



Group Facilitation Skills

Facilitation has been described as being of service to others.

One dictionary definition describes it as the '*process of making something easy or easier*' (Encarta 2007). In order to provide this service for making something easier for others, a facilitator requires a broad range of skills.

An important aspect of any work in community is harnessing ideas and how well this is facilitated can make or break the group. How often have we heard stories of how meetings have collapsed because of personality clashes and with individual agendas getting in the way of the work to be done?

Facilitation Covers

- research and planning
- reflective listening skills (being able to paraphrase what is being said to
- show that you understand the information given)
- conflict resolution skills
- decision making skills
- questioning skills
- self awareness – knowing your own triggers.

Facilitators should have good leadership skills. A good leader provides enough input to empower participants and give them confidence to assert themselves and as participants gain confidence, the good leader will retreat to the background, to allow participants to take more initiative in the process.

When a meeting is facilitated well and discussion flows seamlessly, one could assume that the facilitator's job is an easy one. Wrong.

Facilitators require a broad skill base including a good knowledge of:

- personal triggers and managing them
- maintaining the meeting process
- issues around equity and ethics

- time keeping
- verbal communication
- strategic questioning
- listening and reflection
- conflict resolution
- consensus and decision making processes
- planning processes and achieving outcomes
- group dynamics
- facilitation tools
- evaluation processes
- report writing

While these are a broad range of skills don't be daunted. You may be surprised at what you already know when you assess your own skill level and you may just need to update or add to existing knowledge. Facilitation training is always beneficial, but the application of your current practical know-how is a good start.

Personal triggers and maintaining the meeting process

A facilitator can never remain totally neutral. We all have our own values and position on what we believe is right or wrong. However, if you believe that you are becoming, or could become embroiled in the content of the meeting, you will need to acknowledge this and resolve with the group how to proceed. Your job as facilitator is to maintain the process to enable the group to resolve their issues, not to impose your position.

Equity issues

- Think about how you will facilitate an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander group. What will you need to do prior to the session? What acknowledgements should be made and respectful processes used if participating on the traditional land of our first people?
- For culturally diverse groups: What will you need to research prior to the meeting?
- Have you ascertained if there are any special needs participants, who may require assistance to make them feel included and valued in the group?
- What about access to the meeting space?

When the group first meets, the facilitator is in a strong position of power. They are directing the process and they may have a lot more knowledge about the project than the group participants. This is one of the reasons why it is important for the facilitator to remain focused on the process. If they begin to contribute to the content in their position of power, the group could just acquiesce to what the facilitator suggests and this is not the facilitator's role.

A facilitator showing good leadership qualities will be well aware of power dynamics and as the group progresses and becomes more confident, the facilitator/leader will allow the group to be more pro-active in driving the process as well, with their role transforming from facilitator into coach and mentor.

Knowing who your participants are will allow you to provide additional support if required. For example, a younger or socially disadvantaged person may feel intimidated about contributing to

the discussion and you may need to include particular activities that will enable them to participate. You may have an elderly person in the group who is hard of hearing, where you position them therefore, might be imperative for their engagement with the process.

Ethical issues

It is important to be open about anything that arises, or if there are any agendas at the beginning, own up to them. Sometimes councils may hold meetings/forums to consult with community, but they have already made a decision about what they wish to do and the community is merely the 'rubber stamp'. If this is the case, find out from council where the stakeholders can have input in the decision making and be open about the limitations; or alternatively, you may not wish to be involved in such a tokenistic process.

Never conceal information, if discovered you will lose the trust of the group; if you are not sure about something, say so and offer to find out and let people know at the next meeting; and if you make a mistake, don't cover it up, admit to it and move on.

Time keeping

This is an important aspect of facilitating. If the meeting is to run for 1.5 hrs and it goes well over, you will not only lose participants, but the energy and focus will dissipate, making any extra time spent counter-productive. You may also lose people from future meetings, if their time and contribution is not honoured.

Listening and reflection skills

To actively listen means what it implies:

- listen with your whole being
- focus solely on the interviewee
- maintain open body language
- maintain eye contact
- reflect back what you have heard.

Reflecting back to the interviewee what you have heard, allows you to make sure that you have understood what has been said, this is called paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is also useful for the interviewee, as it allows them to correct you if you have misunderstood them and it helps them to clarify their thoughts on the topic.

