

The Basics of Facilitating and Leading Group Learning

Facilitators also need to lead.

It is okay to have your own perspective and agenda. Make your point of view visible and encourage others to react to it and improve upon it. Express what you think is important. Stand on your values. But don't seek the limelight. Remember that your role is to create the conditions for others to question and learn.

Continually negotiate process with the group.

Get explicit agreement from the group for the process. This includes establishing ground rules, agreeing on a method for decision-making, and agreeing on adjustments to the agenda or time schedule.

Be real. Be open. Be trustworthy.

It is okay to express your feelings, including uncertainty. Give and request permission to make mistakes. Acknowledge mistakes when you make them. Live up to the "contracts" you and the group have agreed to, including breaks and time schedules.

Deal directly with resistance.

Welcome resistance. Don't allow it to build over time. If someone appears to be indirectly seeking conflict with you, respond at least twice in good faith, as if they are not seeking to be difficult. At some point, ask the participant to suspend judgment or to talk with you during a break rather than disrupt the group.

Motivate, recognize and reward participants.

Build relationships with participants by arriving early and learning people's names. Use people's actual words. Find the wisdom in everyone's contribution, even if they are a bit off the mark. Offer praise.

Encourage constructive conflict.

Make it clear that differences of opinion are valued. Listen and reflect what others are saying. Ask questions that seek to understand other points of view. Share your concerns or questions. Invite others to question your perspective on a topic. Avoid taking positions. Support risk-takers. Encourage quiet voices.

Be organized.

Prepare your design and agenda carefully. Have all the materials you need. Check and double check any technology you will use. Build some extra time into the agenda.

Give clear and simple directions.

Break instructions into clear steps. Give instructions verbally and write them down where all can see.

Use stories and questions effectively.

Use personal stories to emphasize points or illustrate another way of looking at an issue. Reflect questions back to the group or to the questioner. Ask open-ended questions. Ask questions that encourage people to look at an issue from another perspective.

Bring energy, fun and confidence to the group.

Use humor, especially directed at yourself. Set a playful tone. Choose exercises that allow the group to play and laugh. Show up prepared and rested. Act as if you expect things to go well.

Common Challenges in Facilitation of Groups

If a person makes a statement that you want to challenge

- 1) Restate their idea to show that you have heard them and understand. You may also want to reflect the feelings you are perceiving. “If I understand you correctly, you feel that...”
- 2) Use questions to get him or her, and then others, to explore the various sides of the issue.
 - Can you give me some more details? What do you mean by that?
 - Let’s explore this idea. How could it backfire? What would happen if...?
 - Does anyone else have a comment on this subject?
- 3) Summarize and move on. The point isn’t to arrive at a right answer but to show different ways of thinking about the issue. Encourage people to draw their own lessons from the discussion.

If a person makes a statement you know to be false

- 1) Ask if anyone has heard or knows conflicting information.
- 2) Provide a correction if no one else offers one.
- 3) Encourage participants to look up the information before accepting either version.

If there is tension or disagreement between participants

- 1) Remind the group that disagreement and conflict of ideas is healthy.
- 2) Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue, not the person.
- 3) If the issue is essential, invite each person to restate the ideas expressed by the other. Give each participant a chance to add to what the other has said until each can accurately describe the thoughts and feelings of the other. Then ask the group for reactions. What can we learn from this exchange?

If certain people don’t speak in the full group

- 1) Use eye contact and move closer to people who remain quiet.
- 2) Encourage shy participants after any contributions they make.
- 3) “I’d like to hear more from people who haven’t had a chance to share yet.”
- 4) Use small groups and pairs to give everyone a chance to be heard.

If certain people dominate the discussion

- 1) Give positive feedback to the speaker as you request that they limit their participation. “Charlie has given us a lot of useful input into this discussion. I’d like to hear what others think.”
- 2) Remind the group of the participation ground-rules.
- 3) If necessary, speak to the individual during a break.

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