

Facilitation: The Secret to Smooth, Synchronized Meetings

The word "facilitate" doesn't mean to lead, control, or direct. Facilitate simply means to make easier. In a practical sense, the job of a facilitator is to help create a space that is comfortable and productive for a group of people. Facilitation is like slicking the wheels of a rusty caboose. Facilitators make meetings, discussions, and events of all sorts run *smoothly*. Within this document, the word "meeting" could be exchanged with some variation with "group discussion", "conference call", or other group events.

The facilitator should be someone who doesn't have a strong opinion to express on the meeting's topics. As a facilitator, if you want to say something, call on yourself in turn, but make sure you don't use your role to dominate the discussion. Furthermore, you should not allow people with race, class, gender, or other subtle or non-subtle privilege to dominate a meeting. As a facilitator, you should encourage everyone to participate while moving the meeting along to meet time limits.

The Secrets

In addition to having savvy and well-prepared facilitator(s), smooth facilitation requires a group in which *everyone*:

1. Understands the **goals** of the meeting and the organization
2. Keeps the group on the **agenda** and moving forward towards the goals
3. **Respects** everyone in the meeting helping to create a space where shy people are comfortable enough to speak, and where people who tend to dominate a discussion feel compelled to defer to others in the group
4. Makes sure decisions are made **democratically**, with input from many different voices

What Good Meetings are Made of:

To Do Before The Meeting: Bring the MAPS!

Materials Bring relevant handouts, minutes from the last meeting, a flip chart, tape, markers, drinks or snacks, etc to the meeting. Get help from other folks in your preparation.

Agenda At every meeting, clear goals and an agenda should be set beforehand. Your goals are what you want out of the meeting: the purpose. Prepare a complete agenda based on your goals. Ask people for input on the agenda and confirm it with people beforehand. Set time limits for each agenda item and try to stay under 1.5 hours for the whole meeting. If you must go longer, the facilitator should make sure everyone is alright with adding extra time onto the meeting. If people aren't okay with it, the discussion should be tabled until a later date.

People Get the right people in the room. Remind everyone who needs to be there more than once, including once the day before the meeting. Ask a different person to be responsible for preparing and introducing each agenda item. Having multiple voices leading the meeting will make everyone feel more welcome.

Space Reserve a comfortable space for the meeting. Pay attention to temperature, arrangement of chairs, insulation from noise, bathrooms, and windows. Bringing quiet munchies and drinks is a stellar idea!

Starting The Meeting

Remember, meetings should be enjoyable, efficient, and build organizational morale.

1. Assign, at minimum, a note-taker (see appendix for tips) and a timekeeper to help the facilitator(s) move the agenda along. A scribe (writes all ideas, announcements, and other items on the board), stack-keeper (keeps track of who raises their hands and calls on them in order), vibes-watcher (assesses the mood of the group and asks for breathers when necessary), and other helpers can be useful as well (see Appendix C for full explanation of roles).
2. Start on time whenever possible to encourage good habits. If you must wait for latecomers, thank people for arriving on time.
3. Welcome/introduce everyone present. Ask someone to think up a juicy icebreaker a few minutes before the meeting and use it during your opening go-around.
4. Quickly review the agenda at the start of the meeting and ask if there are any items to add.

5. Explain the ground rules. Two good ones are: A) if you tend to talk often in group settings make an effort to speak less, trusting that your point will be made by someone else, and B) if you tend to talk little in group settings make an effort to speak more often, helping others who are shy or hesitant to feel more comfortable.

During The Meeting

1. Be sure to start and end on time.
2. Schedule short breaks during the meeting. Even a quick stretch can lighten the mood and make everyone more productive and civil.
3. Stick to your agenda whenever possible. It's there to keep the group on track to achieve your goals. If you have to depart from the agenda, ask for the group's consent.
4. Use appropriate facilitation tools to get the most out of the voices in the room. Use a go-around to make everyone heard, small breakout groups to generate lots of ideas quickly, or basic popcorn discussion to start things off. Silence is good sometimes, but a good trick if you need discussion is to say, "Turn to the person next to you and discuss this." Five seconds and your discussion will be hoppin'.
5. Ask everyone to use hand signals to indicate agreement (fingers twinkling), confusion (arms out, bent, and hands outstretched), and other feelings (See Appendix D for more).
6. Try to keep the conversation flowing and summarize fairly often. Elicit responses from each member when addressing a key topic. Consensus does not mean that each person gets to say the same thing five times. If people seem to be saying the same thing in different ways, try to summarize and move forward. Ex: "So what I'm hearing people say is that we're not quite prepared to rally outside the president's office but that there is interest in putting increased pressure on him within the next week. Do people have other ideas for a more strategic next step?" (See Appendix B for other miscellaneous tips and a sample discussion.)
7. Utilize the meeting roles. They're there to help the meeting go more smoothly but they only work if people understand what they're suppose to do and others help reinforce them. (See Appendix C for tips).

Closing The Meeting

1. Spend a few short minutes recapping your plan of action at the end of the meeting. Did you meet your goals? What are the next steps? Who's doing what? Answer these questions quickly and remind everyone to read the meeting minutes (see Appendix on effective minute-posting).
2. Assign roles for next time and schedule the next meeting.
3. Always leave on a positive note. If all else fails, don't be afraid to make up a brief enticing and inspirational story that isn't true, then blame anyone but SEAC when the group uncovers your lies.