Verbal communication and questioning skills

Facilitation is about drawing out the content discussed by the group, in order to make decisions that will advance the group's objectives. Open questioning skills are a useful tool to harness information. An open question gets people talking rather than a closed question, which requires only a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

Fran Peavey, who popularised the tool Strategic Questioning, talks about short lever and long lever questions. Short lever questions provide a foundation and help to develop rapport and trust

in order to allow deeper dialogue to happen. Long lever questions delve deeper. Strategic questioning is a wonderful way to glean information, but it requires understanding and practice.

For further insight on Strategic questioning www.jobsletter.org.nz/vivian/strat704.ht

Open Questions changingminds.org/techniques/questioning/open_closed_questions.htm

Conflict resolution skills

Conflict can be perceived as negative; however, conflict is a robust part of life and will happen when differing opinions collide. It is how we deal with conflict so that all opinions are heard and valued that leads to resolution.

Conflict resolution network: www.crnhq.org/pages.php?pid=12#skill_5

Conflict management skills: <http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor/7labor/13.htm>

Consensus and decision making processes

When groups make decisions, they can either vote or use a consensus process. Consensus decision making is usually more time consuming. It can allow for fuller discussion around an issue and enables participants to view the issue from different perspectives. Dissenting voices express their concerns until a position is reached that is acceptable to all.

www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Consensus.html

Group dynamics

Group dynamics is a science. Having an understanding of how groups engage and evolve over time will assist you to be prepared for any eventuality in your group.

In the 1960's, Bruce Tuckman developed a model that described the five stages of group development, which is still applicable, he called it: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning:

1. forming this is the time when everyone first meets and are on their best behaviour, as they want to be accepted by the group.
2. storming as people get to know each other and become comfortable in the group, personalities can begin to clash. The facilitator will need to have a good understanding of group dynamics and conflict resolution skills.
3. norming if the group can survive the storming period, the group will begin to bond. Trust develops and tasks can be allocated to group members.

4. performing the group is functioning optimally. There is total trust and participants are committed to the activity and perform well in their roles.
5. adjourning the activity is finished, the report produced and a celebration may highlight the occasion. The group will now dissolve and may go through a grieving process, as strong relationships will have been established.

Resources for Group Dynamics, Small Groups and Community Building - www.community4me.com/Resources.html

Facilitation tools and Evaluation processes

The facilitator should have a range of tools that can be used to fit particular tasks. Always make sure there is a good reason to introduce an activity and that it will achieve the outcome you require. For example, when the group is in the forming stage, you may introduce a number of icebreaking activities, see www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_76.htm this is a great site for a selection of facilitation tools.

To gather ideas around an issue, you may use brainstorming: the group thinks of as many ideas as possible and these are prioritised and the excellent ideas are chosen; and then a decision making tool: the excellent ideas are divided into two lists of 'musts' and 'wants' – the must list is prioritised and a decision reached. (Recording ideas on post-it notes makes it easy to shift them around in these exercises).

Planning an evaluation process is imperative for any project activity.

Planning will:

- establish milestones and the indicators necessary to demonstrate that they have been achieved
- make reporting easier at the end of the project
- assist you to identify what was done well and what could have been done better
- recommend improvements for future projects.

Evaluation activities take many forms. Below are links to a few approaches:

Introduction to Evaluation - www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/intreval.php

Basic Guide to Program Evaluation - www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm

Report writing

As well as evaluating the project, you may be required to write a report. You should ascertain from the client exactly what is required prior to the project starting. The report should be written in consultation with your stakeholder group. How much input they are expected to provide in the

writing of the document should be resolved? Some facilitators will write the report to the first draft stage and distribute it to the group and client for comments, before it is finalised.

Project progress report - www.networklearning.org

Enlivening spaces

We have learnt a lot about working with groups, about the rhythm of a session, and the mix of activity. Have you ever thought about preparing the space you work in? Here are some questions for reflection:

- Do you get there early to create the space as you want it to be?
- Which orientation of furniture feels best to achieve your purposes? (circle of chairs, set up around a square table, arc of chairs before the white board)
- Is there glare coming in the windows behind you?
- Is there any clutter in the space you will be presenting from?
- What will your participants see when they look towards you?
- Do you 'sound out' the room with word or song to sense how your voice will travel?
- Do you fill the space with your positive presence?
- Have you placed pens/paper/water/sweets on the work table?

FINAL TIP:

Experienced facilitators never leave home without extra whiteboard pens, blue tack, scissors & extension lead.

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