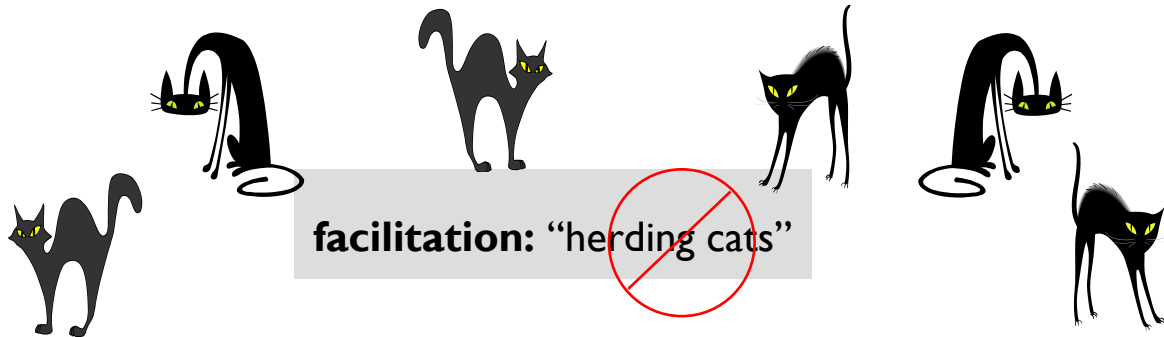

Facilitation Hints and Tips

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This is an evolving document. Someday, it may be a book. For now, it is a collection of thoughts about facilitation that I periodically expand and share. I hope it helps.

Before the Meeting

Planning the Goals. The discussion of goals should address specific outcomes that planners want the meeting to achieve, and longer-term goals that the program wants to accomplish. This may require more or less effort, depending on the standardization, participants, complexity, and purpose of the meeting. For example, a weekly staff meeting, which should still be planned, would not require the same level of preparation as a stakeholders meeting. The first few times that any group meets, the facilitator should pay special attention to planning details, especially goals.

Developing the Meeting Strategy. In this stage of the planning process, the purpose is to take each goal and determine the best way to reach it through selected activities, discussions, or other methods. There are many tools to help make meetings effective, ranging from ways to test the strength of consensus to methods for quickly categorizing ideas and information. A facilitator should work to provide the best strategies as planning discussions reveal needs. For example, developing an overview of a subject can be productively accomplished with small groups one-by-one adding virtual or paper “sticky notes” to a wall, to create like categories and identify gaps.

Creating the Agenda. After planning discussions, the facilitator should develop an annotated agenda, that will lay out each activity and timeframe with specific descriptions of what will be done, who will do it, and what the outcome should be. The annotated agenda will also identify “backup plans” if strategies do not seem to work as planned. For example, a facilitator may prepare a set of questions to ensure that all topics



are covered if the discussion narrows in on a few favorite topics. After agreement on the annotated agenda, the facilitator should develop a meeting agenda (sans annotations) for publications and distribution to participants.

Identifying Potential Strengths and Weaknesses. As part of meeting planning discussions, it is important for to identify areas that could sabotage the meeting progress, or items that could help ensure its success. Discussions may include, for example, participants who may have strong positions on certain topics, those who do not generally get along with one another, or those who have communication traits that could have an impact, positively or otherwise, on group dynamics. This discussion also includes such topics as how much leeway there is in the schedule (e.g., must lunch begin at a certain time, or does the room need to be vacated at a certain time). Other discussions here include resources (e.g., might the group want a projector to post notes, or need a printer to edit notes). Many topics can fall into this category of discussion; it is likely that the discussion will be visited often.



Meeting Facilitation

At a minimum, the meeting should include guiding introductions (if anyone new is in the meeting), presenting participant agreements, presenting an agenda overview, checking in periodically, and discussing next steps.

