

Facilitating Effective Group Discussions: Tips

Courtesy of: The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

Effective facilitation of a discussion involves the recognition and employment of different perspectives and different skills to create an inclusive environment. In order to do so, it is important to consider the features of effective discussions, and conditions that promote small group interaction and engagement. Discussion is a powerful mechanism for active learning; a well-facilitated discussion allows the participant to explore new ideas while recognizing and valuing the contributions of others.

Roles of Discussion Leaders *(adapted from Handelsman et al. 2006)*

1. Create an inclusive environment

Opportunities for reflection:

- What do the participants bring to the group? (“Characteristics that may give you a unique perspective”)
- Self-awareness; awareness of others:
 - What do I bring to the group? What surprises or challenges me?
 - What behaviors am I most familiar or comfortable with?
 - What behaviors challenge me?

Dos and Don'ts:

Do:

- Allow participants to introduce themselves – you can even set up an ice breaker to have pairs of students introduce each other.
- Be clear up front about expectations and intentions amongst participants and the facilitator.
- Use inclusive language.
- Ask for clarification if unclear about a participant's intent or question.
- Treat participants with respect and consideration.
- Develop an awareness for barriers for learning (cultural; social; experiential, etc).
- Provide sufficient time and space for participants to gather their thoughts and contribute to discussions.
- Provide opportunities for participants to pair-share.

Don't:

- Use certain conventions or language that will exclude certain groups from understanding the context of the discussion, or make them feel uncomfortable.
- Assume participants all have the same expectations when the group first convenes.
- Over-generalize behavior or have stereotypical expectations of participants (tokenism).
- Use (or allow others to use) disrespectful language or tone, or disrespectful non-verbal communication.
- Convey a sense of self-importance or superiority.
- Allow only the dominant or more verbal participants to take over the conversation.
- Discourage alternate views or counter-arguments.
- Try to be someone else- be yourself.

2. Keep discussions constructive and positive

- Make the discussion functional by clarifying the goals of each session to the group.
- Establish ground rules:
 - Share personal experiences rather than make general statements about groups of people (stereotyping).
 - Ask dominant participants to allow others to speak.
 - Give all participants a voice- at the start highlight the value of a diversity of perspectives as an essential part of the process.
 - Go over constructive and destructive group behaviors at the start of the course / workshop.
 - Request that if participants challenge others' ideas, they back it up with evidence, appropriate experiences, and/or appropriate logic.
- Try to keep the group on task without rushing them.
- If the group starts to veer in the direction of negativity and/or pointless venting, ask them how they would like to address this.

- Step back when a group is functional/functioning – help participants become independent learners; take control of their learning.

3. Encouraging participants

Encouraging participation can be accomplished by:

- Writing participants' comments on the whiteboard.
- Asking follow-up questions, and paraphrasing the comments for everyone to ponder. A combination of initiating and probing questions can be an effective approach to bring out participants' ideas further.
- Asking the contributor for further clarification and/or elaboration.
- Re-visiting past contributions and incorporating them into subsequent discussions.
- Encouraging others to add their reactions or ideas to build on someone's comment.
- Not being afraid to admit your own ignorance or confusion if you don't know something – invite others to provide resources, and use the opportunity to discuss with the group how one might go about researching the issue.
- Discomfort and silence are ok, but balance with a clearly stated context and purpose.

Potential Problems in Discussions (adapted from: Center for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning Handbook, accessed July 2008)

Maintaining discussions often means dealing as smoothly as possible with the problems that arise. Here are some common problems with suggestions for how to deal with them.

The participant who talks too much:

A way to approach the dominant participant and pull in non-participants is to redirect the discussion to another person or another topic. Alternatively, you may wish to reframe their comments, making them viable additions to the discussion. Facilitators might also ask one or more members of the group to act as observers for a few sessions, reporting back their observations to the group. Perhaps assigning the avid talker to the observer role would help

the person develop sensitivity. Another approach is to break down the group into still smaller task groups.

The member who will not talk:

A way to approach non-participants is to provide opportunities for smaller group discussions or pair-share discussions. Smaller groups may help put some students at ease. A second strategy is to ask opinion questions occasionally (e.g., "How do you feel about this?"). This may encourage participation by reducing participants' fear of answering incorrectly. Another strategy is to have participants write out their answers to a question. Having the words written out may make it easier for a shy or fearful person to speak up.

The discussion that turns into an argument:

In good discussions, conflicts will sometimes arise. If such conflicts are left ambiguous, they may cause continuing trouble. Here are some ways to resolve them:

If the solution depends on certain facts, the facilitator can ask participants to refer to the text or another authority.

If there is an experimentally verified answer, the facilitator can use the opportunity to review the method by which the answer could be determined.

If the question is one of values, the facilitator may use the occasion to help participants become aware of the values involved.

The facilitator can list both sides of the argument on the board.

The facilitator can take a strong position as moderator, preventing participants from interrupting each other or speaking simultaneously. She or he can lay ground rules for discussion, such as asking participants to focus conflict on ideas rather than people and to resist being judgmental.

