

Facilitating fun and effective meetings



Good facilitation makes meetings more useful and more enjoyable for everyone there, and helps groups become more effective. The facilitator serves the group, helping them to keep to agreed meeting processes and attempting to maximise the democracy and inclusivity of those processes.

This handout sets out some key facilitation roles and responsibilities, then lists a series of practical tools you and your group may find useful in fulfilling these roles.

Remember, these roles don't necessarily need to be all fulfilled by one "facilitator" – good facilitation relies a lot on the whole group sharing responsibility for taking on the roles which are needed for a meeting to run well

Facilitation Roles and Responsibilities

Preparing for a group meeting

The meeting space must be chosen and prepared appropriately. Ideally it should be comfortable, and set up to encourage participation. A circle of chairs works well – everyone can see each other and there is no automatic hierarchy in a circle. Make sure there's enough light, air, food & drink to suit the meeting. Are you competing with any other noise? Tea & coffee slow a meeting down, so if you want it short and focussed, it might be best to give it a miss, or wait until afterwards.

Think about meeting times –will people have to skip a meal to attend? Falling blood sugar leads to irritability and lack of focus, so have snacks on hand and plan to take breaks where needed. Will people need to leave in a hurry? If so make sure all important discussion is at the start of the meeting, or time keep so you finish on time.

Prepare the Agenda – work with the group to prioritise agenda items, allocate time to each, etc. Have all the action points from the last meeting been completed? If people are due to report back to this meeting, are you sure they are coming? If not, can someone else fill in for them? Will all the information needed to take decisions be available at the meeting?

However your group sets its agendas, always leave room for additions, so that the whole group can take part in forming the plan for the meeting and thus feel more involved in the discussions. It might be worth talking through suggested agenda items and prioritising them with the group in the first few minutes of the meeting. Finally, make a sensible estimate of the time the agenda will take. If you only have an hour to meet, and two hours of stuff to discuss, make that clear at the start of the meeting, prioritise and arrange another time for the remaining items.

Do you need support? For example, if you are planning on contributing to the discussion, you will need to ask someone to *co-facilitate*. They can step in to the facilitators role for the relevant agenda item, so you can express your opinion without risk of prejudicing the discussion. Can you keep an eye on the time, and still focus on the way the meeting is running? If not ask someone to *timekeep*.

Make sure the meeting is publicised properly in advance. Does everyone know it's going to take place? Are there things people need to be asked to bring along or prepared in advance? Were there action points from last time which it'd be worth chasing up to make sure they've been done?

During a meeting

Once the meeting begins your role as facilitator can be broken down into two areas – *Task* roles and *Maintenance* roles.

Some Key Maintenance Roles:

Establishing common ground – any action group comes together because of a shared belief in the need to make change. This is your common ground. Bringing the group back to focus on what they share helps prevent small conflicts getting out of proportion. If the group seems caught up in disagreement, remind it of the common ground it shares.

Bringing out and resolving conflict – following on from ‘common ground’ is resolving conflict. It can be tempting to brush disagreement under the carpet, and hope it’ll somehow disappear. It rarely does. It’s worth bringing the conflict into the open and working to find resolution early on. The longer you leave it, the harder this will be.

Maintaining democracy & participation – a healthy group needs equality and respect. It’s therefore important for you to make sure everyone not only gets the chance to air their views, but feels like they have been listened to, and their contribution valued. So part of the role of the facilitator is to encourage the quiet people and keep some control on the loud and dominant ones.

Some Key Task Roles:

Keeping to agenda – once the group has agreed an agenda, it’s important to try and stick to it. The facilitator may often have to bring rambling discussion back to an agenda item, or stop it running on to the next item before the previous one is resolved.

Reworking the agenda – sometimes it will become apparent that the agenda needs to change. Maybe new items emerge, or it’s obvious that more time is needed for a sensible discussion on an item. Rather than just letting the meeting run on, the facilitator can work with the group to rearrange the agenda – altering time allotted to items, or agreeing that certain items can wait until another meeting. As a last resort the group can agree to overrun on the time allowed for the meeting, but try not to let this happen regularly.

Maintaining group focus – bringing the group back to agenda items when it gets sidetracked, looking out for areas of agreement and clear proposals for action, and making sure they are given a proper hearing. As facilitator your key role is to help the meeting achieve its purpose - moving ideas forwards and translating them into action.

Recording decisions and action points – it’s surprisingly easy for decisions to get made, then get lost in the other business of the meeting; or for someone to volunteer, but never get the approval of the group to do the task; or for a task to arise for which no-one volunteers, but yet the meeting moves on anyway. As a facilitator, you should bring the group back to these tasks and volunteers and make sure one job is done before the next is started.

Testing for agreement – Often it will fall to the facilitator to notice that the group is nearing agreement, and can move on to a firm decision. Groups can waste a lot of time talking around ideas which they largely agree on. It’s worth presenting the group with the ideas you’re hearing and asking for some sign of agreement or disagreement. If you get a clear indication, one way or the other, you can ask someone to present a proposal for action to the group for adoption.

Evaluating the meeting - at the end leave at least a few minutes to discuss how the meeting went, find out what could have worked better, and what lessons need learning (for you and the group) for next time.

After the meeting

Circulate decisions / action points . Your meeting will have been a waste of time if the decisions aren’t acted upon – make sure everyone knows what’s been decided, what they need to get done, and when the next meeting is.

