



Unit 3

Common Facilitation Techniques

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

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Top Techniques

Listen Actively

Be present and mindful throughout the session. Look at people as they speak, use attentive body language, and paraphrase what they are saying. Always make eye contact with people while they speak, when paraphrasing what they have just said, and when summarizing their key ideas. This way, you are aware of things being left unsaid and additional questions. You may also receive confirmation that they have said their piece. Also use eye contact to let people know they can speak next and to prompt the quiet people in the crowd to participate.

Ask Questions

This is your most important tool in discussion, although you don't want to sound like an interrogator. Design open-ended questions to test assumptions, gather information, and encourage different lines of thought. Then be flexible in how and when you ask those questions. As you become more effective at asking strong questions, you can effectively determine the root cause of problems and encourage full participation in the session.

Paraphrase to Clarify

This is a form of listening and a way of making certain we understand another by repeating their words back to them. This can also help the speaker hear what they just said. Paraphrasing can be reassuring because it tells people they have been heard or listened to, although you must take care not to sound patronizing or condescending.

Generally we repeat what they have said in our own words. However, if the person is upset or emotional, we may find it helpful to repeat their own words back to them.

Example: "Are you saying..." or, "Do I understand you to mean...?"

Build on Ideas

Encourage participants to build on each other's thoughts and suspend judgment on those ideas until it is time to analyze them. In addition to giving participants a chance to speak, you can use techniques like

brainstorming, mind-mapping, and brain-writing. Using the right activities and processes for the issues under discussion will tap into people's creativity while securing their commitment.

Stay on Track

Set time slots for each discussion, and then appoint a time keeper or use an electronic timer to keep things active and the discussion flowing. Let people know when they approach a time barrier; 5 minute, 1 minute, and 30 second warnings are all helpful. Make sure that you also respect the time limit that is set by starting and finishing on time.

As the facilitator, you will also have to step in when the discussion goes way off track (which happens very easily once the creative juices get going!) or buttons get pushed. Doing so skillfully is a hallmark of a great facilitator.

Park It

At every meeting or workshop, tape a flip chart sheet to a wall to record sidetrack items. Later, those items can be reviewed for inclusion in a future agenda, or questions can assigned to someone for an answer. You can add to the parking lot and so can participants. It is the facilitator's role to make sure those items get acted on (even if just means forwarding them to the best person for answers).

Be a Conduit for Feedback

Provide feedback to the group from time to time so they understand where they are and maintain progress. If people are not involved (i.e. checking messages, in the hall making phone calls, or their participation stops for some reason), make sure you tactfully remind people of the ground rules. You should also check in to see if they need a break, the pace is okay, or there is something on their minds.

Challenge Assumptions

People operate under assumptions all the time, and the facilitator needs to bring those assumptions into the open so that they can be worked through and understood by the group. They may need to be debated or challenged. For example, if Mark's idea is being challenged as being too narrow, you need to ask what the basis for that assumption is.

For example: "Ian, you said that Mark's idea is too narrow. Can you please explain what leads you to say that?"

Become a Tracker

Keep track of decisions as well as ideas. (You can ask your note taker to document them if you have one.) Use flip charts or an electronic board to capture notes that everyone can refer back to. Use bullets and symbols (such as stars, checkmarks, and highlights) that are an accurate summary rather than your interpretation of what's been said. Check with the group to make sure that your summaries are clear by asking, "Did I capture that accurately?"

Label Sidetracks

It's your responsibility to let the group members know when they're off track. They can then decide to pursue the sidetrack or stop their current discussion (and possibly make note of it for a future agenda) and then refocus on where they need to be.

You could say something like, "We are now moving into a topic that isn't on the agenda everyone agreed on. What does the group want to do?"

Alleviate Nervousness

Some people are socially awkward, while others become terrified if they are put on the spot. Your use of icebreakers and energizers can help alleviate some of that tension, but you'll need more in order to alleviate people's nervousness and help them be comfortable enough to contribute. Encourage them to speak up and provide opportunities for small group discussion that will help quieter people have a voice. Let them know that spelling is not being graded if they are to write on flip charts and that their drawing skills don't matter if they are creating mind maps or diagrams.

Draw People Out

Open questions, probing, and body language are all tools we can use to make people comfortable enough to voice their ideas. We all have a tendency to self-censor a bit so you want to make the group feel they are in a safe environment, where they won't be judged or ridiculed.

