

Consensus Process & Facilitation

I. What is a facilitator?

Someone who stays separate from the content of a meeting in order to make organizational suggestions, observe the process, and make interventions when needed to maintain respect and the structure that the group decided upon.

II. Why do we need facilitation?

- ⤴ To help everyone in the group think as constructively as possible
- ⤴ To stimulate complete participation and division of responsibilities
- ⤴ To encourage mutual understanding
- ⤴ To provoke a deepening in to the collective wisdom of the group
- ⤴ To help the group find creative solutions that draw from the knowledge of the entire group
- ⤴ To facilitate the building of sustainable agreements
- ⤴ To assure that decisions are transparent, clear, accountable, and democratic
- ⤴ To try to not reproduce societal patterns of domination and to create a equal and respectful space

III. What are the basic responsibilities of a facilitator?

- 1. Introductions:** if people do not know each other well, propose a creative way of people at the meeting introducing themselves, an activity that builds trust in the group
- 2. Form an Agenda:** classify or organize the agenda items and find a proposal for the order, the more detailed the agenda, the easier your job will be to keep bouncing around to a minimum. It usually helps to have time limits assigned to each agenda item as well.
- 3. Distribute responsibilities:** other tasks that can be distributed:
 - a) *Notetaker* – someone to take notes (and if applicable, alert them before if this responsibility includes getting a copy to everyone before the next meeting)
Especially important to include: decisions made, who said they'd do what, next meeting info, and opportunities for those who were not at the meeting to get involved
 - b) *Timekeeper* – to make reminders about the approaching time deadlines that are decided by the group; someone with a watch who does not feel shy about jumping in
 - c) *Vibeswatcher* – someone to keep an eye out for alienating conversations, tensions arising in the meeting, and watch the group's energy level. They can be empowered by the group to make interventions... a joke, a game, suggest a break, etc.
 - d) *Stacker* – sometimes it's important to delegate the responsibility of keeping the "stack" (see 4b below)
- 4. Maintain the collectively decided speaking system:** makes sure the person speaking is respected;
 - a) a "stack" or *speakers list* – needed when many people want to speak on the same issue
note: may want to delegate this if a meeting is complicated or large
hints: one should only break the stack when absolutely needed, and one should check in with the group before doing so, promising those on the stack will get a chance when you finish the tangent topic
Progressive stacking: prioritize under-represented perspectives.
Discussion about how progressive stacking can work for Occupy GA's.
- 5. Stay neutral** in the discussion, if you need to add an idea, it is a good idea to make it clear that you are stepping out of the role of facilitator
- 6. Keep group on task:** this includes recognizing tangents (and pointing them out to the group) and completing (or propose postponement or "tabling") an item of discussion or business before moving on to other items
 - you can use questions like:
 - "is this relevant to the topic at hand?" or "Are we going to get to this later in the meeting?"
 - "can anyone find more information on this topic and can bring it to the next meeting?" or
 - "did everyone understand this decision, any lasting concerns?" and "can we move on"
- 7. Create an open space where everyone feels respected:** encourage quiet or marginal voices and remind people to self-facilitate (see "what is self-facilitation")

IV. What is self-facilitation?

--it is essential to achieve respect and to root out prejudices/domination within our groups
--many people are already conscious of the following interactions, but we all need a reminder once in a while.

1. Am I conscious of how long I speak, how many times I speak, and the volume of my voice?
2. Do I interrupt others?
3. Am I conscious of how many times I encourage other people's ideas, and how many times I propose my own ideas?
4. Do I use any assumed authority? (especially unwarranted authority)
Note: opinions given by men, white people, older people, or people with more experience are often considered more important, even when the speaker doesn't have authority in the subject being discussed – their authority is assumed.
5. How many men are speaking? How many women and people of other genders?
6. Do I use exclusionary language?
7. Do I ever assume that everyone in the room is heterosexual or able-bodied?
8. Am I being constructive with my participation? Or do I ever say things just to get a defensive reaction?
9. Do I speak in order to be understood? Do I listen in order to understand?
10. Am I being open-minded? Do I accept diverse points of view?
11. Am I actively listening? (Body language and encouraging words)
12. Am I recreating the same cycles of domination that I am working to end?