Facilitation Toolkit

Here are a few practical tools and techniques facilitators often use to help them fulfil their roles:

The Agenda – Having a decent agenda is a key tool in keeping a meeting focused and sticking to time. It's often easier to keep to an agenda if it's 'owned' by the group as a whole, so try to give everyone an input into forming it. Once the agenda is set, you can put rough timings by each item, and these can give you a guide as to when to move the meeting on. The agenda then gives you a mandate to remind everyone to stay focused when they talk off subject.

Meeting Ground rules – Ground rules act as a gentle reminder of the way the group would like it's meetings to run. So for example you might have a 'no interrupting' rule, or a 'show respect for each others' opinions' rule. It is useful for the facilitator to be able to say "we agreed that we wouldn't interrupt each other. Is everyone still happy that we try to abide by that rule?". It's a lot less harsh than barking "stop interrupting!". You can tailor your ground rules to your group – so a 'stick to time' rule is useful for groups that often overrun or lose focus etc.

Active agreement is a useful groundrule, in which everyone agrees to take an active part in making decisions. When the group is asked a question or has to make a decision, the facilitator must insist on active agreement. Too many bad decisions are made because people stare at their feet rather than clearly agree or disagree. Later on those same people may feel that the decision was not one they supported, leading to tension in the group. By insisting on active dis/agreement this can be avoided and decisions that represent the views of all can be reached. Having an **hand signal** which indicates agreement can be one quick way of showing agreement.

Hand signals – make meetings run more smoothly, make it easier for everyone to contribute, and also help the facilitator see emerging agreements and common ground. The most basic and essential hand signal is "put your hand/ finger up if you want to speak". Some groups also use "2 hands for a directly relevant point", or waving a hand with fingers pointing up to indicate agreement or down to indicate disagreement.

Flip-charts, or any big sheets of paper, can help a group focus together on an agenda item. Good for gathering together ideas (e.g from a brainstorm) focusing on a set of problems, making sure you have a shared understanding of something.

Throwing It Back To The Group -Your key asset as a facilitator is the group you are working with. If you ever find yourself stuck for an idea on how to move things on ask the group. Throwing it back to the group isn't a cop out - it's the best tool you have.

Checking with the group – regularly ask to find out how they're feeling, whether they need a break, want the agenda modifying and are happy with the decisions being made. After all you are there to serve the group, and it encourages a sense of ownership.

Brainstorming -people shout out ideas without fear of comment or criticism - an excellent way to get the creative juices flowing. Usually ideas get recorded on a flipchart/ big piece of paper. Often works best in combination with other more analytical tools e.g. small groups, go-rounds and prioritising.

Prioritising through giving people a certain number of dots to stick/draw by a list of ideas can help focus a group on the ideas/ problems/ campaigns they think are most important.

Go-rounds - where everyone in turn is given the same time to speak uninterrupted and without comment or criticism.

Sharing roles within the group –You don't have to take on the burden of facilitation alone. Roles others can take on to support you in the role of facilitator might include:

- **Recorder/ Note taker** – takes down the key decisions, who's doing what, and when.
- **Mood watcher**– watches the mood of the meeting to note tension rising, lack of focus, flagging energy etc. They can then suggest that the groups takes appropriate action, like taking a break etc.
- **Doorkeeper/ gatekeeper/ meeter-and-greeter** – meets and greets people (esp newcomers) on the way in, and can check they all know what the meeting is for, how it will work etc.
- **Co-facilitator** – someone to step in and facilitate if the facilitator is flagging, or feels a need to take a position on an issue.
- **Timekeeper** – makes sure each agenda item gets enough time for discussion, and that the meeting finishes at the agreed time.
- **Jargon-buster** – makes the meeting more accessible and less intimidating by making sure the language is clear to everyone, and that acronyms like “WTO” or “LDF” are explained.
- **Mingler** – makes sure newcomers are integrated into social meetings, encourages other group members not to clump together in scary looking groups...

Reframing - a key use of active listening, that helps show people that they have been listened to. It means listening carefully to what someone says, then repeating it back succinctly in your own words, to check that you have understood their point. It's a useful tool for clarifying and moving forward discussion. Make sure you personalise your statements - "it sounds to me like what you're saying is..."

Breaking into small groups - this can help those intimidated by larger groups speak up and have their views fed back to the rest of the group. It can break up any negative dynamics within a group, and encourage people to listen to different perspectives. It can also save time!

"Think and listens"- people pair up and speak to each other, uninterrupted, for anything from 30 seconds to 5 minutes depending on the issue being discussed. They then swap. It's important that the listener makes a real effort to listen, including keeping good eye contact and remaining attentive! Each pair can then feed back their opinions to the whole group. Some groups find this a useful technique for developing ideas and boosting confidence.

Speakers list ("stacking") - the facilitator notes down people's names as they raise a finger to show they want to speak, then invites them to speak in that order. The group will soon become impatient with people that ignore this protocol and just barge in and interrupt.

“Tension breakers”/ Icebreakers/ silly games – getting people to play a game / do a silly exercise can lift energy levels and the mood, and so help the meeting re-focus and be more productive. They can also encourage people to feel more comfortable with each other and so more willing to participate constructively. Beware games that make people feel self—conscious/ left out.

Note-taking / minutes– recording what's decided and what jobs need doing, so that your meeting leads to action.

Breaks – often if a discussion is stuck in a rut, people are getting irritable or losing focus, or there's some interpersonal tensions that need sorting, a break can actually save you time as people have a chance to collect their thoughts and re-focus. A break can also give the facilitator some space to plan a new approach.

“New Voices” – if a discussion is being dominated by a few people, saying that you'll prioritise contributions from people who haven't spoken yet can be an effective way of making the dominators hold back and give others a chance to contribute. Avoid doing this in a way that makes a shy individual feel “on the spot” and pressured to speak against their will.