The art of drawing people out is more directive than reflective listening. When facilitators ask questions such as, "Can you say more about that?" or "Can you elaborate on that statement?" they are making a judgment that it would benefit the group to hear more from the person who has just been speaking.

Use Mirroring

This means using the same words or body language as another person. This may make us feel uncomfortable and like we are mocking another person, but it does have the effect of making others feel more comfortable with us.

Gather Ideas

Not unlike brainstorming, this is where we use open questions and probing to make sure we get everybody's ideas out there. Who knows where the best idea will come from? If you have some quiet people in the group, try to elicit ideas from them as well as the talkers. Small group discussion and then reporting back to the larger group can be useful for this.

Use Queuing or Stacking

This technique is particularly useful when several people want to speak to a topic or respond to something you or someone else has said. By naming the order in which people will speak, you reassure the group and the individuals in the group that you haven't forgotten them and that you've created a space for them to speak. As an example, "OK, Tim is first, then Sue, followed by Michael, and then Rob."

Don't use this technique too frequently, or people will feel as though they are being held up or that they will run out of time to speak.

You can also encourage others to speak up, reduce tangents, and prevent people from taking up too much talking time by using a question like, "Can we hear from someone we haven't heard from in a while?" You can also use a time limit statement, like, "We have five minutes left and I want to make sure we've heard from anyone who hasn't had a chance to comment yet."

To encourage people you have not heard from, try asking, "Does anyone have a different perspective on this issue?" or try, "Jim, you looked like you had something to say. Would you like to take a few minutes to speak now?"

Offer Balance

This is an especially useful neutrality technique. If you have several people present one side of an issue, or it seems that everyone is supporting one idea or one particular person, you might want to encourage the group to consider the other side as well. This is a way to draw out pros and cons of any issue before making decisions.

Providing Effective Feedback

Giving Feedback

Part of your role as a facilitator includes providing and accepting feedback. People have very strong opinions about the effectiveness of meetings as well as facilitation, and it is important that you are providing a service that they value. It's also important that you are able to accept their feedback and make changes that are needed to provide them an experience that they will appreciate. You can gather feedback on how the meeting is going, behavior of the participants, whether objectives are being met, whether people have the tools necessary to uncover problems and make decisions, and how well you are doing.

Principles of Good Feedback

The goal of asking for and providing feedback is to make improvements. Therefore, feedback needs to be positive and constructive. It also needs to be offered as closely to the time being discussed as possible, so that people can relate to what was going on at the time. In order to provide feedback that is accepted, the following principles apply:

- **Ask permission** before you provide feedback to ensure that the person or the group is ready to hear what you have to say. If they are not ready, negotiate a better time to talk. Feedback should not be forced on someone, and if it is, you'll find that they do not hear you anyway.
- Be **professional** and **tactful**. Remember that the idea is to improve circumstances or behavior.
- Keep comments **focused on the behavior** and not the person. "You seem uninterested," is not as effective as, "You have returned late from all our breaks in this session, you are checking your phone frequently, and you have not contributed any comments today."
- **Be specific** and describe what has happened, not your impression of what happened. For example, say, "You have been involved in several sidebar conversations this morning," rather than, "You seem distracted."
- Ask the person if your feedback has been **fair and accurate**. If it's not, they'll usually let you know. This kind of approach also helps them to take responsibility for their actions.
- Offer **positive feedback** when things are going well. We can all use some positive reinforcement!

Feedback Formats

Facilitators have plenty of options when it comes to gathering feedback. Depending on the nature and size of the group, here are some ideas:

