

FACILITATION TIPS

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For some of us the reality of trying to facilitate a discussion with a group of our colleagues is similar to trying to herd cats in a tornado or lasso a swarm of bees.

Pick your own metaphor. The outcome is the same. People are people and sometimes a group of professionals resist the structure of a facilitated dialog. Egos get in the way of constructive outcomes and we find ourselves fighting wars we never signed up for. And sometimes getting shot by others on the same team. Death by friendly fire is of doubtful valor.

So, what do we do as leaders when the group won't say anything? Or when two participating mavericks persist with their side conversations? Or when one Brahman-type bullies his/her way around the table?

After years of experience both as a facilitator and as one who has been facilitated (?), I have a few suggestions for your consideration and believe that they can help you *in Mining Group Gold* (book title by Thomas A. Kayser).

SEVEN STEPS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE DISCUSSIONS

1. *Ask for Feelings and Opinions*

Ask questions that help people express their ideas or that draw people out.

What is your reaction to....?

How do you feel about ?

What is your thinking on ?

How well is this discussion agreeing with your gut?

What is it about this issue that really excites you?

2. *Paraphrase*

Sometimes it helps to ask one person to repeat or paraphrase what they understood the other person said. Add a verifying question after the paraphrase to confirm the level of accuracy.

Let me see if I understood your point. Are you saying that ?

What I'm hearing you say on this is that Is that about right?

In other words, you believe that Do I have that right?

You're saying that Am I understanding you correctly?

3. *Ask for a Summary*

We've had a lot of good ideas presented in the last few minutes. I need someone to summarize the major points before we move forward.

It seems to me that Pat doesn't agree with Zack. Pat, will you summarize your major concerns with Zack's proposal?

4. *Ask for Clarification*

Maria, it looked like you might have a question about where we're headed. What is your view on what we need to do on this?

I didn't understand that last comment. Could you give me another chance?

5. *Ask for Examples*

Michelle, give us 1-2 examples of what you mean. . . could you do that, please?

Jose', could you expand just a bit on your thinking? Perhaps I need an example to see more clearly what you're saying on this.

6. *Stay Focused*

We were discussing the new By-Laws. Let's get back to that if we can.

I'm having a little difficulty seeing the connection between that situation you just mentioned and the specific issue we're looking at right now. Could you help us get that focused more clearly?

7 *Test for Consensus*

We seem to be saying that we want to ... Am I on target here? From the sound of this discussion it appears that we're agreeing to move forward with this new plan. Is this what you want to do?

HOW TO WORD QUESTIONS TO GET RESULTS

In order to gain the kind of participation you want, you need to word your questions carefully. A badly worded question can inhibit participation and arouse fear or hostility. Here are some DOs and DON'TS for wording questions:

Do:

- Phrase your question clearly and concisely.
- Ask questions that require participants to draw on their own experience.
- Ask questions that encourage the participants to explain their own viewpoints.
- Word your question so it is clear whether it is intended for the whole group or for a specific participant.
- Try to begin your questions with *what*, *why*, and *how*.
- Ask questions that cannot be answered in one word.

Don't:

- Ask questions that can be answered *yes* or *no*.
- Ask questions that might arouse antagonism.
- Ask personal questions that a participant may not want to answer before a group.
- Ask questions that put a participant on the spot -- such as, "Jane, I'm sure you have the right answer to this one"
- Ask questions that reflect your own opinion -- such as, "Don't you think that ?"

Handling Questions from the Group

Inexperienced leaders are often tempted to answer questions from participants asking for opinions or suggestions. By answering these questions, you will unwittingly give the impression that you are the expert and make the group afraid to offer its own opinions. Always remember, when a participant asks you for an opinion, that your role is to be neutral.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't answer *any* questions from other. Here are four kinds of questions you might be asked — and how you might handle them.

- *A question asking you to clarify a statement you've made.* You've made the statement, so you should answer any questions concerning it.
- *A question asking for clarification of your question.* Again, you should usually answer the question, although there are times when you can let the participants interpret your question themselves.
- *A question asking for factual information.* If you know the answer, you can give it -- but you might want to throw it back to the group if you think one of the participants would have the answer.

