

Facilitation Excellence

A toolkit and primer for facilitators of all skill levels

“Facilitation: the act or process of rendering easy”

The Oxford English Dictionary

Communication and decision making are the lifeblood of any group endeavor – from routine operational meetings to times of change and challenge. If your participants’ intellectual capital, goodwill, and buy-in to the group’s goals and values isn’t cultivated, these core group processes (and the implementation of their outcomes) are likely to suffer – along with the members of the group. The structures and practices of facilitation cultivate the buy-in of your participants – it enhances both the quality of the outcomes and the satisfaction of the folks involved, creating a virtuous cycle that generates group capacity to effectively solve problems and meet challenges. It is grounded in the understanding that everyone’s perspective and participation is valuable. It actively solicits and harnesses the leadership skills and unique potential of all members. This toolkit provides guidance for practitioners at all skill levels to improve their facilitation excellence.

Table of Contents

*The Role of Facilitator
Attitudes and Attributes
Don’ts and
Tips, Tactics & Tools
Troubleshooting
Bibliography*

The Role of Facilitator:

A Facilitator “enables groups to work more effectively [by] advocating for fair, inclusive and open processes that balance participation and improve productivity while establishing a safe psychological space.”

Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making

The **core duties of a facilitator** are to *encourage full participation, promote mutual understanding, foster inclusive solutions, and cultivate shared responsibility*, which results in stronger individuals, groups and agreements. They do this by gathering group process expertise, critical self-reflection skills, and a deep bag of tricks to help guide any group (no matter how diverse or divergent) toward productive communication.

Process Advocate – *upholding a process which cultivates full group participation*

- Wield the authority delegated to you by the group in the service of the participants, the group, and its goals.
- Be a process advocate – know the structure, objectives, timing, and dynamics of a process, and uphold them for the group; be comfortable enough with your process to flex and bend the design as necessary to meet group needs.
- Be content literate, but neutral – don’t contribute content to the process.
- Hold faith that the group can solve its own problems through their process – trust their intuition while keeping an eye on their goals.
- Manage time and track participant energy levels.
- Ask for assistance from the group when needed – enlist them as supporters of process (in roles like time-keeper, ‘vibes watcher’, board scribe, snack bringer, or energy level tracker).
- Have fun and build a healthy relationship with the group and its members through its process.



Fair, Inclusive, Open, Safe – *stewarding a space which actively empowers all voices*

- Uphold the groundrules agreed upon by the group, thus ensuring the safety and full participation of all members.
- Maintain an anti-oppressive and equitable space for exploration, discussion, and action.
- Help to liberate voices and opinions by acknowledging intersectional oppressions, historical dynamics, and by opening up closed conversations.
- Know and confront your own attitudes and stereotypes.
- Model and validate desired behaviors – lean into discomfort, be vulnerable, move back or forward in dialog as needed.
- Encourage participants to respect and refrain from judging themselves and others.
- Interrupt communication that shuts down, diminishes, or marginalizes voices – uphold an environment where voices get equal space and value.
- Uphold the group’s belief that every person in the group has something valuable to say, that their opinions and knowledge matter, and that all ideas are worthy in this space.
- Encourage taking risks without pressuring anyone to do so.
- Support the group in navigating the complex emotional responses and interpersonal dynamics at play.
- Move power to the group – allow them to decide if and how they would like to proceed as necessary.

Effective Work – *guiding the group toward achieving its goals*

- Support everyone’s ability to do their best thinking, to discover effective solutions and build sustainable agreements.
- Focus on how well participants work together, not on how well they argue.
- Help the group identify achievable goals and accomplish them.
- Initiate and stimulate productive discussion (using activities, framing questions, and other process tools).
- Summarize lengthy or confusing comments into concise statements.
- Synthesize and reflect back the group’s process and decisions.
- Keep the group moving from one agenda item to the next, while being sensitive to the group’s needs.
- Shape intense interactions toward desired goals by paraphrasing, reframing, and reflecting.
- Create space to find innovative win/win solutions.
- Capture the work of the group – clarify how the group will harvest the work accomplished; steward the producing and distributing of minutes, outcomes, and any implementation or follow-up.

Facilitators are often also participants in the groups they are facilitating – which means they are often occupying two (or more) roles in a process. Identifying (and juggling) any power dynamics, potential conflicts of interest, and overlapping stakes in the process that each role holds is part of a facilitator’s job.

Here are a few commonly held dual roles, and what dynamics you will need to juggle:

- *Facilitator & Member* – have a stake in process and outcomes
- *Facilitator & Content Expert* – hold process and content expertise, but have no stake in outcomes
- *Facilitator & Leader* – have a stake in outcomes and the thriving and/or existence of the organization



Facilitator Attitudes and Attributes

“An effective facilitator has to have respect for all group members, expecting and fostering the best in participants by modeling and affirming positive behavior. Facilitators also need the skills to be assertive, to intervene when necessary to protect group members from attack, to name a conflict when it has emerged, and to bring the group back on focus. A calm presence, flexibility, creativity, and a sense of humor will go a long way to support any group and its process.”

Great Meetings! Great Results

Attitudes: *perspective, worldview, approach*

- Be the servant of the group and its process – always be asking ‘what would serve the group best right now?’
- Respect the participants – honor diverse perspectives, respect intentions, believe in equal worth
- Empathy and compassion – empathize with each participant, sense how they will respond, and show compassion for their challenges and achievements
- Be non-defensive – stay grounded in yourself and focus on the issue at hand (either content or process) instead of personal attacks; learn from your reaction, channel your emotions into productive work
- Flexibility – if it’s not working, be willing and able to let go and try something else
- Patience – everyone has a different communication style and speed, hold space for them all
- Expect the best – model and affirm positive behavior
- Humor and joy – sharing laughter and joy can help the group bond and lighten sometimes overwhelming loads

Attributes: *skills, expertise, character*

- Listening Skills – listen on many levels simultaneously: content, emotion, subtext, intention, impact, and context; listen for group agreement, disagreement, and confusion
- Summarizing and Clarifying (Synthesis) Skills – sum up comments, work & outcomes; differentiate between viewpoints, options, etc.
- Group Development and Dynamics Skills – understand and ground in the group’s context; know how to steward group growth and juggle interpersonal dynamics
- Process Skills – know your group process tools and when to deploy them
- Conflict Management Skills – know when and how to intervene in a way that keeps the group on track and honors individuals; know how to name, surface, and embrace conflict in a way that serves to strengthen the group.
- Recording Skills – represent work and process back to the group (visually and/or orally)

- Self-awareness – be self-reflective, and aware of your social identity (including areas of privilege and disempowerment); be conscious of how culture and power has shaped your values and beliefs
- Commitment to the community – care and believe in the group you’re working with, and cultivate a relationship of mutual respect and accountability
- Humility – no one is THE expert in everything, you always have more to learn
- Open-mindedness – judgements often shut down process and block progress
- Acknowledging imperfection – model vulnerability by admitting mistakes and accepting constructive feedback
- Resilience – cultivate your ability to recover from challenges and setbacks, both in the moment and after the facilitation (have a robust self-care practice, with rituals to help you let it go, integrate growth, and come back stronger).



Don'ts and Dos

Don't control your group with opaque authority.	Do empower your group with knowledge and the right to hold you accountable.
Don't let them put you on a pedestal.	Do act as a servant leader.
Don't make decisions for the group or pressure the group into a decision.	Do require the group to be robust and duly diligent in their decision making.
Don't feel like you have to appear infallible.	Do learn from your mistakes, and model that learning for the group.
Don't pretend to have all the answers.	Do know where to retrieve the answers.
Don't pretend you are superhuman, that nothing can hurt or effect you.	Do know your own triggers and reactions, and have tools for self-reflection and correction on tap.
Don't call folks out in anger or defensiveness.	Do model constructive feedback and accountability.
Don't talk too much.	Do use your voice to empower others.
Don't let them treat you like a therapist (or act like you're in therapy).	Do protect yourself from taking on their problems.
Don't try to 'save' the group or 'fix' someone in it.	Do encourage the group to take responsibility for itself.
Don't get knocked to the ground by conflict, challenges, or process going awry.	Do stay grounded – when your flow doesn't flow, reground, take a breath, identify what is happening, balance on your feet, ask a question, take a break.
Don't let the group bite off more than it can chew (and then choke on it).	Do assist the group in planning achievable goals and a feasible process.
Don't define success solely by the outcomes.	Do define success by the strength of your process.
Don't say Yes to all facilitations and processes, even if you feel like you should, or there is 'no one else' to do it.	Do know when to say No. (Ask yourself: Will it cause harm? What is my capacity? Does it compromise my values? Is neutrality an issue? Do I have time to prepare/follow-up?)