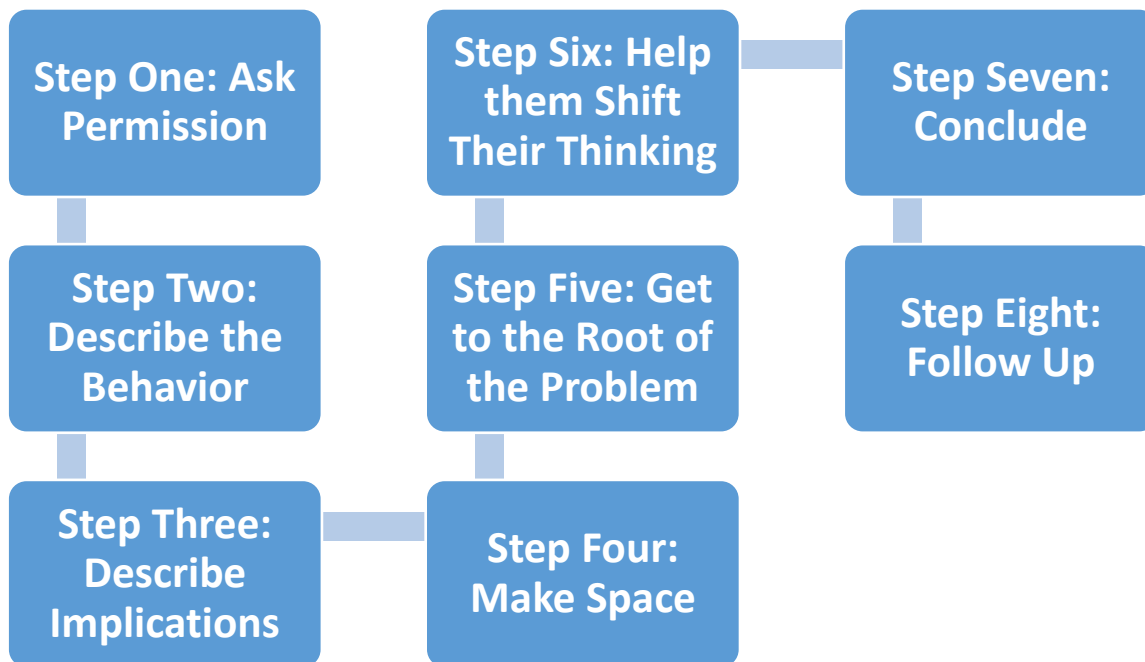
- Complete a paper or electronic survey. Then, analyze and discuss the results.

- Post questions within the meeting room and ask participants to rate the items. (You can list bullet points and have them check off what they think or write comments.)
- If the group is technologically savvy and has their smartphones, establish a hashtag (#) abbreviation, and have groups provide feedback and contribute comments over a social networking site such as Twitter.
- List what is and what is not going well. Then, create an action plan that the group agrees to in order to make the needed improvements.

The Feedback Process

Sometimes we're asked to facilitate a group that doesn't seem to need a facilitator. Everyone is courteous, they seem to get along, and they are not identifying any kind of problem. This is where you are needed more than ever!

You'll need to point out the behavior you are witnessing and then get participants talking and working together on things that matter. After all, you've been asked here for a reason! And, as we've highlighted already, feedback is necessary for other reasons, too. Here is a process that you will find very practical in your work as a facilitator.



Step One: Ask permission.

Background: You need to ask permission for a few reasons. First, this allows the receiver to identify if there is a better time. Second, when they grant you permission, it signals that they are open to hearing what you say.

Example: “I’m going to insert a break here and then offer you some feedback that I think will help things along. Is that okay with everyone?”

Step Two: Describe the behavior.

Background: Don’t focus on specific people. Instead, give a clear description of what you saw and heard.

Example: “In the e-mail survey that I sent last week, several of you mentioned very specific examples of what was not working on this team. We’ve been here for an hour already, and no one has mentioned these examples.”

Step Three: Describe the implication of continuing the behavior.

Background: Be professional and tactful. Your goal is to provide the group with the safety and security to openly speak about these issues.

Example: “If you don’t feel comfortable in discussing these issues, things are not going to change.”

Step Four: Provide space for the other person(s) to respond.

Background: Listen attentively, paraphrase, and summarize. Arrange smaller groups for discussion if that will help quiet people speak up.

Example: “You’ve explained that these issues aren’t being discussed because people are afraid of insulting one another, and that there is a potential for backlash. Do I have that correct?”

Step Five: Get to the root of the problem.

Background: Make sure that you are dealing with the real problem and not just symptoms. Acknowledge that the issue can be dealt with as a problem that needs solving.

Example: “What steps can you take to make sure we have the safety in this environment to proceed?” Suggestions could include ground rules or agreements like:

- What is said in this room stays in this room.
- We are here to make progress and to improve.
- We are committing to being open-minded and open to change.

Step Six: Help them shift their thinking.

