

Facilitating Meetings

short guide



Meetings are a necessary part of working in any group – they give us the chance to share information, to reach decisions and to get jobs done. But too often they drag on and on, with tempers running high, people talking over each other, and no decisions being made. Bad meetings leave you wondering why you bothered turning up. Unfortunately this pattern is very common in groups. However by using some facilitation skills it's easy to turn around the style of meetings and actually make them an enjoyable and inspiring experience.

What is facilitation?

Facilitation is about helping the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. It's also about making sure everyone can be involved in discussions and making decisions. It combines a series of roles and tasks. Sometimes these are taken on by one person – the facilitator, however there's no reason why they can't be shared between one or more people in the meeting. Good facilitators stay neutral, winning the trust of everyone in the meeting and treating everyone as equals. At no time do they make decisions for the group or take sides in a conflict.



Was the meeting successful?

Tasks – What got done? Did you get the necessary results? Were problems solved, and were the objectives of the group met?

Maintenance – How did it get done? How did people feel and how will this affect morale and group cohesion? Did the meeting make good use of the pooled talents? Was it enjoyable?

Key facilitation tasks

- ✓ Help the group plan the meeting agenda. Think about timing and order of agenda items, and how to tackle each point.
- ✓ Prepare the room so it's comfortable and everyone can participate; sort out materials the meeting might need e.g.: paper, pens.
- ✓ Introduce the meeting, what it's about and how the meeting works (e.g. consensus or voting, handsignals, breaks).
- ✓ Keep the group to the agenda and decision-making process
- ✓ Keep the meeting focussed on one item at a time.
- ✓ Help everyone to participate. Keep track of who wants to speak. Draw out quiet people and limit those who talk a lot.
- ✓ Challenge aggressive or discriminatory behaviour and put-downs.
- ✓ Introduce techniques such as ideastorming, go-rounds and working groups to make the meeting more efficient and participatory.
- ✓ Clarify and summarise points, make sure everyone understands the discussion.
- ✓ Test for agreement and get clear decisions made.
- ✓ Ensure that action points and decisions are recorded.
- ✓ Keep the meeting to time.
- ✓ Help the group deal with conflict.
- ✓ Listen for underlying issues, concerns or emotions. Help bring them out so they can be dealt with.

Co-facilitation roles at a meeting

Instead of just one facilitator you could have two or more people sharing the different tasks:

Co-facilitators can take turns facilitating and support each other.

Taking hands: the job of keeping track of whose turn it is to speak next and of giving appropriate time limits to speakers.

Vibes-watchers pay attention to the emotional atmosphere of the meeting, They watch out for individuals' feelings and intervene if necessary.

The timekeeper keeps track of the time and the agreed time frame for the different agenda points, negotiating extensions if needed.

Notetakers or **recorders** take minutes or notes, collect reports, and also draw attention to incomplete decisions – e.g. “who is going to contact so and so, and when?”.

The doorkeeper welcomes people in, bringing them up to speed on the meeting and practical stuff.

A facilitator's skills and qualities

Good listening skills to hear underlying concerns in the group. This includes strategic questioning to be able to understand everyone's viewpoint properly.

Respect for all participants and interest in what each individual has to offer.

Understanding of the aim of the meeting as well as long-term goals of the group.

Neutrality on the issues discussed. Avoiding taking sides or manipulating the meeting towards a particular outcome. If this becomes difficult, or you know in advance that you'll struggle to remain impartial try:

- **letting someone else facilitate;**
- **making it clear when you're expressing your own opinion and when you're intervening as the facilitator**

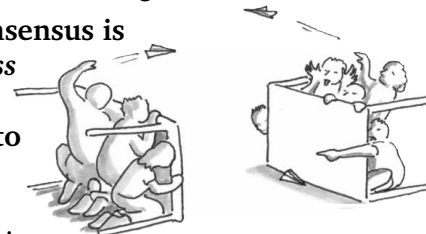
Clear thinking and observation – pay attention both to the content of the discussion and the process. How are people feeling? What is being said?

Assertiveness – know when to intervene decisively and give some direction to the meeting.

Facilitating consensus

Many grassroots groups use consensus decision making rather than voting in their meetings. When working to reach consensus we bring together different ideas and try to find a proposal that is agreeable to everyone. Consensus is about participation and equalising power. Good facilitation plays an important role in helping a group to reach agreement.

The key to helping a group towards consensus is to help all members of the group express their needs and viewpoints clearly, find the common ground and find solutions to any areas of disagreement. Active listening, summarising and synthesis are three skills that help the facilitator with this.



1. Active Listening

When we actively listen we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions.

2. Summarising

A succinct and accurate summary of what's been said so far can be really helpful to move a group towards a decision. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: "it seems like we've almost reached agreement on that element of the proposal, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." Check with everyone that you've got it right.

3. Synthesis

After discussing the issue freely move on to finding agreement on what needs to be done. During this stage, sometimes called synthesis, you need to find the common ground, find connections between seemingly competing ideas and weave them together to form proposals.

Start with a summary of where you think the group and its different members are at. Then start building a proposal from whatever agreement there is. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have. It's not unusual for people to be willing to give way on some things but not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different proposals.

To make summarising and synthesis easier it is helpful to write up key issues on a flipchart as the discussion happens.

For more information read our in-depth facilitation and consensus briefings, available on our website.

*For more briefings and
training workshops see:
www.seedsforchange.org.uk*



Some Facilitation Tools for Meetings

(For more tools see our briefing *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops*)

The agenda provides vital structure for the meeting. Either draw up the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, or prepare a proposed agenda in advance. Allow everyone to have an input. Start by collecting agenda items from the group. Estimate the time needed for each item. Think about priorities for this meeting – what could be tackled another time or in separate working groups? Be realistic: if the meeting is only an hour long, there should only be an hour's worth of items on the agenda! If the meeting is longer than 1½ hours plan in breaks. Think about effective tools for controversial topics.

Write up the proposed agenda where everyone will be able to see it (on a whiteboard or flipchart, for example) or make copies to give to everyone.

Group Agreement: the group agrees at the beginning of the meeting what behaviour will help make the meeting a safe, respectful place for everyone. May include things like: switch off phones; no smoking; one person speaking at a time; no put-downs; respect etc.



Go-rounds: everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas as well as slowing down the discussion and improving listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

Handsignals can make meetings run more smoothly and help the facilitator see emerging agreements. Three simple signals should suffice:



Raise a hand when you wish to contribute to the discussion with a general point.

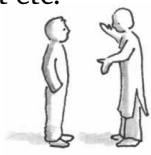
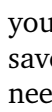


Raise both hands if your point is a direct response to the current discussion.

This allows you to jump to the head of the queue, so use it wisely and discourage overuse!



'Silent applause' – when you hear an opinion that you agree with, wave a hand with your fingers pointing upwards. This saves a lot of time as people don't need to chip in to say "I'd just like to add that I agree with..."



Ideastorming gathers a large number of ideas quickly. Start by stating the issue. Ask people to say whatever comes into their heads as fast as possible – without censoring or discussion. This encourages creativity and frees energy. Write down all ideas for later discussion.

Paired listening creates a space where everyone is heard, so participants can explore and formulate their own thoughts and feelings on an issue without interruption. In pairs, one person is the listener, the other speaks about her thoughts and feelings on the issue. The listener gives full attention to their partner without interrupting. After a set time swap roles within the pairs.

Parking space: when something comes up that's not relevant to the discussion at hand "park" it in the parking space (a large sheet of paper on the wall) and deal with it at an appropriate time later. This allows you to stay focused but reassures participants they will be heard.

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Small Groups create safer spaces for people to contribute to the meeting. They can also make meetings more efficient – any topics are discussed more effectively in a smaller task group, and different groups can discuss different topics simultaneously. Explain clearly what you want groups to do. Write up the task where people can see it. If you want feedback at the end, ensure each group appoints a notetaker to report back.

Talking stick: people may speak only when they hold the talking stick. This makes people conscious of when they interrupt others.

Throw back to the group – many facilitators feel they have to deal with all the problems that arise in meetings. Where possible, let the group do the work. If someone asks a question, you don't have to answer it so throw it back to the group. Get them to make the major decisions about things like time, and priorities for the meeting.

