

## **GROUP FACILITATION OVERVIEW**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR**

1. Facilitators anticipate the nature of the group and the group's perception of the situation. They know the exercise, its purpose, and the key learning before starting.
2. Facilitators are willing to relate to the customs and norms of the group without making value judgments. They do not say "that's great," "good," or make judgments about input.
3. Facilitators control and focus the direction of the communication process toward the specific objective of the discussion. They keep the group moving toward its goal.
4. Facilitators create an atmosphere in which the participants feel understood and safe to communicate openly and freely.
5. Facilitators develop skills in the timing of the questions and in providing the transitional sequence of questions during the discussion process.
6. Facilitators avoid playing negative roles (dominator, monopolist, hostile, aggressive, silent, clown, digresser, etc.)
7. Facilitators listen carefully on several levels. They visually observe reactions of the participants, they hear what is being said (with ears and hearts), and they physically adjust voice, tone, and body position so that it allows the greatest reinforcement.

### **TIPS FOR THE FACILITATOR**

8. Model the behaviors you want to see in your group. Set the tone and teach by example. Demonstrate warmth and caring for, and interest in each group member.
9. Give appropriate, descriptive feedback to group members.
10. Have a plan for structured group activities, and be well prepared to carry out that plan. However, be flexible enough to meet the needs of group members as they become apparent.
11. Be patient with group members. Allow for silence and humor where appropriate.
12. Ensure that the group rules, especially about put-downs and confidentiality, are followed by all members of the group to create safety and dignity for all members.
13. Encourage those who are quiet to participate, and those who like to talk frequently to be more effective listeners.
14. Help group members to talk to each other and not to you as the facilitator. Maintain the focus on the person who is speaking until they are finished.

## LISTENING & FACILITATION TIPS

### ACTIVE LISTENING

Effective listening is **active**, with the listener talking with and keeping the focus on the other person. The emphasis is on helping the other person(s) discover themselves, make their own decisions, and take responsibility for their lives. Effective listening **avoids** evaluating, judging, labeling, or giving advice. Instead, it includes the following communication skills:

- **Open-ended questions**: Questions that begin with what, when, where, who, or how. Closed-ended questions, those that begin with do, will, don't, etc., are only utilized if seeking a yes/no answer. Why should be used sparingly because it is often utilized to put people on the defensive.
- **Summarizing and clarifying**: Paraphrasing that focuses on the important events, ideas, people, or situations shared by the participants.
- **Reflecting feelings**: Stating your perception of the other person's feelings with emotional words such as happy, sad, confused, excited, afraid.

Effective listeners are aware of not only what the person says, but also tone of voice, facial expressions, eye contact, body posture, and movement that often convey the feelings and meaning of the participants.

### ROAD BLOCKS TO EFFECTIVE FACILITATION & LISTENING

- Commands ("You must...", "You have to...")
- Comparisons ("If I were ever in your position...")
- Generalizing (Never, always, everybody)
- Shaming ("That is wrong," "You shouldn't have done that")
- Blaming ("It's your fault," "You did this to yourself")
- Advice Giving ("I think you should...")
- Making Light ("It's not that bad," "Everything will be ok")

## **POSSIBLE FACILITATOR RESPONSES**

*Adapted from Global Learning Partners, Inc.*

- “That is interesting. Please tell me more.”
- Repeat the main points of the contribution and summarize.
- “That sounds like an example of...”
- “I appreciate you sharing this idea because...”
- “Thanks for sharing this. It’s important to have some different perspectives.”
- “I’ve never thought of it that way. Tell me more.”
- “Let’s explore that more.”
- Mirror back the feelings and the mood of the group.
- “I’m not clear about... Could you tell me more?”
- “Hmmm, tell me how you got to that?”
- “Tell me more about that. I had been thinking of this differently.”
- “I’m not sure I know what you mean by that. Can you say more?”
- “I’m not sure we are talking about the same thing here. Let’s rephrase what was said.”
- “You know, that doesn’t fit my experience. Can you tell me more about how you see that?”
- “What do others think of this idea?”

**SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH  
TYPICAL SMALL GROUP CHALLENGES**  
*From Study Circles Resource Center*

<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>Certain participants don't say anything and appear shy</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot.</i></li> <li>• <i>Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues.</i></li> <li>• <i>When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background, encourage him/her by conveying genuine interest.</i></li> <li>• <i>It's also helpful to talk with participants informally before and after the session.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker.</i></li> <li>• <i>Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate; "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet."</i></li> <li>• <i>If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Amy has to say."</i></li> <li>• <i>Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice – you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?"</i></li> <li>• <i>If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say, "We are wandering off the subject and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."</i></li> </ul>

**SMALL GROUP SUGGESTIONS [continued]**  
*From Study Circles Resource Center*

<p><b>Challenge:</b> <i>Someone shares info that you know to be false, or participants get hung up about facts but nobody knows the answer</i></p>	<p><b>Possible responses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ask, “Has anyone heard conflicting information?” If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself.</i></li> <li>• <i>If no one knows the facts and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on.</i></li> <li>• <i>If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information after they leave the program.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Challenge:</b> <i>Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating</i></p>	<p><b>Possible responses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>This may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions.</i></li> <li>• <i>It may help to pose a question and go around until everyone has a chance to respond.</i></li> <li>• <i>Occasionally, the group seems to be in agreement and isn’t coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case, the facilitator’s job is to try to bring other views, especially if no one in the group holds them. “Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?”</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Challenge:</b> <i>Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another</i></p>	<p><b>Possible responses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas take place anytime difficult topics are considered.</i></li> <li>• <i>Explain that for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: it is acceptable to challenge someone’s ideas, but it is not acceptable to challenge them personally. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur.</i></li> <li>• <i>Don’t hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you.</i></li> <li>• <i>As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.</i></li> </ul>

