



Unit 2

Facilitation Skills & Techniques

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Identify the competencies linked to effective small group facilitation

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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.

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.

- Ñ “If I understand you correctly, your idea is to...”
- Ñ “Is this an accurate understanding of your point..?”
- Ñ “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:

- Ñ “Ruth, you seem to be reacting to that last comment. Will you share how you are feeling?”
- Ñ “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:

- Ñ The Council must accept the donation within three months or forego any claim to it.
- Ñ The Council must also decide on its use by this date.
- Ñ 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:

- Ñ **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."
- Ñ **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.

- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ **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.
- Ñ **Nafco**, a statewide drug addiction service, has asked to lease the property to set up a drug rehabilitation center with residential facilities.

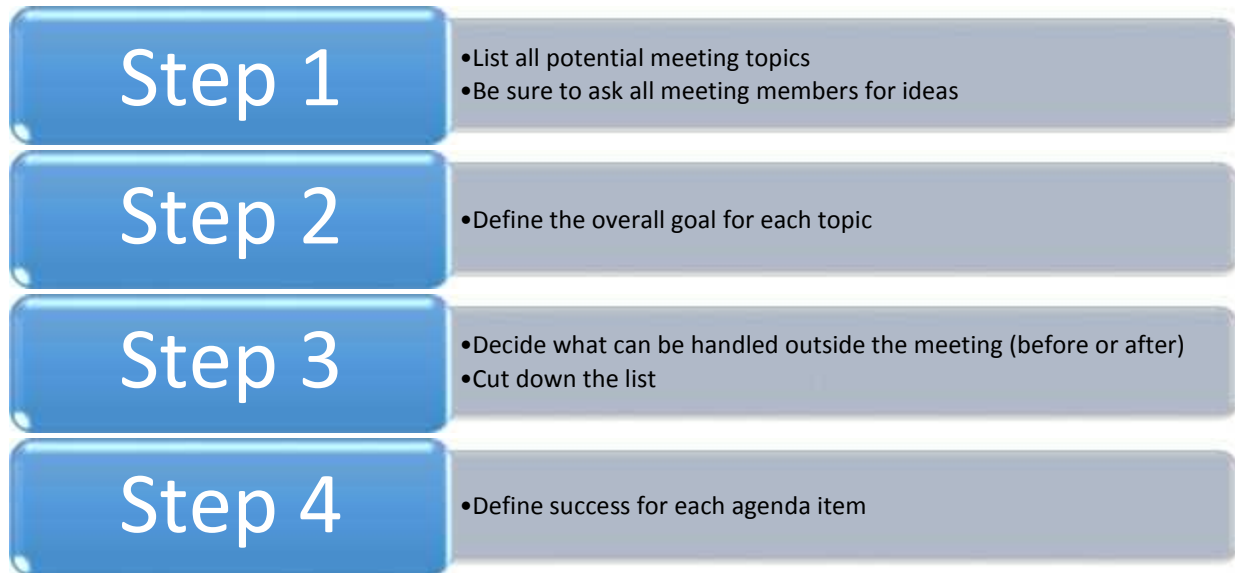
Discussion Question

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.



Further Reading:

- ✓ Berger, Duane, Michael Doyle, Sarah Fisk, Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, and Catherine Toldi. *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- ✓ Petz, Jon. *Boring Meetings Suck*. Wiley, 2011.