Background: Since people listen to themselves far more readily than they accept the ideas of others, have the members of the group offer their ideas and support what they have to offer. Build on their ideas to help them move ahead.

Example: “I think the suggestions you are offering will work. I have a couple of ideas to add so that we can move ahead. Would that be okay with you?”

Step Seven: Conclude the feedback session.

Background: Establish a clear action plan which you will support and encourage them through. Let people know that they since have worked through this, you will be returning to the agenda. (You may want to offer a short break or stretch as a transition.)

Example: “Thank you for your openness and willingness to work through this problem together. As we move ahead, we’re committed to...”

Step Eight: Follow up.

Background: If the group is making a significant shift in behavior, they may need more support than you initially expect. You need to follow through with that support so that you don’t have to go through the entire process again later.

Example: An hour or so later, you can ask, “Is everyone comfortable with how we are doing now? Is there anything else we need to adjust?”

One Step Further

Facilitators and Feedback Language

Facilitators use language that helps people to feel comfortable and welcome to speak. They try to avoid questions and comments directed to people. They focus on behavior. They avoid assumptions and

generalizations such as, “usually,” “always,” or “you should.” They focus on phrases such as, “What do you think of...” or “Let’s try...”

In opening up a session for feedback, they will use statements like:

- I have noticed...
- Can I offer you a suggestion?
- I am wondering if...
- I am concerned about...

Tips for Receiving Feedback

As a facilitator, it’s also helpful if you can take some time and help people in accepting feedback. (This will be helpful to participants in facilitation as well as performance reviews!) This can be difficult for many of us, partly because we do not know how to accept a compliment, and partly because we are so determined to avoid making mistakes or failing.

Participants can learn how to accept feedback in an open manner by:

- Listening with an open mind and heart.
- Encouraging the speaker to focus on their behaviors, not them (if they are having trouble with this).
- Using open ended questions, summarizing, and paraphrasing to ensure your own understanding.
- Trying not to get emotional or defensive.
- Offering your point of view, maintaining a calm voice and relaxed tone.
- Accepting that even if you don’t like what you are hearing, when it comes to being accountable, you have to take responsibility for your actions (or non-actions).
- Offering solutions, rather than expecting the other person to tell you what to do.
- Listening for the other person’s perspective and how your behavior impacts him or her, as well as the team.
- Do your best consistently and reliably.
- Thank someone who offers you a compliment.

Managing Divergent Perspectives

Sequencing

Usually if a lot of people are taking part in a discussion, there are a lot of differing perspectives on the issues. When this happens, everyone approaches the topic from their own point of view and their own frame of reference. The facilitator’s challenge is to help people value one another’s contributions.

Sometimes facilitators have a tendency to cut people off if they appear to be off topic. However, deciding what is off topic and what will eventually help the group understand one another better is not easy to discern.

What can a facilitator do? The simplest and most straightforward technique is **sequencing**. With this technique, the facilitator validates each perspective and then directs a group to focus on each line of thought in sequence, one at a time. This is very similar to queuing or stacking, except with points of view rather than speakers being stacked.

Case Study

A group of managers met to discuss buying new computers. One manager, Tom, made a controversial statement about Microsoft Word, and another manager, Janet, had a private reaction to that statement.

“I hope Tom stops talking soon,” thought Janet. “He’s going on a tangent and is wasting our time.”

However, the next person to speak responded to Tom’s comment. After a few minutes Janet said, “OK, folks, we’ve got to get this discussion back on track.” Someone else said, “Thanks, Janet. I too thought we’d drifted off topic.” This was a critical juncture. Tom felt like he had been put down, and Janet felt irritated and guilty.

Question

How could a facilitator have handled this situation differently?

The Language of Facilitation

Applying the Language

A particular style of communication has evolved as a part of facilitation. Having skill with these techniques is particularly important when it comes to commenting on participants' behavior without offending them.

Paraphrasing to Clarify

This involves describing, in your own words, what another person says. Monitor your tone so that your voice is supportive.

- "If I understand you correctly, your idea is to..."
- "Is this an accurate understanding of your point..?"
- "What you are saying is..."

You should be paraphrasing regularly throughout the session to check your own understanding and to contribute to accurate notes. Your repetition will reassure participants that you are hearing what they are saying. It is also helpful if the group is not making progress or they seem to be stuck. New facilitators often receive feedback that they are not paraphrasing enough.