## SEQUENCING QUESTIONS IN FACILITATION: THE “O.R.I.D.” APPROACH

- Objective** What did you *observe* happening? What are some of the words, phrases, or comments you remember hearing? What part of the exercise struck you the most? What happened? What did we just do? What are some of the reactions you saw?
- Reflective** How did you feel? What emotions did you experience? What surprised you? What made you angry? Where did you find yourself frustrated? What was exciting? When have you experienced something similar? What memories did it bring up?
- Interpretive** What are you thinking about now? What do you think is the most important aspect of this issue? What did you learn? What new insight came up for you? What would you like to see changed? Where do you see this happening in your daily life?
- Decisional** How will this help you or motivate you to do things differently now? What is one thing you will take away from this exercise? How will it affect how you see things in the future? What will you change?

**Note:**

*It is best to have 2-4 questions prepared for each level, but only ask 1 or 2 per level as needed. Remember to be flexible and respond to the flow of the group and its dynamics.*

## SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH TYPICAL LARGE GROUP CHALLENGES

<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>The group is slow to respond to provocative questions</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Pause long enough for participants to gather their thoughts.</i></li> <li>• <i>Repeat or reword a question.</i></li> <li>• <i>Break down the question into smaller elements.</i></li> <li>• <i>Ask the group for permission to move on, but emphasize that you may come back to this topic if time permits.</i></li> <li>• <i>Don't apologize! Be positive!</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>The group seems restless or bored</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Check the setting. Is the room temperature comfortable? Is it time for a break? Is a meal coming up?</i></li> <li>• <i>Move discussion along faster. Perhaps the pace is too slow.</i></li> <li>• <i>Remind the group of the time frame, noting what is left to cover or how much time is left.</i></li> <li>• <i>Pause for a short energizer.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>One participant frequently repeats the same comment</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Offer a summary of what has been said to show understanding.</i></li> <li>• <i>Invite other participants to share their thoughts/feelings about what has been shared.</i></li> <li>• <i>Note that you would like to hear from some new voices in the conversation.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>People bring up side issues that take the group off course</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Summarize what went on before the distraction.</i></li> <li>• <i>Pose a question: "how can we tie this to our topic?"</i></li> <li>• <i>Inform the speaker that (s)he is bringing up the topic of another workshop (if that is true).</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Challenge:</u></b> <i>One member tells long, personal stories or rambles on and on</i></p>	<p><b><u>Possible responses:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Bring the group back in time and place: "We've heard some personal stories, so let's return now to the topic of..."</i></li> <li>• <i>Sum up for the speaker by interrupting on a breath.</i></li> <li>• <i>Try to link the story to the designated topic and restate the question.</i></li> </ul>

## TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE CO-FACILITATION

### **BEFORE THE SESSION**

- Schedule ample time for planning
- Take some time to get to know each other
- Discuss each other's style of planning and facilitating
- Avoid making assumptions about one another
- Take time to discuss your views about the topic (especially examine areas of disagreement)
- Discuss any concerns about potential challenges that participants may present
- Find out whether and when it is okay to interrupt
- Decide how to keep track of time
- Strategize about how to stick to the original outline and how to switch gears
- Plan ways to give signals to one another
- Divide facilitation of activities fairly
- Agree to arrive at the workshop site in time to set up and check-in before the workshop begins
- Schedule time after the workshop to debrief

### **DURING THE SESSION**

- Keep communicating with each other throughout the session
- Support and validate one another
- During activities that don't require constant attention, check-in with one another
- Include your co-facilitator even when you are leading an exercise or discussion, by asking, for example: "Do you have anything to add?"
- Use lots of eye contact
- Assert yourself if your co-facilitator is talking too much
- Remember that it is okay to make mistakes
- Take the initiative to step in if your co-facilitator misses an opportunity to address a relevant point

### **AFTER THE SESSION**

- Discuss what worked well
- Examine what did not work
- Brainstorm what could have been done differently
- Listen carefully to one another's self-evaluation before giving feedback
- Name particular behaviors, for example: "When you kept interrupting me, I felt undermined and frustrated", or "I got the impression that some participants were bored", instead of "You always interrupt me" or "You were very controlling during the workshop."
- Realize the importance and potential difficulty of debriefing a challenging session



## KEY PLANNING QUESTIONS FOR CO-FACILITATORS

- *How detailed would you like to be in planning for the session? What are the benefits and consequences of that approach?*
- *Do you prefer structure or flexibility? How might we achieve balance?*
- *What should we do if we are behind schedule? Ahead of schedule?*
- *What should we do if one facilitator misses a key point? How do you feel about your co-facilitator interjecting?*
- *What are some topics about which you are most comfortable facilitating? Least comfortable?*
- *How do we want to respond to silence? Humor? Conflict? Emotion? Off-topic conversation?*
- *How should we check-in/give feedback to each other, during and after each session?*