points, relate discussion to group's main goals, etc.

Test for Agreements:

1. listen carefully for agreements and hesitations.
2. test for agreement as soon as a decision seems to be emerging. Periodic testing will help clarify disagreements, making discussion more fruitful.
3. state the tentative agreement in question form, and be specific: "Do we all agree that we'll meet on Tuesday evenings for the next two months and that a facilitator will be selected at each meeting for the next one?" rather than: "Do we all agree to do it the way it was just suggested?" If you are not clear how to phrase the decision, ask for help.
4. Insist on a response from the group. Don't take silence for consent. Participants need to be conscious of making an agreement or decision together.
5. sometimes stating the perceived agreement in the negative helps to clarify group feeling: "Is there anyone who does *not* agree that...?" This method is especially useful when the group is under time pressure or has a tendency for nit-picking. It is important for members to be supportive of group decisions. If you have doubts about their commitment, ask them.

Keep Track of Time:

1. remind the group when time is up.
2. make sure the timekeeper is alert.
3. renegotiate agenda if more time is needed.

Give 'Em a Break:

1. be conscientious about scheduling breaks and respect the groups need for breaks.
2. suggest an unscheduled break if people are fidgeting, falling asleep, or too depressed to function.
3. a group that is full of energy and charging ahead may want to postpone a scheduled break.

Encourage Individuals to pursue on their own projects or ideas in which they have strong interest but the group does not.

FACILITATING MEETINGS – BEGINNING TO END

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- ✓ **Introductory activity:** can be started while waiting for latecomers.
- ✓ **Agenda review and approval:**
 - ▶ show the group the agenda and give an idea of what is to be covered and how. You may need to explain why each item has been included and how it fits the group's needs. Go through the whole agenda before asking for comments.
 - ▶ ask for approval, corrections or additions. If there are several additions or changes, take them all down before trying to make a decision about ordering them.
 - ▶ determine the ending time for the meeting if not already fixed.
- ✓ **Assign roles:**
 - ▶ **Notetaker:** notes should include date, attendance, agenda, brief notes (highlights, statistics) on items such as reports or discussions and verbatim notes on items such as proposals (with revisions), decisions, announcements, next meeting time & place, evaluation comments.
 - ▶ **Timekeeper:** assists the facilitator in keeping within the time limits set on agenda items; keeps the group aware of the status of time remaining for the item; good to give ample warning towards the end of the time limit so the group can bring things to a close.
 - ▶ **Process Observer:** pays attention to the overall mood or tone of the meeting; provides feedback to the group regarding such things as: *balance of participation* (gender, age, dominating, withdrawing); *use of inclusive language*; *group spirit* (cooperation, tension, general vibes or dynamics); *dealing with conflict* (avoidance, passive-aggressive), etc.
- ✓ Use short agenda items, fun items, announcements, and breaks throughout the agenda to **provide rest and relief** from more emotionally taxing items.
- ✓ **Move the group through the agenda item by item.** Applause, a few deep breaths, mutual congratulations, and dramatically crossing the item off the agenda chart are useful tension relievers and indicators of accomplishment between items.
- ✓ **Summarize discussions, restate decisions made, review responsibilities for tasks to be done.** This should be done at the end of the meeting but can also be done following particularly long or difficult items.
- ✓ **Before the end of the meeting** select a facilitator, subject matter and process if appropriate, and time and place for the next meeting. This should be done before participants begin to leave.
- ✓ **Evaluate the meeting.** Start with the good or positive aspects, then things that were not good. Insist on getting concrete suggestions for improvement of negative aspects. Try not to end on a negative note. Don't get caught up in further discussion of agenda items. Good to ask process observer for observations that haven't yet been shared.
- ✓ Try to **end the meeting with a feeling of togetherness** – a song, a prayer, some silence, an affirmation circle – anything that affirms the group and brings a sense of closure to the time together.
- ✓ **End the meeting on time!** If the agenda is taking longer than anticipated, renegotiate it. Get group agreement that the time be extended or items be held for the next meeting.