Stepping in on Troublesome Behavior

The facilitator's role includes keeping a safe, open, and productive environment. If people exhibit behaviors that interfere with the goals of the group, it's up to the facilitator to intervene. Using the feedback tools we discussed previously are often enough, although sometimes conflict resolution is needed.

Perception Reading

This is your ability to assess a participant's inner state in order to see if you understand what they are feeling. You might be picking up signals from their body language, verbal statements, or a shift in their emotions. In order to check that you are reading things correctly, and to support the individuals, you can use statements like these:

- "Ruth, you seem to be reacting to that last comment. Will you share how you are feeling?"
- "James, you seem frustrated by this discussion. Is that how you feel?"

Perception reading is very important for a facilitator, as it means you recognize emotional shifts which might interfere with participants' ability to stay engaged in the process.

Case Study

Facilitating Group Decision-Making: The City Council

Task Information

In this exercise you will be given a decision to make that is not uncommon in public service. As a group, you will have to make a decision that will affect the entire community. Unfortunately, there is no single "right" answer. Only your group can decide what the members feel is right. As you will see, your decision will involve a question of values. In this exercise, you may also discover some of the ways that conflicts arise in decision situations and how these can be minimized.

Background

On March 13 the City Council of New Bristol received notification that Stanley and Sophie Kucinski had willed their property at 125 Ridge Road to the city. The letter stated that the Kucinskis had attached the following stipulations:

- The Council must accept the donation within three months or forego any claim to it.
- The Council must also decide on its use by this date.
- If the Council chooses to lease, sell, or donate the property, it may do so to either a nonprofit or profit organization as long as the use contributes to the quality of life of the community.

It is now June 12 and council members are meeting to make their decision. Prior to the meeting, they solicited requests and suggestion for use of the property, a 10 room brick structure located on approximately one acre of prime land. The following bids were received:

- **The Friendship House**, a United Fund agency that runs programs for minority and disadvantaged youth, has requested that the city arrange a lease/purchase agreement. New Bristol is primarily an industrial (steel) town with a growing black and Asian population. There is clearly a need for programs for the disadvantaged young people, but neighbors in the area have vocally come out against the Friendship House proposal, saying, "We don't want 'them' over here."
- **Saint Stanislaus Church**, whose property borders on the Kucinskis' on the east, has offered to buy the property for \$125,000. The church would convert it to additional parking facilities to accommodate their growing crowds on bingo nights. Many senior citizens support this use, since bingo is one of few recreational outlets for them and safe off-street parking is at a premium.

- A **local builder** has offered to buy the property and develop it into a moderately priced retirement condominium building. This would require special building permits, but would help the tax base and also be attractive.
- A **local women’s group** has proposed a three-year lease to set up a Women’s Centre. It would provide workshops, birth control, abortion counseling (and possibly a clinic), and serve as a refuge for battered women. According to police, domestic violence has increased drastically as inflation and layoffs increase stress in this working class community. The Rector of Saint Stanislaus’ Church is strongly opposed to letting the women’s group have the property.
- One of the **major oil companies** has submitted a bid of \$300,000 for the property if the Council will grant a zoning change to allow a gas station. These funds could be used to buy sorely needed playground equipment, but the gas station would be an eyesore on Ridge Road.
- **John Lateck** has offered to buy the property for \$200,000 and convert it to a private club. He has assured the Council that it would not be an “ordinary” bar. Rumors are that John is a homosexual. Parents of children at Saint Stanislaus School have besieged the Council with letters smearing John and alleging that the property would turn into a gay bar.
- **Nafco**, a statewide drug addiction service, has asked to lease the property to set up a drug rehabilitation center with residential facilities.

Discussion Question

Assume that as a group you form the City Council. What will you do with the Kucinski property? You must make a decision.

Building Agendas

Part of facilitating meetings is developing an agenda. The purpose of an agenda is to keep the meeting focused on a central set of topics. However, agendas can easily become overcrowded and interfere with the process.

Here is an easy process for developing an agenda.

Step 1

- List all potential meeting topics
- Be sure to ask all meeting members for ideas

Step 2

- Define the overall goal for each topic

Step 3

- Decide what can be handled outside the meeting (before or after)
- Cut down the list

Step 4

- Define success for each agenda item

Further Reading: