

Effective Facilitation

Any meeting or discussion that involves more than two or three people can benefit from a facilitator, a person who's main role is to guide the process of the discussion. Having a facilitator becomes essential when there is a conflict between group members or when a meeting involves a large group. This fact sheet provides some helpful tips on effective facilitation.

A Facilitator's Role

Facilitators play a number of important roles in promoting effective communication. The facilitator works to focus the attention and effort of the group members, ensure that agenda items are addressed, and prevent the group from getting off track. The facilitator makes sure the group is in agreement on the process they will use to discuss and address issues, and may suggest alternative processes if the group's discussion becomes unproductive. The facilitator also has primary responsibility for ensuring that the group's ground rules are respected by all members and that there is an atmosphere conducive to open, productive communication. Thus, the facilitator must protect individuals from personal attacks and encourage shy or quiet members to contribute their ideas. Finally, a facilitator handles meeting logistics, such as drafting and circulating an agenda and ensuring that the meeting room is arranged properly. Facilitators may be a member of the group or an outside third party. The same person can facilitate each meeting or the position can rotate.

Techniques for Effective Facilitation

Focus on process. The facilitator must remember that his or her role is to make process-related suggestions and comments, not comments or suggestions that relate to the issues being discussed. For example, when a participant asks a question that deals with a substantive issue, the facilitator should not attempt to answer it, but should instead refer the question to a participant in the meeting who is qualified to answer it. In limited cases, where a member of the group is facilitating, the member may step out of their facilitator role to offer a suggestion. Facilitators should do this infrequently. Before doing so, facilitators should make it clear that they are stepping out of their facilitator role and should clearly announce when they are resuming their facilitator role. If a meeting turns to an area where the facilitator has many suggestions, the facilitator should step down for that portion of the meeting and the group should select a new facilitator.

Maintain neutrality. Meeting participants must perceive the facilitator's actions as neutral and fair for the facilitator to be effective. Facilitators may have their own strongly-held views on a subject that are well-known to participants, but they can still successfully facilitate a meeting if parties feel they are not advancing their own agenda. Remaining focused on the process of the discussion rather than content can help a facilitator maintain a position of neutrality.

Clearly explain the role of facilitator to the group. The group needs to understand the facilitator's role in guiding the process of communication. It is particularly important when a group member is facilitating for the group to understand that the person will make process-related suggestions but not content-related suggestions while acting as facilitator. In such cases, the member facilitating can gain the trust of the group by asking for their assistance in keeping within the facilitator's role. (For example, it is perfectly appropriate to say, "I am still new at facilitating, and would greatly appreciate it if you would speak up if you feel I am making content-related suggestions or am not acting neutral.")

Resist the temptation to speak too much. Because the facilitator has the attention of the group and the power to guide the meeting, many facilitators are tempted to talk a lot. Remember that as a facilitator, your role is to guide a process that lead to a productive discussion among participants, not to participate in the discussion yourself. Effective facilitators speak only when it is necessary to guide the process.

When to Call in an Outside Third Party as a Facilitator

Although many meetings can be facilitated by a member of the group, certain situations can hinder the effectiveness of a facilitator from within the group. In such circumstances, an outside third-party is often needed to facilitate the communication process. The following are some characteristics of situations that may call for a third party as a facilitator.

- There a large number of issues and/or the issues under discussion are complex.
- There are a large number of diverse interests represented at the meeting.
- Parties at the meeting have historically been in conflict or may have trouble communicating because of cultural or other differences.
- The issues under discussion are emotionally charged and parties' emotions may hinder effective communication.
- Stereotypes and misperceptions held by participants may hinder effective communication.
- The parties involved are unsure how to handle the procedural aspects of discussion, have disputes over what process to use, and/or have tried meeting without an outside facilitator without success.
- No member of the group is willing or trusted to take on the role of a neutral facilitator.

A number of both nonprofit services and for-profit dispute resolution firms offer a range of third-party dispute resolution services, including facilitators. The American Arbitration Association is a good source to contact for listings of reputable professional facilitators in your area.

Additional Information

The following sources provide additional helpful information on this topic:

How To Make Meetings Work, Michael Doyle and David Strauss, 1976 (Jove Books: New York).

Breaking the Impasse: Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes, Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshank, 1987 (Basic Books, Inc.: New York).

Leading and Communicating: A Guide for Watershed Partnerships, available for \$2 from the Conservation Technology Information Center, West Lafayette, Indiana, Tel. (317) 494-9555.

The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict, Christopher W. Moore, 1986 (Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco).