

Facilitation Guide

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

What is a Meeting Facilitator?

The “facilitator” is a guide or “discussion leader” for the group. The process of facilitation is a way of providing leadership without taking the reins.

“One who contributes structure and process to interactions so groups are able to function effectively and make high-quality decisions. A helper and enabler whose goal is to support others as they achieve exceptional performance.” - Ingrid Bens

What Does a Meeting Facilitator Focus On?

A facilitative leader focuses on both content and process. They are the “content and process leader.”

Content = What tasks, subjects, problems, issues are being addressed

Process = How things are discussed

A good facilitator must manage and do the following while conducting meetings:

- Listen actively
- Ask questions
- Paraphrase
- Synthesize ideas
- Capture ideas
- Stay on track
- Give and receive feedback
- Test assumptions
- Summarize periodically

Facilitation Core Practices

Listen actively—this is listening to understand more than judge. It also means using attentive body language and looking participants in the eye while they’re speaking. Eye contact can also be used to acknowledge points and prompt quiet people to take part.

Ask questions—this is the most important tool facilitators possess. Questions can be

used to test assumptions, invite participation, gather information and probe for hidden points. Effective questioning encourages people to delve past symptoms in order to uncover root causes.

Paraphrase—facilitators paraphrase continuously during discussions. Paraphrasing involves repeating what people say to make sure they know they're being heard, to let others hear their points a second time and to clarify key ideas.

Synthesize ideas—ping-pong ideas around the group during any discussion that requires the collective opinion of the members. When people comment and build on each other's ideas, it builds consensus and commitment.

Capture ideas where all can see; use the flip chart, white board, or projected text—this is another main tool and should be used constantly to record emerging ideas as well as final decisions. Anyone can do this, and the notes taken need to be brief and concise. Seeing the group work displayed keeps the discussion from cycling back, directs participants to summarize a point, serves as stimulation for others to grow ideas, as well as documenting the thought process.

Stay on track—set time guidelines for each discussion. Ask a group member to act as timekeeper. Point out digressions whenever discussion veers off topic. Park all off-topic items to be dealt with later, on a separate parking lot sheet posted in clear sight.

Give and receive feedback—facilitators periodically “hold up a mirror” to help the group see itself so it can assess problems with the proceedings and make corrections. They also periodically ask for feedback about how things are going with the pace, the process and the content.

Test assumptions—facilitators always strive to bring the assumptions people are operating under out into the open, so they can be clarified, corrected and clearly understood by everyone.

Summarize periodically—an effective facilitator can listen to a complex conversation and then offer a concise and accurate summary. Summaries can also be used to revive a discussion that has come to a halt, or to end a discussion when things need to be wrapped up. Remember that summarizing is one of the main ways to arrive at a consensus.

Starting a Facilitation

- ___ introduce yourself and give a brief, personal background
- ___ clarify the role you will be playing as the facilitator
- ___ clarify the roles to be played by any other members
- ___ go around the room and have members introduce themselves by name and current position, as well as other relevant check in questions
- ___ review any data collected from members; have key points on a flip chart paper, overheads or PowerPoint; answer questions
- ___ clarify the goal and the specific objectives of the session (see agenda)

- ___ review the approach to the meeting and invite comments; make any changes
- ___ specify time frames; appoint a time keeper; make sure there's true acceptance of the agenda and outcomes
- ___ take care of all housekeeping items
- ___ ask the group to set norms/groundrules for the session; post these
- ___ set up a parking sheet to keep track of digressions for later attention
- ___ proceed to the first item on the agenda; make sure everyone is clear about what is about to be discussed

- ___ explain the process or how you will be handling agenda items
- ___ be sure that the time frame for the first item is clear; make sure you have a time keeper

- ___ get on with the meeting

During a Facilitation

- ___ insure that all members participate
- ___ manage conflicts or differences of opinion
- ___ keep the group on topic and park off-topic items
- ___ monitor time and maintain an appropriate pace
- ___ help members adhere to their ground rules
- ___ make interventions if there are problems
- ___ maintain high energy and a positive tone
- ___ help members articulate points
- ___ keep track of ideas by making clear notes

As any meeting proceeds, it is excellent practice to periodically:

Check the purpose – periodically check to see that everyone is still clear about the focus of the conversation by asking:

“Is everyone still clear about what is being discussed?”
“Are we still discussing our topic or have we shifted focus?”

Check the process – periodically ask members if the approach being used is working by asking:

“We said we would work this issue through as a large group, rather than sub-grouping. Is this approach working or should we try something else?”

Adjusting the process throughout insures that things are working.

Check the time – ask members how the pace feels to them by asking:

“Is this session dragging or are you feeling rushed?”
“What can we do to improve the pace?”

Take the pulse of members – continuously read faces and body language to determine how people are feeling. Don’t hesitate to ask:

“How are members feeling? Is anyone feeling they’ve dropped out? How can we get our energy levels up again?”

Reading people lets you know when to stop for a break or bring lost members back into the fold.

Ending a Facilitation

- ___ help the group make clear statements about what has been decided
- ___ insure clear action plans with names, accountabilities and dates beside each step
- ___ round up items not discussed at the meeting, including those placed in the parking lot, and help the group create a plan of action for each
- ___ help the group create the agenda for their next meeting
- ___ decide on a means for follow-up, either written reports or a group report-back session
- ___ solicit personal feedback from participants
- ___ clarify your role in the follow-up process, if any

Close by thanking participants for the opportunity to facilitate.

Exit Surveys

What is it? An anonymous survey that takes the pulse of the group in order to determine how things are going.

When to use it? At the end of a meeting or at a mid-point. Whenever you want to take the pulse of the group and uncover hidden feelings.

What does it do? Provides data about the effectiveness of the interaction so that issues can be surfaced and addressed. Allows for safe venting of concerns.

How to use exit surveys?

1. Identify two to four questions. Write these on a single flip chart sheet. The following are typical examples of exit survey questions:

Please provide your response to the questions below: 1 = poor 2 = fair 3 = satisfactory 4 = good 5 = excellent				
1. Did we achieve what we needed to at today's meeting?				
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
1	2	3	4	5
2. Did everyone's ideas get heard and taken into consideration?				
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
1	2	3	4	5
3. Did we make well-thought-out and equitable decisions?				
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
1	2	3	4	5
4. Was today's meeting well structured and well run?				
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
1	2	3	4	5

2. Post the survey sheet on a wall near the exit, so group members can mark it as they exit the room. If people seem reticent, place the survey on a flip chart stand and turn it against the wall to further protect the anonymity of raters. Provide markers and ask people to provide their assessments.

3. At the start of the next session with that group, present the exit survey sheet. Use the survey feedback process to assess the data. This consists of the following format; for each question discuss:

Why did this item receive this rating?	What actions would improve this rating?

4. At the end of the discussion, review all the improvement ideas. These will fall into two categories. Some suggestions will be action steps that need to be planned. The rest of the improvement ideas will be new norms that the group is recommending to itself. The norms need to be added to the list of norms already in place for this team. Repeat the exit survey anytime there are issues with the meetings, or institute them periodically as a preventative means of keeping meetings running effectively.

What's the outcome? The exit survey acts as a “safety valve” for releasing anxieties or concerns. It channels these concerns into solutions and thus empowers the group to resolve its own issues.

Questioning Formats

When selecting questions to ask, there is a broad range of questions from which to choose. Each of these question formats achieves a slightly different outcome.

Fact-finding questions are targeted at verifiable data such as who, what, when, where and how much. Use them to gather information about the current situation.

e.g. *“What kind of computer equipment are you now using?”*
“How much training did staff receive at the start?”

Feeling-finding questions ask for subjective information that gets at the participants’ opinions, feelings, values and beliefs. They help you understand views, and they contain words like *think* or *feel*.

e.g. *“How do you feel about the effectiveness of the new equipment?”*
“Do you think the staff felt they received enough training?”

Tell-me-more questions can help you find out more about what the participants are saying. They encourage the speaker to provide more details.

e.g. *“Tell me more.”* *“Can you elaborate on that?”*
“Can you be more specific?”

Best/least questions help you understand potential opportunities in the present situation. They let you test for the outer limits of participants’ wants and needs.

e.g. *“What’s the best thing about receiving a new computer?”*
“What’s the worst thing about the new equipment?”

Third-party questions help uncover thoughts in an indirect manner. They’re designed to help people express sensitive information.

e.g. *“Some people find that computer training is too time consuming. How does that sound to you?”*
“There is some concern about overly autocratic managers in many factories. Can you relate to that concern?”

