

Group Facilitation Skills

What is facilitation?

to facilitate is "to free from difficulties or obstacles", "to make easy or easier" or "to carry out a set of functions or activities before, during and after a meeting to help a group achieve its own objectives".

The Role of Facilitator

A facilitator is concerned primarily with group process - assisting the group work as a constructive and cohesive unit. This task has three parts:

1. Leading

- (a) **Focussing** - Providing a clear focus for the group's energy and activity. Ensuring the group stays on the topic.
- (b) **Stimulating** - Encouraging constructive discussion between group members.
- (c) **Supporting** - Bringing out information from introverted members of the group and to allow new ideas to be shared.
- (d) **Directing** - When the group is interacting poorly or in the wrong direction the facilitator must be willing to redirect the discussion.
- (e) **Team Building** - Establishing a safe, cohesive, interactive and cooperative group environment.

2. Being a referee (this is a stronger form of group facilitation)

- (a) **Regulating** - Maintaining order in the group discussion, discouraging participants from talking at the same time, or dominating the floor.
- (b) **Protecting** - Ensuring that all contributions to the discussion are treated equally and that no-one is rebuffed for their input. Controlling problem people within the group allowing everyone to participate freely.
- (c) **Timekeeping** - Ensuring the meeting giving adequate but not too much time to each item so as to complete the agenda.

3. Remaining personally neutral

- (a) **Being objective** - Being able to put aside personal preferences and taking an objective look at the discussion drawing out each viewpoint on its own merits.
- (b) **Encouraging fair feedback** - Promoting evaluation and discussion of each point raised, by all members of the group.
- (c) **Developing ideas** - Concentrating on both the group dynamics and the content of the discussion and drawing out ideas by asking pertinent and stimulating questions without pushing a personal agenda.

Facilitators also need:

1. Managerial skills and qualities

To be effective in the role of a facilitator the person needs to be effective as a manager, able to organise, delegate and follow up on details.

2. Communication

The ability to effectively make a point using verbal and non-verbal communication is important.

3. Planning the group environment

To arrange the venue for the meeting sensitively and to set it up in such a way that all barriers are removed between facilitator and audience.

Personal skills and qualities of facilitators

(a) Flexibility

The ability to fulfil different group roles; leader, supporter, inquisitor etc. in order to keep the group process fluid and maximise potential.

(b) Confidence

To instil confidence and a sense of safety in the group by appearing purposeful and in control, therefore dealing with natural anxiety and insecurity.

(c) Authenticity

To be consistent in approach to the task, not moving the goal posts, becoming trustworthy to the group.

(d) Patience/Perseverance

To appreciate the difficulties of group work and have the determination to see a task finished.

(e) Leadership (Presence)

To have the trust and respect of the group to immediately assume leadership if and when required.

(f) Integrity

To be an example to the group of how to conduct oneself in communication.

(g) Initiating

To be able to start the group working on the task or when a problem is discovered/developed to find an alternative way around it to maintain the working.

(h) Respectable

To have the respect of the group as being a person whom they can trust the judgement of.

(i) Perceptive

To have the capability to recognise undertones in the group; using the positive ones to the group's advantage and countering the negative ones appropriately.

Problems Facilitators May Encounter

i. Quiet/Shy Participant -

- A. a group member is not participating as they could. This may be because the participant is:
- shy, timid or insecure
 - indifferent to the issues being discussed
 - bored
 - feeling superior or above the proceedings
 - distracted by pressing issues outside the meeting
 - having trouble understanding the topic under discussion
 - in conflict with other group members
- B. possible interventions:
- make eye contact (connect) with the participant and ask a simple question
 - involve the participant in a small subgroup discussion as a way to break the ice
 - recognise any contribution immediately, sincerely and encourage more
 - ask during a break or in private about why the participant is so quiet
 - suggest that everyone takes a turn in sharing their view or opinion

ii. Overly Talkative Participant -

- A. a group member talks too much, rambles on repeatedly and is generally dominant. This may be caused by:
- a high need for attention
 - being overly prepared/unprepared for the meeting
 - wanting to flaunt knowledge
 - having or wanting to have the most authority
- B. possible interventions:
- during a pause for breath, thank the participant for their comments, and restate the agenda
 - emphasising relevant points and time limits
 - ask the participant to explain how their comments adds value to the topic in hand
 - reflect their comments back to the group
 - communicate personally with the member during a break
 - remind everyone of the need to allow all to contribute

iii. Side Conversation -

- A. a group member is disrupting the meeting by being involved in too many side conversations. This may be because the participant:
- feels the need to introduce an item not on the agenda but does not want to do so publicly
 - is bored with the meeting
 - has a point to raise that they feel makes other items on the agenda less important
 - is discussing a related topic but not being heard
 - wants to be the centre of attention

B. possible interventions:

- ask the participant to share their idea with the group
- get up and casually walk around near the participants having the side conversation
- call the participant by name and ask if they want to add the topic of their discussion to the agenda
- restate a recently made point and ask for the participants opinion

iv. **Overly Disagreeable Participant -**

A. a group member is highly argumentative or generally antagonistic. This may be because they:

- have a combative personality
- are upset by others opinions or a specific meeting issue
- are a show-off by nature
- are unable to make suggestions constructively
- feel that they are being ignored

B. Possible Solutions:

- paraphrase the participant's comments, and after their response, recap his/her position in objective terms
- find merit in the participant's suggestions, express agreement, then move on
- respond to the participant's comments, not the attack
- open the discussion of the participant's comments to the group
- mention that, due to time constraints, the comments can be put on the agenda for the next meeting