Facilitation Tips, Tactics & Tools:

"The most important learning resource one can have is practical experience."

A Manual for Group Facilitators

5 Phases in Facilitating an Event:

- 1) **Assess:** who are you working with? identify event goals and needs of group and participants; conduct stakeholder interviews as necessary; work out logistics (time, location, number of leaders/participants)
- 2) **Plan:** what framework will engage participants, achieve goals, and leave the group feeling satisfied? plan an achievable agenda, with preliminary time limits, constructive activities, and flexible options
- 3) **Prepare:** gather materials and relevant information; confirm time/location (and support/materials, including snacks); prepare co-leaders and yourself (be fed, rested, mentally and emotionally prepared)



- 4) **Facilitate:** set a positive and productive tone; model appropriate behavior; provide appropriate prompts and challenges; model experimentation and risk taking; be prepared to change, ask yourself 'why am I doing what I am doing?' and have a good answer (or change!); capture the group's work!
- 5) **Evaluate:** during the program – monitor the tone and content of the dialog (sometimes with the aid of the group); after the program: what worked? what didn't? what would you do differently next time?

A Model for Evaluating a Facilitation Event:

1. **WHAT?** What happened during the activity? State the facts, identify behaviors, refrain from opinions and judgments, but note all relevant exchanges.
2. **NOW WHAT?** So what are you going to do about it? Did the behaviors serve you or the group? What did you learn from your (individual or collective) success or failure? What was your individual role in the process, and was it satisfactory? Define the team's synergy or pattern of interaction, and note the areas of ease and difficulty.
3. **SO WHAT?** What can be different next time? What good things should remain unchanged? What things should evolve or be discarded? How will you measure success? How do you create permanent, positive change?

Tips and Phrases for Constructive Processing of Emotional Content (during or after an Event)

- Monitor verbal and non-verbal behavior constantly (*look for signs of confusion, boredom, anger, etc. look for people talking, writing/not writing, yawning, checking their phones*)
- Ask open ended questions (*how did that feel? how was that for you? how was that experience?*)
- Focus on feelings (*how did you feel when they said that? what is one word you could use to describe your feelings right now?*)
- Test out perceptions (*what do other people feel?*)
- Appropriate self-disclosure (*I'm confused, how do other people feel?*)
- Focus on behavior (*what was she doing that made you think or feel that?*)
- Explore more deeply (*can you say more about that? what would be an example?*)
- Ask the group to diagnose itself (*what is happening here right now?*)
- Diagnosing (*does the large amount of joking suggest we're avoiding a big issue? or are we having fun?*)
- Draw out the lessons (*what can we learn from that?*)
- Focus on one issue at a time (*we want to move on to that, but first let's make sure we've covered this topic thoroughly*)
- Ask the group to summarize (*where have we got to?*)
- Review (*we seem to have covered so and so. Is that right? anything to add/what have I missed?*)

How to Juggle Multiple Roles in Facilitation

*Being perceived as content and outcome neutral is a key source of your power to serve the group – when juggling multiple roles, a large amount of **what you are managing is your actual and perceived neutrality.***

- name and define all roles you're holding and how you will be code switching
- be extra conscious of upholding process agreements and guarding your actual and perceived neutrality
- be conscious of the extra/different power of your voice, take steps to mitigate it
- if your stake in the matter at hand is (or is perceived as) too high, or if you have strong opinions on the topic, recuse yourself and have someone else facilitate (and grow their own skills, leadership, and buy-in at the same time!)



If You Only Remember 5 Tips, Remember These!

- 1) **Have Food** – when humans ‘break bread’ together, we are more likely to see each other as human, and are more inclined to bond and work well together, not to mention avoiding low-blood-sugar fights!
- 2) **Set the Tone** – as facilitator, the tone of the meeting is primarily up to you to model, set it up right (ie productive and positive) and maintain it well
- 3) **Follow AND Lead** – let the group show you what it really needs in discussion, while guiding them toward achieving their core goals
- 4) **Acknowledge** – make sure to acknowledge: any hard interactions or hurt feelings, the effort shown, the work done, the challenges faced, and the outcomes committed to
- 5) **Open and Close with a Ritual** – rituals ground us in the space and help us switch gears into and out of productive dialog and decision-making mode (*try lightning round check-ins/outs – 2 words only: for check-ins 1 word ‘your top goal for this meeting’/1 word ‘how you feel right now’; for check-outs 1 word ‘something you learned here’/ 1 word ‘how you feel right now’*)

Troubleshooting Dialog:

“Conflict is a normal, natural part of human interaction and sooner or later it is part of virtually every group’s experience. It is important to recognize that conflict has the potential to be very healthy for the group. Conflict, when acknowledged and dealt with in a positive manner, can clarify differences, increase the creativity of the group and build a strong team.”

Great Meetings! Great Results

As facilitator, you hold discretionary power over the process – which means that when shit hits the fan, you are the first responder. You hold the ability to intervene in dialog, to alter process, to manage voices – in short, you hold the power to intervene in process to maximize the group’s ability to overcome a challenge. While you should be guided by the principles of servant leadership when deciding when and how to take action, the power to decide is ultimately yours – and the more wisely you wield it, the more you will empower your group to make wise decisions. This section provides basic guidelines on intervening in process, with specific solutions to common facilitation troubles.

When and how to take action: not all situations need to be responded to, and acting might in fact disrupt the group more – intervene when you judge that a situation threatens the groups’ ability to function; consider the costs and benefits of the groundrules/process agreements before enforcing them; intervene early – before energies have escalated; move from gentle to firm; stay calm and respectful (speak lower and slower)

The meeting space doesn’t meet your needs: prepare! know what you need and what you’re likely to get; look for creative solutions, enlist the group in problem solving; carry a ‘kit’ to help you transform a space (ex: many kinds of tape, extra ‘wall’ paper, tie line, folding easel, scratch paper, markers, large cloths, snacks, etc.)

Not enough/too many participants: select activities and structures that can be scaled up or down easily; be ready to innovate on the fly; use small group break-out/large group discussion processes; attend to morale/efficiency – have you got the right amount of folks in the room to achieve your goals?



Not enough/too much time: plan the agenda with as much process and content data as you can; start promptly, run efficiently – enlist a timekeeper, remind folks of timeliness throughout dialog, set preliminary time limits for all agenda items; when time needs to be extended or shortened, be transparent and ask for group approval; table agenda items to next meeting or to subcommittees as necessary; use extra time to address often ignored ‘big picture’ issues (like values, mission, strategic planning, or innovative ideas) or engage in self-evaluation/critical group reflection

Exercise/Activity fail: admit it – the activity missed the point or didn’t work as intended; flip it – deconstruct why/how it failed as an example of how process can fail, or why it failed here; use it to normalize the value of ‘it’s safe to fail’, thereby encouraging innovation and risk taking; ask the group for input on next steps

Discussion is stalled because the group is checked out or stuck: ask pointed concrete questions, and then ask folks to elaborate on answers – ask “why?” “how do we know that?” tell me more about that.”; balance the conversation by presenting different viewpoints in the form of leading questions; ask folks if they have anything to share right now; temperature check group for energy/hunger/ information overload/physical comfort; take a break, play a game, move around; go meta – ask “is this conversation/process serving our goal?”; go micro – “let’s list some concrete actions”; if a participant seems repeatedly disengaged, check-in (some folks have different learning styles and may be alienated by process, requiring a work-around, etc.)