Guiding Introductions. The meeting begins with round-robin introductions. Even if participants know one another, the facilitator can ask each participant what he/she would like the meeting to accomplish. This helps to assess how much consensus about meeting goals exists within the group. Also, participants' responses allow the facilitator to, for example, immediately alert participants when their intentions for the meeting are not in line with goals, or to assess the strength and diversity of opinions about certain goals.

Presenting Participant Agreements. After introductions, the facilitator will introduce Participant Agreements, and ask if everyone is willing to abide by the agreements for the course of the meeting. The following core agreements are an example, which can be revised as necessary during the planning process:

- **Participate fully.** In addition to being an invitation to speak during the meeting, this agreement also reminds people that they should be “fully present” in the meeting, holding phone calls, internet searches, email checks and so forth, until a break.
- **Let one person speak at a time.** This is a reminder that no side conversations take place, so that 1) everyone can hear all of the discussion, and 2) those taking notes are not missing important points because of the noise level.
- **Honor confidentiality.** Although there may not specifically be confidential information discussed, it is important that participants agree to hold their discussions in an

atmosphere that everyone feels comfortable speaking freely, without fear that their ideas or opinions will be broadcast to colleagues not affiliated with the meeting.

- **Honor timeframes.** This is an agreement between the facilitator and participants that the facilitator will ensure that the meeting finishes on time each day, if the participants arrive on time, and come back from breaks as requested.
- **Criticize ideas not people.** This is a reminder that “personal attacks” are not acceptable. People should be free to disagree about ideas, but not to engage in ad hominem assaults.

Presenting an Agenda Overview. This provides another opportunity for participants to introduce items that they had hoped would be covered at the meeting. (Items that cannot be covered at the meeting will be identified and noted for later discussions, either at the meeting if time permits, or on a conference call, or other venue, at a later date). This is also an opportune time for leaders to give a “pep talk” to their colleagues about taking advantage of the meeting opportunity to accomplish as much as possible.

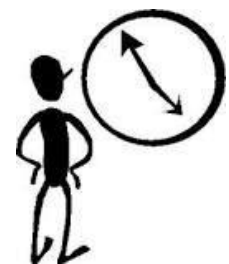
Checking-in Periodically. The facilitator should check in with the participants several times during the meeting, to ensure that everyone understands where the group is, in relation to the agenda and goals, and to ask if anyone needs to ask questions or add additional ideas. The facilitator can work with the team to adjust the agenda and activities as required.

Discussing Next Steps. By the end of a fruitful meeting, people have not “spent” their ideas. They continue to think of new and innovative topics for further discussion or action. So that those ideas are not lost as the meeting progresses, a short time should be set aside toward the end of the meeting to collect those ideas, and determine if there is an obvious priority or agenda item that should be further addressed. This is also an opportunity to list follow-on tasks and responsibilities, if the meeting has produced such a list.

Facilitation Skills

In addition to the items listed above, addressing the content and process of the meeting discussions is the true job of a facilitator. A good facilitator should be able to keep the group on track, and on time. More importantly, a facilitator has to be cognizant of group dynamics and use them to provide supports and mitigate barriers to meeting goals. Most importantly, a good facilitator needs the mental agility and memory skills to continually process the conversations and feed ideas or summaries back to the group in a way that ensures progress.

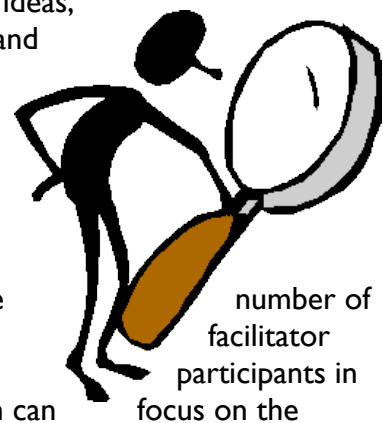
Staying on Track and on Time. Participants often remark to facilitators that they have done a good job “keeping us on track,” “checking the time,” or “herding the cats.” Staying on track and on time, even with a group that is not easily led (e.g., “cats”) are important jobs of the facilitator, although not enough, in themselves, to ensure a successful meeting.