“Magic wand” questions let you explore people’s true desires. Also known as crystal ball questions, these are useful in temporarily removing obstacles from a person’s mind.

e.g. *“If time and money were no obstacle, what sort of a computer system would you design for the department?”*

Simple Facilitation Probes

Questions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who would like to begin? • What do you think about that? • Why would you suggest that? • Who else has a suggestion about that? • How else might we accomplish this? • How do you suggest we proceed? • Is that feasible? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are we headed in the right direction? • What should we do next? • Does everyone agree? • Who else should we talk with? • What are we missing? • What else should we discuss? • What will that require?
Observations	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think we addressed that earlier. • I think that you are in agreement. • We have not established when this will be done. • We are spending a lot of time on this topic. • I believe we have consensus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This seems to be very important to you. • That seems very similar to this. • You seem to be suggesting a change. • We appear to be stuck on this point. • No one has offered a solution to the problem.
Guidance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let's table that for now and revisit it later. • We'll note this on the flip chart. • We need to discuss this further. • Let's agree how to proceed. □ • Let's move on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why don't we generate a list of ideas first. • Let's identify the pros and cons of that. • We should clarify responsibilities and timing. • Let's pose that question to the team above. □ • Why don't we...

Probing Questions – to delve more deeply

The following are sample questions that are designed to delve more deeply into a problem situation:

How would you describe the current situation in this department?
How would your most important customer describe it?
How would a senior manager describe it?
How long has this been going on?
What makes it worse?...better?
To what extent are people aware of the problem?
How do people feel about the situation?
Why hasn't the problem been solved?
Who wants change to take place? Who does not?
Who contributes to the problem?
How do you contribute to the problem?
If the problem were totally resolved, what would the ideal situation look like?

On a scale of 1 to 5, how serious would you say this problem is?

1	2	3	4	5
not serious at all		somewhat serious		very serious

What are the most significant barriers to solving this problem?
What are the parameters of this initiative? (time, money, materials)
Are any solutions going to be taboo or unacceptable?

How would you rate the overall level of commitment to making changes in the past?

1	2	3	4	5
Low		Medium		High

What are some boundaries that you would suggest for this initiative?
What would be some of the best possible outcomes of this initiative?...The worst?
What are some of the things that will help this initiative to succeed?
What are the potential blocks to success?
What rules or guidelines would you like to suggest to guide group interaction?

Decision Options Chart

Option	Pros	Cons	Uses
Spontaneous Agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fast, easy • unites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • too fast • lack of discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when full discussion isn't critical • trivial issues
One Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be fast • clear accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of input • low buy-in • no synergy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when one person is the expert • individual willing to take sole responsibility
Compromise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discussion • creates a solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adversarial • win/lose • divides the group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when positions are polarized; consensus improbable
Multi-voting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • systematic • objective • participative • feels like a win 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limits dialogue • influenced choices • real priorities may not surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to sort or prioritize a long list of options
Voting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fast • high quality with dialogue • clear outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may be too fast • winners and losers • no dialogue • influenced choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trivial matter • when there are clear options • if division of group is OK
Consensus Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collaborative • systematic • participative • discussion-oriented • encourages commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • takes time • requires data and member skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • important issues • when total buy-in matters

Building Consensus

Consensus is....

- Reaching an agreement that **all team members can support – both during the meeting and once they leave.** It is an agreement that no member opposes even though it may not have been someone's first choice.
- When each team member can say, "I've had my chance to speak my mind, and I can support the decision we've reached even if it is not the decision that I might have reached alone."

Consensus is not...

- The same as a unanimous vote. A consensus decision may not have been everyone's first choice.
- The same as a majority vote. In a majority vote several people may be unwilling to support the agreement.
- All team members being totally satisfied with the agreement. Since the agreement may not have been everyone's first choice, some people may not be totally satisfied. Consensus does not mean that you have 100% agreement, but that everyone can live with and support the decision.

When you want to have consensus...

- Do not vote on issues. Voting can lead to majority decisions where some people cannot support the conclusion.
- Ensure that everyone has been heard. Ask, "Has everyone offered their opinion yet?"
- Do not equate silence with consensus. Ask, "Do you agree?" "Can you live with this?" "Can you support this?"
- When a proposal has been offered ask any dissenting voices, "Is there anything that we could add, delete, or change that would make the proposal acceptable to you?" Then check whether the rest of the group finds the proposed changes acceptable.
- Spend the additional time to work through the issue and do not accept false consensus. False consensus is when some members think, "I'll go along with it for now, but will fight it after I leave the meeting."

Degrees of Agreement

How would you describe your reaction to the proposed solution?

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strong Support	Support with Minor Reservations	Neutral	Not my Preference but Would Support	Disagree but Won't Interfere	Disagree and Can't Support
<i>"This is a good idea that I can enthusiastically support."</i>	<i>"I support this even if there might be a few small points I'd modify."</i>	<i>"I have no opinion on this but I can live with the decision."</i>	<i>"I'd prefer another option, but could support the group's decision."</i>	<i>"I disagree with this choice but won't undermine it."</i>	<i>"No. I can't support this."</i>