

**Seeds for
Change
Short guide**



Introduction to facilitating meetings

A short guide to making your meetings effective, inclusive and enjoyable.

Facilitating meetings

Facilitation is about taking responsibility for making meetings as **easy**, **inclusive** and **effective** as possible. It is rooted in the values of shared power, equality and the belief that everyone's needs matter and all voices should be heard.

There are two main areas to keep in mind when facilitating:

1. Creating a space where everyone feels valued and is able to participate fully in discussions and decisions.
2. Helping a group work efficiently and get tasks done, such as sharing information, reaching decisions, airing conflict or getting on with jobs.

Facilitation is a proactive role, but not a 'power-over' role. The facilitator doesn't have more power than anyone else, or makes decisions for the group. They should stay neutral in discussions, or make it clear when they are stepping out of the facilitator role to give their own opinion.



Facilitation tasks

Facilitation can involve different tasks depending on the situation. They can be taken on by one or more facilitators. This list of tasks will be relevant to most meetings:

- ✓ Helping the group decide on a realistic agenda and time-frame for the meeting. Keeping the meeting on time, and ensuring that a written record is made of any action points and decisions agreed at the meeting. (A minute-taker can be appointed to make notes).
- ✓ Finding out about and accommodating any access requirements in the group that will help people to participate, e.g. seating requirements, different ways of processing information, or regular breaks.
- ✓ Regulating the flow of discussion, e.g. drawing out quiet people, or those with the most relevant experience. Often in meetings some people are heard more than others; this power dynamic can be a reflection of wider society. Facilitators should pay attention to who has spoken a lot and try to make sure everyone is heard.
- ✓ Keeping the meeting focussed on one item at a time until the issue is resolved. This can be helped by clarifying and summarising points, and checking for agreement in order to make clear decisions.
- ✓ Introducing facilitation tools where appropriate, e.g. ideastorms to help people come up with creative ideas, or small group conversations to increase participation. See *Meeting Tools* below.

Sometimes facilitation will involve helping the group address conflict, or reach agreement on a difficult decision. See our *Consensus Decision Making* guide for a suggested process.

Facilitation skills

Active listening: The conscious effort to get an accurate understanding of where someone is coming from. In active listening you set aside your own response to what someone is saying and instead focus on really listening and helping them feel heard.

Questioning: Asking questions can clarify issues and support people to explore their needs. Facilitators can ask clarifying questions to get a clearer understanding of what someone is saying, or put open questions to the group to open up more exploration.

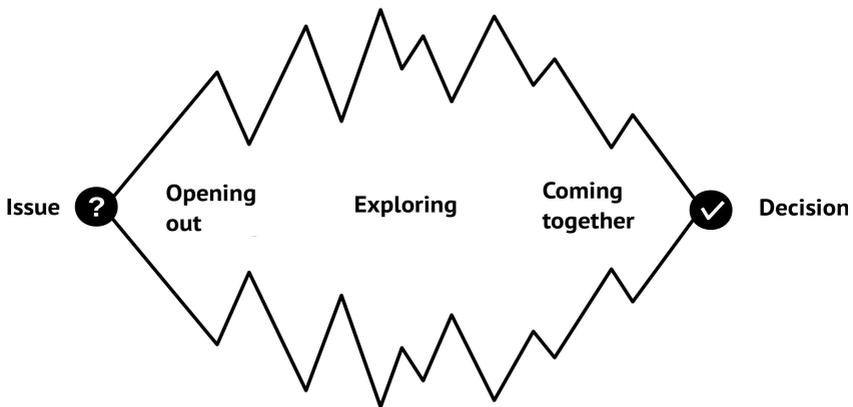
Summarising: Regular summaries of the discussion can help avoid repetition by reassuring people their points have been heard, and highlighting the key issues raised. The facilitator should offer the summary tentatively and give people space to correct them, e.g. "What I've heard people saying so far is... Did I miss anything out?"



Facilitating decision making

A key role for a facilitator in a decision making meeting is to help a group explore issues and reach clear agreements that work for the group.