- *A question requiring you to give an opinion or make a proposal.* Never answer this kind of question, because it will take you out of your neutral role. Your best move is to throw the question back to the group. You might say:
 - “How would you answer Jim’s question?”
 - “How do the rest of you feel about that?”
 - “Jim asked _____?‘ How do you feel about it?”

HOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE RESPONSES FROM PARTICIPANTS

The success of a meeting depends on how fully the members participate. Participation is contagious — when one member participates, it tends to encourage others to do the same. As meeting leader, you can play a key role here. The way in which you acknowledge a participant's contribution can have either a negative or positive effect on the willingness of this person and the others to continue expressing their thoughts and opinions.

Your goal in acknowledging responses should be to maintain a positive atmosphere in which all members of the group feel free to participate fully. No doubt there are times when you will wish that one particular person would not talk so much. But you should keep in mind that stifling that member's responses will have a stifling effect on the other members of the group, too.

When acknowledging responses, your guiding principle should be neutrality. Avoid revealing your feelings about what a participant has said, either by your words, your tone of voice, or your facial expression. This doesn't mean you should appear uninterested. Always indicate that you are attentive and that you respect and appreciate the contribution.

There are some basic techniques you can use for acknowledging the responses of participants. The following table describes these techniques and gives some examples.

Technique: REACT NEUTRALLY

Basic Idea: Use noncommittal words. Don't agree or disagree with participant

Purpose:

1. Convey interest
2. Keep person talking

Examples:

1. "I see."
2. "Uh-huh."
3. "That's very interesting"
4. "I understand."

Technique: EXPLORE

Basic Idea: Ask questions:

1. Who
2. What
3. Where
4. Why
5. When

Purpose:

1. Gather additional facts
2. Help person explore all sides of a problem

Examples:

1. “Who developed the pilot program for you?”
2. “What do you feel the real problem is?”

Technique: RESTATE

Basic Idea: Restate all or part of person’s last sentence, or the basic idea of his or her statement.

Purpose:

1. Show you are listening and understand what person is saying.
2. Encourage person to talk

Examples:

1. I understand, your idea is....?
2. “This is your decision and the reasons are...”

PEOPLE WHO CAN MAKE A FACILITATOR'S JOB TOUGH

Dominator—always has right answer

Direct your attention away from the person by tactfully tossing a question to someone else. For example, you might say, "Let's hear several opinions on this."

Don't get defensive, but let the person know that you do appreciate his contributions. Ask him to summarize the key issues or major conclusions.

Wanderer; side tracker

Direct her attention to the topic on the table or chart pad.

Say something like this, "That's an interesting point, however with your permission I'd like to hold it until later."

Be patient, the group often pulls the discussion back on track.

If all else fails, try the direct approach, "Pat, that sounds interesting, but help me understand the relevance to the issue in front us right now."

Hostility toward group leader

Don't let yourself be pulled into an argument. Encourage the group to answer the person's charges or claims.

If possible, approach topic from a different perspective to reduce the person's antagonism.

Deal with the issue candidly, by saying something like this, "I get the impression, Pat, that it's tough to be a full participant in our discussion because of some strong feelings you may be experiencing toward me. What can we do to ensure that we get the benefit of your good thinking?"

Silent

When you ask this person a question, make direct eye contact.

Involve him in a sub-group and ask him to report back to the larger group. Ask a direct question that you know she can answer easily.

Talk with the person during a break to find out why he isn't participating.

Watch her body language closely. If you sense she was almost ready to say something, you can give them a warm invitation by saying something like this: "Peg, I thought you had something you wanted to say."

Side conversations

Stop talking and wait for the side conversation to end.

Stand behind the ones who are talking. Change the seating arrangement after a break.

Give one of the talking persons an assignment such as charting the responses.

Ask a direct question to one of the talkers.

Stubborn and frequent disagreement

Let the group handle this person.

Change the subject.

Ask the person to summarize the position he disagrees with.

Ask others if they agree with her. Usually the majority will not.