

Facilitation: What is it, and how to do it

Facilitators serve to oversee and help in the processes of discussion, debriefing, and decision-making. The facilitator's goal is to make sure that everyone feels included in the discussion and that a good process is used to reach a decision. Facilitation is important both in decision-focused meetings but also for debriefing during educational activities.

The principle of facilitation is to **separate content from process**. This means that the facilitator is responsible for the process (of discussion and decision making) and **must therefore abstain from taking a position** in the content that is being discussed or decided.

A **safe, friendly meeting environment** can help leaders achieve meeting goals and reach educational objectives for an activity. Establishing **ground rules** that respect individuals and build trust among participants support any discussion. It is frustrating and unproductive to participants and facilitators alike when opinions are not respected, persons are criticized in a non-constructive manner, and many views are not expressed.

Ground rules that facilitators should establish and promote:

- One person speaks at a time
- Questions may be asked to clarify ideas
- Criticizing others must always occur in a careful, respectful and constructive manner
- Feelings may be expressed; they are not to be sloughed off or denied
- Controversy should be about positions (which can be changed), not personalities (which are much harder to change)

Duties and tips for facilitators

- Make sure participants are physically comfortable; arrange the room so that everyone can see each other
- Share meeting ground rules with participants; allow for other rules or norms to be proposed and accepted by the group
- Communicate clearly; talk slowly and allow for translation if needed
- Act as a neutral person – refrain from giving a personal opinion. Expressing personal opinions on the matter under discussion as a facilitator damages your authority as a facilitator. Better keep your opinions until you have finished your task as a facilitator and voice them then.
- Maintain a positive group atmosphere; do not let personality conflicts take over
- Allow thinking time
- Avoid asking leading questions

Techniques for facilitators

- After a topic has been presented, ask all participants to write down their thoughts before sharing; allow people time to think on their own first
- Write down major ideas so everyone can see; visuals help those with language barriers
- Summarize what you heard someone say and ask them if that is what they meant; this helps them feel heard and gives them a chance to clarify any misunderstandings
- Shake hands (jazz hands) is a sign that you agree with what someone says
- Keep the discussion moving; if an idea has already been stated, move on
- Keeping a speakers list or having people hold up numbers on their fingers can help keep track of who should speak next; you can also call on people or go in a certain order if needed
- Break into smaller groups so more people have a chance to talk; this is particularly good for educational sessions or brainstorming