In order to come up with decisions that people are as happy with as possible, it is important to give enough time to exploring the issue and understanding different perspectives. The diagram illustrates this point - the discussion needs to open out to explore differences before trying to come together in a proposal.



Another key point is to be as clear and explicit as possible at the point at which you are making a decision. Otherwise it is very easy for everyone to come away from the meeting with a different idea about what has been decided.

Read out the proposal and check who agrees with it. Take time to check everyone has a shared understanding of what they are agreeing to. In a simple majority vote you would be looking for over 50% of people to support the proposal, in consensus you would need everyone to at least give their consent for the proposal to pass, even if it wasn't everyone's preference. If you don't get enough agreement go back to the discussion stage and look for a new proposal.

Power and accessibility

Another important role for a facilitator is making sure that the meeting works for different people involved. At a minimum, a facilitator should take steps to meet access requirements, with the help of the rest of the group if necessary. It is also important to try to cater to different preferences and balance out power dynamics in the group.

Accessibility: Access requirements are things that people need to have in place in order to participate fully in the meeting. This might include physical things about the venue, like step-free access and accessible toilets. It could also be things about the meeting itself, like having a laptop with headphones and screen-reader software if someone needs it to read a long chunk of text, e.g. a policy you are agreeing on. Where possible, give people chance to tell you about their requirements before the meeting so you have time to make arrangements.

Preferences: We all have preferences about how we participate in meetings, e.g. do we prefer small groups or large ones? Can we concentrate if someone speaks for a long time? What makes it easy for us to process information, feel comfortable, have fun, speak our minds and hear what others have to say? When something is not our preference, it is possible to stretch ourselves and manage for a while. This may be at the cost of getting more tired, or not getting as much from the discussion. As a facilitator, building in lots of variety of activities will help balance things out so everyone gets their preferences met some of the time!

Power: The way that people participate in a meeting and whether they get heard by others is very closely related to how much power they have in the group! Facilitation will never 'solve' power imbalances. However, it can help to create a space where people are empowered to voice their thoughts and opinions and supported to listen and take into account what each other have said. Some practical ways of doing this include: spotting points that are getting missed and asking people to expand / repeat; using tools like a go round that enable everyone to be heard; challenging problematic behaviours and micro-aggressions.

Meeting tools

Agenda: A list of items you expect to cover in a meeting. This gives structure and focus to the meeting, and lets people know what to expect. It can be made in advance or at the start of the meeting. Collect agenda items from the group and estimate the time needed for each item. Try to be realistic, and prioritise if necessary. Sending the agenda in advance will give people time to think before the meeting.

Go-rounds: Hearing from everyone in turn on a certain question or topic. This can help the group hear from people who haven't spoken much, or test for agreement on something. It's also often used at the start of the meeting for people to introduce themselves. Clearly state the topic of the go-round and model an answer of the length you want, to ensure you stick to time.

Ideastorms: Getting out lots of ideas before evaluating them or making decisions can help people be more creative and see new solutions. Give a clear question and encourage people to come up with as many ideas as possible, e.g. shouting them out or writing them on post-its. Make sure all the ideas are recorded for later discussion.

Small groups or pairs: Splitting into small groups can help more people participate actively in the meeting. It gives people a chance to work out their thoughts before coming back to a whole group discussion. Explain clearly what you want people to discuss in their small groups, how much time they have and what they will need to feed back afterwards. Nominating a facilitator in each small group can help them stay on track.

Breaks and energisers: Breaks give people time to move around, process information or work out their thoughts. Build in regular breaks, or offer a quick group game.

For more facilitation ideas, and tips for troubleshooting meetings, see our longer *Facilitating Meetings* guide.

Introduction to meeting facilitation

Facilitation is about taking responsibility for making meetings as **easy**, **inclusive** and **effective** as possible. It is rooted in the values of shared power, equality and the belief that everyone's needs matter and all voices should be heard. Whether you are new to facilitation or you want to quickly refresh your skills, this short introduction provides key tips, suggestions and tools to help you run effective meetings.

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