Unclear or hesitant comments:

The facilitator can encourage participants making unclear contributions to give examples and factual evidence of their points. The facilitator can also restate points for verification or rejection by the participants, or give enthusiastic nonverbal cues and patience.

The discussion that goes off track:

Some facilitators keep discussions on track by listing the questions or issues they want to cover on the board or summarizing the discussion on the board as it proceeds. Stopping and asking a participant to summarize where the discussion is at the point it appears to go off track may also help.

The student who attacks the facilitator:

When participants argue for the sake of argument, facilitators will usually lose if they take the bait. Participants or students who attack often want attention, so simply giving them some recognition while firmly moving on often takes care of the problem. If participants are simply trying to embarrass the facilitator, they may seek to make him or her defensive with such comments as, "How do you really know that...?" or "You're not really saying that...?" Such questions can be handled by playing boomerang. The facilitator might say, "What I'm saying is..., but now I'd like you to share your perspective." Turning the question back to the questioner forces him or her to take responsibility for his or her opinion. Other ways to handle these situations include:

- Confrontation

Facilitators can confront the questioner with their reactions to his or her behavior. "I'm uncomfortable with the imprecision of your questions. What I really hear you saying is..."

- Active listening

Facilitators can paraphrase the message they heard and check out the accuracy of their assumptions before responding.

- Locating

Facilitators can ask the questioner to explain the context behind the question.

- Reframing

The focus can be on clarifying the assumptions behind the person's argument and then inviting her or him to see alternative possibilities.

- Deferring

Often, the best strategy is to invite participants to come up after the session and arrange for a time to talk about the disagreement further, and then move the discussion on to another topic.

FACILITATING BASICS

Kris L. Baack, Ph. D.

Source: Clawson, Bostrom and Anson, (1993). Small Group Research

A FACILITATOR

Trusts the resources of the group

Honors each member and encourages full participation

Helps the group task be achieved effectively and efficiently

Helps the group work with conflict

Guides the process rather than being involved in the content

Listens actively throughout the process

Draws out issues

Keeps the group on task

Identifies agreements and disagreements

A FACILITATOR

Does not direct

Does not withdraw

FACILITATION OCCURS IN

Planning and decision-making

Problem-solving

Conflict resolution

Brainstorming and idea generation

Training

Self-help groups/personal growth experiences

WHAT IS FACILITATION?

Promotes ownership and encourages group responsibility--the facilitator helps the group take responsibility for and ownership of meeting outcomes and results, stays out of their content, turns the floor over to others.

Demonstrates self-awareness and self-expression--the facilitator recognizes and deals with own behavior and feeling, and is comfortable being self; keeps personal ego out of the way of the group.

Listens to, clarifies and integrates information—the facilitator really listens to what the group is saying and makes an effort to make sense out of it; clarifies goals, agenda, terms and definitions with the group.

Develops and asks the right questions—the facilitator considers how to word and ask the “best” questions; asks questions that encourage thought and participation.

Keeps group focused on outcome—the facilitator clearly communicates outcomes to the group up front; makes outcome visible to the group; keeps the group focused on and moving toward its outcome.

Creates and reinforces an open, positive and participative environment—the facilitator draws out individuals by asking questions; uses activities and

technology to get people involved early on; handles dominant people to ensure equal participation.

Actively builds rapport and relationship—the facilitator demonstrates responsiveness and respect for people; is sensitive to emotions; helps develop constructive relationships with and among members; greets and mingles with the group.

Presents information to the group—the facilitator gives clear and explicit instructions; uses clear and concise language in presenting ideas; gives the group written information

Demonstrates flexibility—the facilitator thinks on feet; adapts agenda or meeting activities on the spot as needed; can do more than one thing at a time.

Plans and designs the meeting process—the facilitator plans the meeting ahead of time; directly includes meeting leader/initiator in planning; develops clear meeting outcomes; designs agenda and activities based on outcome, time frame and group characteristics.

Manages conflict and negative emotions constructively—the facilitator provides techniques to help group deal with conflict; gathers and checks group opinions and agreement level in disputes.

Encourages/supports multiple perspective—the facilitator encourages looking at issues from different points of view; uses techniques, metaphors, stories, examples to get the group to consider different frames of reference.

Directs and manages the meetings—the facilitator uses the agenda to guide the group; uses technology effectively to manage the group; sets the stage for meeting and each activity; sets time limits; enforces roles and ground rules.

FACILITATOR DEFINITION

Source: Schwarz, Robert M., The Skilled Facilitator

Group facilitation is a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of the group, substantively neutral and has no decision-making authority, intervenes to help improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions in order to increase the group's effectiveness.

INFORMATION ON FACILITATING

Kris L. Baack, Ph.D.

Source: Harrington-Mackin, D. (1994). The Team Building Tool Kit, American Management Association; New York

RESPONSIBILITIES OF FACILITATOR

Schedules, arranges and conducts meeting

Prepares and distributes agenda prior to meeting and ensures agenda is followed during meeting

Clarifies purpose and helps team identify goals

Ensures all team functions are assigned to various team members

Encourages everyone to participate throughout the discussion

Summarizes and organizes the ideas discussed to gain commitment

Identifies common topics or subjects in discussion to maintain direction of discussion

Asks questions to clarify comments and restates if members are confused

Tests for consensus by stating the position that appears to be the team's conclusion

Assists members in dealing with team conflicts in a productive manner

Assists members in pointing out feelings that are interfering with team's work

Helps team sort out areas of agreement from areas of disagreement

Models performance standards, active listening and trust-building behaviors

Instills accountability in all team members

Keeps leadership apprised of progress on a regular basis

Protects the right of team members to have and to express different points of view

Encourages team to finish each agenda item before moving on to the next

Encourages critical thinking by challenging the team's assumptions

Remains neutral on positions

Must not dominate the team nor decide team rules alone

HELPFUL FACILITATOR BEHAVIOR

Appearing interested

Correcting

Modeling

Offering support

Refocusing

Confronting

Evaluating

Observing team needs

Prompting

DESTRUCTIVE FACILITATOR BEHAVIOR

Arguing with team members

Giving priority to agenda items

Letting team wander too long

Baack, page 2

Minimizing roles of others
Telling team what to do
Being too easy going about role
Lacking good team manners
Manipulating/controlling discussion
Neglects needs of team members
Violating team rules

FACILITATING MEETINGS

Get meeting started. *"Let's review the agenda..." "Our goal today is..."* etc.
Encourage communication and involvement of all members. *"Let's go around the room and get everyone's opinion about..." "How do you feel about this?" "How would you answer that question?" "We haven't heard from you yet. How do you feel about this?"*

Ask team members for opinions and feeling to encourage discussion. *"Do you agree with this?" "What is your reaction to..." "How do you feel about..."*

Ask for a summary of the discussion. *"We've had a lot of good ideas, will someone summarize the major points before we go on?" "Let's review, first..."*

Paraphrase what someone has said to help members understand each other.

"I'm hearing..." "Are you saying..." "It sounds like you're asking for..."

Ask for specific examples to improve your understanding. *"To make sure we're all with you, give us some examples." "Can you expand on that, I'm not sure I understand."*

Clarify assumptions. *"Your idea assumes that we won't meet the deadline, is this correct?" "Your suggestion is..., correct?"*

Ask for explanation in order to eliminate confusion and repetition. *"We have been everywhere with this issue. Can someone suggest how we might proceed?" "The examples you gave apply to...Do they also apply to...?" "I think we are confused, could you explain this again?"*

Probe an idea in greater length. *"Let's look at a totally different opinion." "Are there other points to consider?" "What about...?"*

Suggest a break or a rest. *"Let's take a 10 minute break." "We've been at this for an hour, let's stretch a minute."*

Move the team toward action. *"What would you do first?" "How would you propose we get started?" "OK, so first...then what?"*

Poll members. *"How many agree?" "Let's get everyone's opinion." "Let's ask everyone."*

Encourage open-mindedness. *"You all have good ideas, let's listen to everyone." "I'm not sure you heard this correctly. It might help if you tell us what you heard her say before you state your objections." "It's important we value everyone's feelings."*

Recommend a process. *"Let's try brainstorming on this." "Why don't we all comment on this proposal." "Would it help if we put the agenda items in priority order before we start?"*

Step out of the facilitator role. *"I have strong feelings on this, would someone else facilitate, so I may share my thoughts."*

Stop discussion to focus on team feelings. *"Let's stop for a minute and see how everyone is feeling." "We've been debating this for a while. Let's pick this up next time." "Are you all OK? What do you need right now?"*

Encourage greater participation. *"We haven't heard from..." "You have stated your opinion, let's hear from...she hasn't expressed her view."*

Reflect for the team what someone is feeling. *"I get the impression you are not satisfied with this course of action." "Her comments suggest she isn't feeling comfortable with our decision."*

Get back on track. *"I think we've lost our focus." "Help me get back on track here." "I need help finding the common thread here."*

Surface differences of opinion. *"You haven't said so, but I'm hearing you don't agree, is that right?" "I'm afraid you're all saying what you think we want to hear. What do you really think?" "It sounds like we're trying to avoid disagreeing with each other. Who would be willing to voice a different opinion?"*

Check team progress. *"Are we going in the right direction?" "Are you OK here?" "Is this the best way to proceed?"*

Encourage new thinking. *"What would the opposite idea be?" "Let's take the role of our committee; how would they react?"*

Explore potential results. *"If we did it this way, what is the worst thing that could happen?" "If it works, how will it effect our goal?"*

Test for consensus of the team. *"Can we identify any areas we still disagree on?" "Does everyone accept that we...?" "Is this something we can all live with?"*

Handle consensus blockers. *"Why do you feel this way?" "Let's hear why you disagree?" "Do you see a way for us to compromise?"*

Move towards decision. *"We have discussed all sides. Let's make a decision." "We have considered all options, let's vote."*