III. When and how does one make interventions?

1. **PRE-EMT** difficulties and treat each possible problem with a collectively decided agreement.
Make an intervention before the problem arises!
2. **Interrupt someone only as last resort**
3. **De-personalize** your intervention. In order to not offend or single out one person, you can remind the whole group of a collective decision or how important self-facilitation is. Only direct an intervention towards an individual when absolutely necessary.
4. **Don't Just Control, Create:** interventions are not only to keep people on track, but to keep to group agreements, and to build a psychologically safe environment . The challenge is creating more options, not controlling.
5. **Raise Energy:** sometimes it is useful to make an intervention or propose a quick break in order to lift the energy level when it gets low (a quick activity that gets people on their feet is often helpful)

IV. What is Consensus Decision Making?

Myths, truths and challenges brainstorm.

Introductory Brainstorm Suggestions:

- a) Everyone's encouraged to participate
- b) Try not to judge anyone's ideas
- c) Don't judge yourself
- d) Abnormal ideas are encouraged
- e) Think "outside of the box"

V. Beginning, Including, Coming to Consensus

■ {BEGINNING DISCUSSION}

1. **Brainstorming**
 - *it's a good idea to let everyone speak without restrictions
 - *it's often helpful to have someone write down the group's ideas where everyone can see them
 - a) *Brainstorming styles:*
 - Some brainstorming formats include suggesting that people:
 - speak the first words that come to mind in reaction to a statement, question, or topic
 - share their initial emotions on a topic
 - take a minute to write down ideas in silence, then share
 - b) *Synthesis*
 - Sometimes the list generated from a brainstorm is useful on its own, but often it is more effective to synthesize the brainstormed ideas into a more useful format
2. **Processes to include people:**
 - a) Breaking into small groups
 - b) Do a "go-around" where people in a circle take turns speaking
 - c) Popcorn: toss a talking stick or object from one speaker to another
 - d) Everyone is encouraged to speak one at a time, giving space, but with no specific order

▶ {INCLUDING EVERYONE'S OPINIONS} getting through the divergent thinking zone

3. Basic Techniques:

1 Paraphrasing: for a calming & clarifying effect for the group and for the speaker

When to use it: -- when what someone says is confusing
-- when the speaker needs help thinking outloud

How to use it: -- repeat the point in your words, starting with something like... "I'm hearing you say..." -- remember to check with the person... "Did I get it?"

2 Drawing out: telling the speaker "I'm with you, I'm understanding you up to this point, now tell me more..." encourages the speaker to take their time and get all they can out

When to use it when speaker is having difficulty clarifying herself/himself or is confusing to others

How to use it: use with or instead of paraphrasing. So paraphrase, then say something like "can you say more about that..." or "can you give an example..." or just add a leading "so..." "and..." "because..."

3 Making space: encouraging less vocal people to participate

-- general questions sometimes work: "Does anyone who hasn't said much want to add anything to this?" or watch quiet people's body language closely, and if they look like they have something to say, ask "Was there a thought you wanted to share"

-- leave a few extra seconds of silence before moving on to a new topic, silence may be uncomfortable, but it is important!

-- Encourage ideas that aren't considered "normal" or the "risky ideas" and support creativity and ideas that come from the heart

4. Other skills include: mirroring, tracking, encouraging, balancing, listening for common ground, and clarifying

● {GETTING THROUGH the "GROAN ZONE" towards CREATIVE SOLUTIONS}

3. Avoid polarizing positions

Instead, look at the needs of the different people or subgroups and encourage them to think creatively to find "win-win" solutions

As soon as polarity begins, you could add something like: "are these the only possible routes"

4. Coming to Consensus

-- Begin with an inclusive proposal

a) clarify the proposal, any questions?

b) ask if there are any concerns?

c) if so, more discussion

d) form a new, modified proposal

e) table the issue (postpone) if time runs out and no immediate solution can be found

f) form a committee to work on a new proposal for the next meeting or later that meeting (*it is important to include people from all sides of an issue on this working group*)

g) try for consensus.... "any lasting concerns?" you can ask for signs of approval, like thumbs up or "does anyone stand aside" and "are there any blocks"

h) who will be responsible for the implementation of this decision?