Balancing participation between dominant and passive voices: encourage folks to check themselves on giving/taking space; acknowledge diverse communication styles as valid; ask if there are any thoughts from “voices we haven’t heard yet”; respectfully ask dominant voices to wait to share until others have, reminding them that it’s your job to hold space for equal voice (hold silence for at least 30 seconds afterwards, allowing shy folks the room to step up); use your discretionary power to limit speaking time, cut off the speaker’s list, or to not accept some people onto the speakers list if time is short and they’ve spoken a lot.

Participants coming down on you as facilitator: set yourself up as ‘servant of the group’s process’ at the start; model taking in constructive criticism; uphold the group agreements/groundrules (including ‘no personal attacks’ and ‘the 50% rule’); if scapegoated, remind the group we all share in this process equally; have a co-facilitator ready to support you if you need to step aside for a time

Big feelings appear in the dialog: acknowledge that feelings are normal, and we will hold appropriate space for them; insist that feelings not be judged, but that behavior must remain respectful; make them into an asset – what are they teaching us about our dialog process/goals?; have opening/closing rituals that include space for feelings; know your own hang-ups, don’t let your feelings take the most space, recuse yourself if necessary; take a break or change the process to accommodate feelings and still achieve the agenda

Arguments between participants: intervene early – when the conversation begins to move from dialog to debate or attack; return to the process/topic/goals; uphold the group agreements; interject focused questions, guarding against interruptions; summarize, reframe, find common ground between viewpoints, remind folks of equal validity; take a break to defuse – when folks come back, change the space or seating arrangements

Interrupting participants: keep a speakers list (either visually or orally tracked and affirmed); use a ‘talking token’; uphold the ground-rules; remind folks of our commitment to equal voice and respect



Material too simple/too complex: assess expertise/familiarity with topics and exercises (either in preparation or in the moment); pause for “is this old news?”/“are you still with me?” – ask the quiet ones too!; get visual or verbal affirmation of relevance/understanding at key points; watch body language for cues (like blank, bored or overwhelmed faces; ask (and solicit) questions that give you clues about the level of comprehension and engagement

Talking off topic, scattered discussion, or unclear comments: ask participant how the comment is relevant to the discussion at hand; ask for clarification; paraphrase or summarize unclear comments and reflect back, asking “do folks understand?”; bring the group back into focus by defining the ‘problem’ or topic and the desired outcomes of this discussion; use alternate processes to synthesize diverse input on a large topic (like small-group/large group); check for diminishing group capacity (are folks getting too tired to be productive?)

Someone ‘freaks out’: stay calm, express sincere concern for this ‘urgent emotional expression’; make a small space to surface, address and/or solution-build to meet the underlying needs; enlist the group and/or an ally; take it to later/a private discussion or ask the group if it wants to make a larger space for this now; return to process appropriately; don’t let anyone hold the process ‘hostage’; create channels for evaluation/follow-up

Participants making oppressive comments or personal attacks: make space for differing opinions/ideas while upholding group agreements of respect and ‘I statements’; remind group of difference between intent and impact; reframe statements, model giving space to learn by using phrase “I don’t think you intended to say...” & “What I heard you trying to express is...”; don’t argue with the person voicing the statements; don’t allow others to counter attack; move the conversation away from debate/attack and back toward common values and goals

Disregarding or manipulating the process: remind the group of commitment to process, because process is the agreed upon structure through which we meet our goals; ask if there is an underlying need or un-surfaced aspect of the topic which isn’t being addressed; ask specific folks to comply with process, or give a valid reason why they are departing from it – and then address the reason through process; call out blatant manipulations of process, reminding folks of their mutual commitment to effective and equal dialog

Mistaken expectations (yours or the group’s): notice, surface, and clarify differences in expectation (of goal, role, or process) ASAP; go meta – discuss framework/process/goals/roles; ask for more info on the ‘real’ or ‘source’ problem/situation – either within the discussion, or from specific folks on a break; innovate on the fly (adopt a process/role that will meet the actual goals) or responsibly exit

Bibliography:

- *Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision Making* by Sam Kaner (et. al.) (2007)
- *Great Meetings! Great Results* by Dee Kelsey and Pam Plumb (2004)
- *A Manual for Group Facilitators* by The Center for Conflict Resolution (1977)