Do not be shy about calling a group to order, calling those lagging in from a break, or asking participants to stop a discussion that has gotten “off track.” In addition, the facilitator should constantly assess progress against goals and time, so that adjustments can be made to the planned schedule or activities.

Recognizing and Using Group Dynamics. A good facilitator will quickly recognize those members of a group who can move it forward, and those who can keep it from making progress. Employing specific skills to support those who can benefit the group, while re-directing those who move the group away from progress can be a learned skill. However, working with the group dynamics in a way that allows everyone a chance to express opinions, and with an approach that seems natural and does not appear to “single out” certain participants is a special skill. For example, when a person is interrupting or “hogging the conversation,” the facilitator can employ many ways to ask the person to stop, or can ignore the person by not calling on them. As an example, the facilitator walks into the center of the group periodically as a way to better engage them. When someone is interrupting, the facilitator steps into the center, then pauses with her back to the person who is interrupting and calls on someone else. This movement around the group seems perfectly natural, and works to quell the disruption without calling attention to it.

Employing Mental Agility and Memory Skills. A facilitator should be continually looking for similarities and differences in ideas and opinions; categorizing ideas, either “in his head” or on paper; summarizing discussion points; and feeding summaries back to the group. This allows the group to continually progress. For example, when the facilitator says, “It appears that all of the comments on this topic are in agreement, why don’t we move on,” the group can begin discussion of another topic. In addition, if there is some agreement, the facilitator can point that out, to let the group focus on areas of disagreement. Additionally, at some point in every discussion, the topics at hand becomes cumbersome. When that happens, the should be prepared to note potential categories, to assist grouping like ideas. Once the related ideas are pooled, discussion can outliers, or on the gaps.



number of
facilitator
participants in
focus on the

Post-Meeting Reporting

At a minimum, every meeting should have a report that lists a summary of major discussion points, an action plan, follow-up tasks or action items and responsibilities, and timelines.

Your job as a facilitator is to:

Manage the group's **processes** and **interactions** to achieve defined **outcomes** within the **time** available.

You can do this by:

- "Setting the stage"
- Listening
- Noting
- Organizing
- Analyzing
- Summarizing
- Feeding back
- Encouraging
- Reframing
- Paraphrasing
- Questioning

facilitate: make easy or less difficult or more easily achieved



Your job as a facilitator is NOT to:

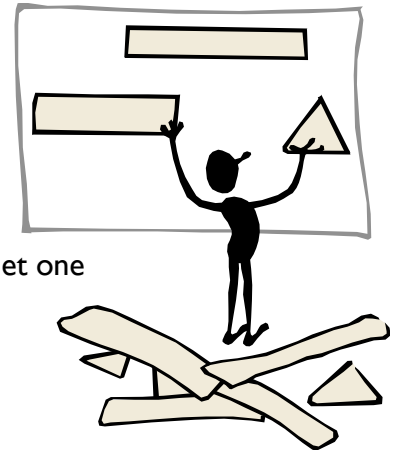
- Assert authority or control the group
- Participate as a group member or leader
- Insert content into the group's discussions
- Persuade the group to a point of view or decision
- Assess or judge the group member's opinions or group's decisions



Managing Processes

Set ground rules and refer to them when necessary.

- When referring to the ground rules, remind the entire group; don't select out individual behavior.
- Be "playful" more than stern.
 - "Time out folks, we're not following our agreement to let one person talk at a time," is okay. "Fred, please stop your side conversation," is not okay.



List tasks, in order, and expected outcomes.

- Be prepared to diverge from the plan, but don't let go of the "big picture" of what you need to accomplish.
- Constantly be planning how the rest of the process can accommodate how the current process is unfolding.

Periodically check in with the group about where they are in the process.

- If they're really diverging, bring it to their attention and ask if that is the group's intention.