In A Nutshell:

Remember, to have a good meeting, you need good product and good process. Good facilitation makes the process run smoother. To have a good product, everyone should be geared towards achieving the goals set out by the group. Don't start a meeting without goals and an agenda for meeting those goals and don't let a meeting stray too far from those goals once you've begun. And of course, the best way to make your meetings and your organization run smooth like butter over and over again, is to create a respectful space where everyone is engaged in making decisions democratically with input from many different voices. We can do it!

Appendix A: Make Your Meeting Minutes Brief And Beautiful

Good meeting minutes shouldn't be a script of every word uttered at your meeting. If something isn't relevant to the goals of your meeting and your group, leave it out of the minutes (unless it's funny). People reading the minutes only want to spend time reading about the essentials. No full sentences or fancy language needed.

A good format for meeting minutes includes:

- The name of your group/committee, date, place and time of the meeting
- The names of voting members present and absent
- Proposals made and passed
- Tasks people are responsible for (with names in bold) and deadlines
- Reports people made on a topic
- Announcements people made

Appendix B: Miscellaneous Facilitation Tips and Sample Conversation

-Good phrases:

"Let's hear from some people who haven't spoken yet."

"The men in the room have been talking a lot, let's hear from some of the women."

"The veteran eoners have been talking a lot, let's hear from some of the new people."

-Keep it positive:

Instead of using "but", use "and". Ex: "That's a good idea **AND** this is also a good idea" or **AND** "I think we should hear from some others"

-When in doubt, resort to the small group!

Often logistical discussions (mtg. times), contentious topics, and project details (what color the to make the t-shirts) can get carried away and take up unnecessary amounts of time in the big group meeting. These discussions can and probably should be dealt with by a small group of people after the meeting which reports back to and works with the bigger group later.

-If the discussion is contentious and/or people aren't respecting each other, try this: declare who the next three speakers are, and don't let people raise their hands until those three are done. This way everyone concentrates on what's being said, instead of sighing, moaning, and planning his or her response.

-&Have someone in the group summarize the discussion before starting a new agenda item. This brings a sense of closure to that agenda item. More importantly, it allows the group to feel more involved as they are summarizing the discussion, not the facilitator.

Sample Conversation:

Facilitator: OK, the next thing on the agenda is the Toxins project. Liz?

Liz: Well, we discovered the school has been dumping toxins in the lake and...

Amit: Gee, this reminds me of a story I read when I was a kid.

Facilitator: Please, don't interrupt.

Liz: Well we decided we'd like to re-route the drainage pipes into the President's house.

Facilitator: (Miya raises her hand) Discussion? Yes? (points to Miya)

Miya: Isn't that a bit harsh? Maybe we should try the publicity route first.

Andy: Publicity? They didn't care about publicity when they massacred the class of '98!

Chris: Yeah, but they'll be pretty embarrassed if this comes out. The Provost did say he's pro-environment the other day.

Facilitator: OK, it seems like we have two proposals: to re-route the pipes now, or to get a lot of publicity and see what that does. Hands? (All but two people vote for doing publicity first.) Well, you two can re-route the pipes if you want, but don't say we did it.

Appendix C: Meeting Roles

Time Keeper

Keeps track of how much time is left for each agenda item and pushes the group to stick to time limits by notifying the group and facilitator when there are 20 minutes left, 10, 5, etc. If the group has run out of time but has not finished the discussion, the group needs to make a concerted decision to extend the discussion/agenda item and set a time limit for how much longer it wants to take.

Stack Keeper

Keeps a list of who wants to speak. Makes the facilitator's job easier when there are a lot of people or a complicated discussion. The stack keeper should always be looking around the room for people raising their hands and nod to them to let them know that they are "on stack" so that they can put their hand down. The stack keeper can call on just the next person or sometimes say, "On stack we have Paul, Beth, Maya, then Jessie."

Scribe

Takes notes from brainstorm, discussion, announcements, and proposals and puts them on a big sheet of paper or a white board so that everyone can refer to them. The scribe is also helpful when good points get raised then lost in discussion or go unnoticed.

Note Taker

Writes the official notes that can be sent out to the mailing list and kept in the group's archives for future use. See Appendix A for tips. It is the note taker's job to send the meeting notes out asap (preferably that night) so that people can review their tasks easily and those who missed the meeting can stay in the loop as much as possible.

Vibes Watcher

Monitors how people are feeling to ensure that no one is being ignored or personally attacked. A vibes watcher should also be aware of people that are getting sleepy, restless, or generally too unhappy to make decisions. The vibes watcher can remedy these situations by calling for short breaks, stretching exercises, or bring to the group's attention the injustices s/he has observed.

Appendix D: The Point of Hand Signals and How to Use Them

The Point:

Hand signals are ways for people to comment without having to disrupt the meeting. When everyone is willing to use them, they can save a lot of time, help the meeting run much more efficiently, and encourage everyone to actively participate.

For instance, often in meetings people will end up repeating in different ways what other people have already said. Many people feel the need to say things like, "I also really think that we should reevaluate our goals and blah blah blah blah blah." Instead of having to raise your hand to basically say, "I support that", people can give the Silent Cheer (see below). This helps the Facilitator and everyone else read the mood of the whole group rather than being blinded by the attitudes of a few aggressive speakers.

Silent Cheer/Twinkle: Hold up your hands and wiggle your fingers in the air.

Focus/Get to the Point: Move your hands back and forth bringing them together in a 'V' shape. Get back to the point. Use this signal when people go off on tangents and aren't sticking to the agenda.

Jargon: Throw up your hands with palms upside down. Use this for acronyms or when people refer to things you haven't heard of. If you think other people haven't heard of it you should do this too so that others who might be too embarrassed to ask a question themselves can know what's going on.