Don't be afraid to ask the group how they want to proceed.

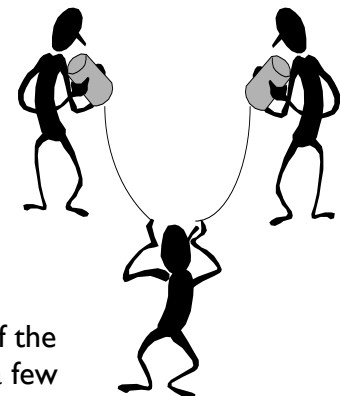
Adopt group members' suggestions that are helpful about how to proceed. For example, "Let's give it a shot and see if that will move us forward."

- If you think a suggestion won't work well, ask the group if they'd like to adopt it, "Mary thinks we should do 'X.'" Do the rest of you agree that we should proceed that way?"

Managing Interactions

Take seriously your task that everyone should get a chance to speak.

- Not only does this enrich the discussion, but it allows you to cut people off who are talking too much, by saying, "Joan has been waiting for a chance to speak; let's give her a turn."
- Let the group talk freely without calling on them. However, if the discussion ends up narrowly focused on a topic, or between a few people, step in to call on people who want a chance to talk. Once



you do this, most of the group will begin to look for your direction in who gets to speak.

Note ideas on a flipchart (or ask a group member to volunteer to do so).

- The points of the flipchart notes are to (1) organize the discussion, and (2) let people know they've been heard.
- Use the flipchart to move the discussion along as necessary. For example, "I've got that idea noted. Let's see if there are other ideas to add to our list."
- You should be organizing the discussion for the group as you note it.
 - Plan how you are going to note the discussion and organize your notes.
 - Use different colors to denote different objectives you're trying to accomplish, or different areas of agreement.
 - List notes in outline form, with symbols and indentations to make clear how the thoughts are organized.
 - Use symbols, (e.g., dashes, dots, shapes), rather than numbers and letters to create the outline. The discussion moves too quickly to keep track of which letter or number you are on. As you note the discussion, it is better to be thinking, for example, "Major topic - use dash, subtopic – use dot, topic from previous discussion – use blue, really important idea – use star, the group seems to have consensus – underline."



Don't be afraid to let the group have short silences.

If you think that people will get caught up in their own agendas during a discussion, or that they will narrowly focus on an idea to the exclusion of others:

- Introduce the topic, and start the discussion by asking group members to take a few moments to note their top priority ideas on a note pad. Then, go around the room and ask for each person's top idea. Only open up the discussion after everyone has had a chance to express his/her highest priority opinions.

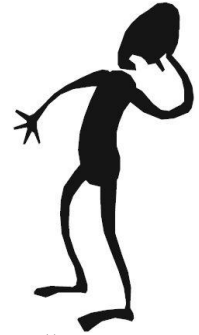
To diffuse one-on-one tensions:

- Ask for more opinions when one-on-one discussions or arguments start.
 - Say "[Name] has been waiting for a chance to talk."

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- Don't be afraid to let group members diffuse tensions in their own way, if it's constructive. For example, someone may ask someone else to stop interrupting by saying, "Let me finish."

When the group needs to work through disagreements:

- Test assumptions. "What assumptions are you making about that idea John," or "Does everyone agree with John that [assumption]?"
- Define terms. A major source of disagreements is that people are using the same words to refer to different concept or ideas. When people are disagreeing, ask, "Raoul, how do you define 'X'?" Then ask, "Maria, does Raoul's description match yours," or "Maria, how do you define 'X'?"
- Look for agreements. Narrow down the disagreement by understanding and pointing out where there are agreements. For example, "It sounds to me like we have a consensus that the sky is blue. We're trying to get a handle on how to describe the clouds. Is that correct?"
 - When there's agreement or consensus, move the group on. They don't need to keep talking about something that they agree about. For example, say, "It seems like we have consensus here. Let's spend time on the next topic."



Consensus means that everyone in the group "can live with" an idea, not that everyone agrees. Generally, you're better off asking if the group has consensus than agreement.

- If you can't read it from the discussion, to get a quick idea of the group consensus:
 - Summarize the topic or decision.
 - Ask the group for a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down."
 - If pretty much everyone has "thumbs up," give those who disagree a chance to speak, and see if you can move on.
- When the group cannot get past a disagreement, set it aside temporarily.
 - For example, say, "We've just got a few minutes to finish this part of the discussion, and I'm not sure that we can solve this issue by then. Let's set it aside and we can come back to it later."
 - If it's that important, someone will remind you to come back to it later. Often, it's a "philosophical" difference that gets further discussed outside of the group.



Don't speak for the group, even when you're summarizing their thoughts.

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- Don't say "This is what you said." Say, "Let me see if I'm understanding this correctly," or "I interpreted what you said as 'X.' Is that correct?"
 - Use the question, "Is that correct," or "Am I right about that," often.

If a topic continues to come up again and again after the group has moved on, it means that there was not really agreement or consensus about the topic.

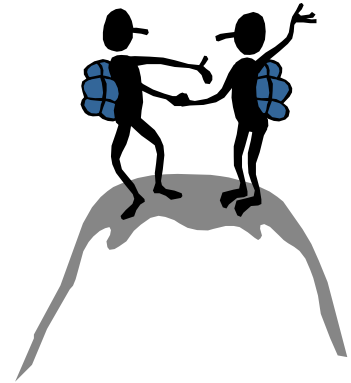
- Depending on the circumstances, either give the group a chance to re-open the discussion, or remind them that they have finished that discussion and need to move on.
- At a minimum, note the topic again, so that the person bringing it up "feels heard" again.

If someone is really disruptive to the group, take them aside at the break, and say something like, "Lee, it seems like we're not really getting at something that's on your mind. Can you explain it to me so that I can help the group to focus on it?" Or, "Lee, you have so many great ideas that I keep calling on you, but I really need to give a few others a chance to speak when we get back from the break. I'm sure you understand what I mean. Thanks."

Achieving Outcomes

Reorganize, summarize, and synthesize regularly.

- This is a good tool when conversation is getting "bogged down" because it brings them back to "bigger picture."
- To get their attention, start the summary by explaining what you're trying to do, and remind them that you're summarizing their words.
 - For example, "Let me be sure I'm understanding where the group is and what you've decided before we move on..." (Note the stated expectation that you intend for the group to "move on" after your summary).
- Periodically check in with the group about their progress in accomplishing outcomes.
 - If they're really diverging, bring it to their attention and say, "It seems like we're doing 'X.' I just want to be sure that this will get us to [outcome]."



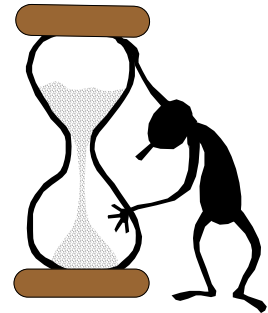
Managing Time

Have a very clear idea about what you need to have accomplished at various stages of the discussion.

- Plan this in advance, and have a "Plan B" about what can "slip" and what cannot.
- Plan how you could accommodate "slips."

Constantly be planning how the rest of the process can accommodate how the current timeline is unfolding.

- Periodically remind the group about where they are in the process and how much time they have left to accomplish a task(s).
- If someone seems to be always extending the discussion so that the group goes over time limits, ask that person to be the timekeeper.
 - For example, “We need to finish our discussion of ‘X’ within about 15 minutes. George, would you keep us posted on the time so that we don’t go beyond that?”



People will take breaks until you call them back to the meeting. Call them back a couple of minutes before you plan to start.

- Assume that all breaks will take 5 to 10 minutes longer than you plan, even when you manage them tightly.
- Don’t tell people to “be back in 15 minutes.” Tell them to “be back at 3:30.”