

Anti-oppressive Facilitation – making meetings awesome for all

([adapted from AORTA](#))

Introduction

Ineffective meetings can leave people feeling drained and discouraged, rather than inspired and energized. Good meetings help build strong organizations and projects. Even organizations with great meeting process inadvertently perpetuate barriers to full participation. This happens through group dynamics of power that marginalize structurally oppressed people and alienate people lacking familiarity with a group's meeting culture.

Whether or not you act as facilitator at meetings you attend, building your facilitation skills will help you make your meetings better, more inclusive, and more democratic!

WHAT IS FACILITATION?

The facilitator keeps an ear on the topic, helping keep the conversation focused while including as many people's comments as possible, and an eye on time, juggling the ever present need for more time.

- Offers periodic time checks where needed.
- Helps keep the group conversation on topic and relevant. Prevents ramblings and tangents.
- Makes process suggestions to help the group along.

- Summarizes discussion, synthesizes people's comments when helpful, and notes key areas of agreement, to help move the group forward.
- Moves topics toward conclusion, including bringing the group to a decision and finding volunteers to follow-up on each identified task.

Facilitation ensures that the group is empowered *as a whole*. Effective facilitation:

- Ensures that everyone gets to participate and share ideas in a meeting, not just those who feel most comfortable speaking up.
- Helps prevent or interrupt any (conscious or unconscious) attempts by individuals or groups to control influence over the meeting and group.
- Mitigates and interrupts social power dynamics, by addressing, and pointing out if necessary, discrepancies in who is being heard.
- Helps the group come to the decisions that are best for the whole group, not just personal preferences.
- Ensures the group follows its own agreed-upon process and meeting agreements.

Some things facilitators *don't* do:

- Dominate the speaking space.
- Dismiss people's ideas.
- Let individuals take the group off-topic and off-task.

MEETING CONTAINERS

Things like community agreements, an agenda, and a place to store important topics for future conversations, next steps, etc. are important foundations for a meeting—we call them “containers.” They act as visual tools that participants and facilitators can come back to throughout the meeting to help keep the group focused, on track, and on the same page. They also offer direction for moments when things get sticky or tense.

Community Agreements

Community agreements help define your role as facilitator and clarify the group’s expectations of you. One of your big responsibilities to the group is to make sure these agreements are upheld. Here are some examples

ONE MIC

NO ONE KNOWS EVERYTHING; TOGETHER WE KNOW A LOT

STEP UP, STEP BACK

WE CAN’T BE ARTICULATE ALL THE TIME

BE AWARE OF TIME

EMBRACE CURIOSITY

ACKNOWLEDGE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTENT AND IMPACT

Agendas

There are many different ways to build an agenda to match the style, culture, and needs of each group or meeting. However you do it, a clear and well-constructed agenda that all participants can agree to is a crucial step for an efficient, inclusive, and awesome meeting. The facilitator’s job (generally) is to keep the participants on track by following the agenda as well as paying attention to when the agenda isn’t working and changes need to happen. Here are some best practices regarding agendas:

- Set and share the agenda before the meeting starts. If you didn't make an agenda ahead of time, create the agenda at the beginning of the meeting.
- Review the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. Share your reasoning before asking for amendments or changes. It is important that the group be on board with the agenda.
- Display the agenda so that all can see it.
- Announcements and report-backs at the beginning can save time.
- Mix up the length and type of agenda items.
- Put agenda items that will be easy successes or engaging discussions early in the meeting.
- Follow with the "big stuff."
- Schedule breaks for a meeting longer than 90 minutes.
- Finish on something short and easy—end with a good tone.
- Label items with their expected actions: decision, discussion, play, evaluate, brainstorm, review, update, silence, feedback, appreciations and concerns. The expected action or desired outcome will/should inform how you design your facilitation approach for that item.

Garden/Parking Lot/Topics for Future Meetings

Whatever your group chooses to call it, keep an ongoing list to write down ideas, questions, and topics for future meetings. Often in the course of talking about one topic, really important things surface that need to be addressed, but are not on the current meeting's agenda. Unless they are urgent/time sensitive, it can really help keep the group on topic to have a space to note them so that they can be incorporated into future meetings.

Next Steps/Who, What, When, Priority

It can be very helpful to keep a section of the meeting notes where you're tracking any next steps or tasks that are coming out of the meeting. Make sure to identify who is doing what by when.

COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

STRIVE FOR EFFECTIVE. THERE IS NO “BAD” AND “GOOD.”

- What is considered “good” communication changes from culture to culture. Approaching people with the belief that there are “good” and “bad” communicators can escalate tension and conflicts.
- Our job as facilitators is to build up our toolkits to be effective. This requires us to look and listen to how our communication style is working for the other people, and to change things to move towards the others.
- Away from rules, toward effectiveness.
- The more diverse a group is, the more this comes up.
- Be aware that you bring your own expectations when you facilitate.

SYNTHESIZING

Synthesis means getting the core of what someone is saying. It is helpful in many contexts, including:

- when people are in conflict or not understanding each other.
- when an individual is emotional or repeating themselves.
- when the group is multiracial, multicultural, multi-class, multilingual etc.
- when people's first languages differ.

What can synthesis do?

- It is clarifying and can prevent miscommunication.
- It can help slow down a conversation.
- It can help others build empathy and compassion.
- It can be deescalating. People usually feel reassured that they are being heard.
- It can help draw people out.

Synthesis statements often start with:

- I want to see if I'm understanding you correctly.
- It sounds like...
- I'm hearing that....
- Are you saying.....?
- If I'm understanding you correctly....

GROUP DECISION MAKING

Steps in a decision making process

1. Identify: the problem or issue we need to address
2. Wonder: how can we best address this issue/problem/challenge?
3. Specify: how *exactly* can we address this?
4. Discuss: what are advantages and disadvantages for each approach?
5. Consensus: which approach does the group generally prefer, and how can it be amended to so that everyone or at least most people agree
6. Decide: we agree we believe this is the best way to address the problem we have
7. Implement: who will do what by when to follow through on the decision

Note that a proposal is step four. **If there's conflict or tension, go backwards in the process to build agreement.**

TIPS, TOOLS, TECHNIQUES

Some simple tools can drastically shift the energy of a meeting, help you hear new voices, and invite the perspectives of quiet, introverted, or silenced participants:

- Start the meeting with quick check-ins about how folks are doing, so you know where participants are at when they walk in the room.
- Build in a couple minutes for quiet journaling/thinking before launching into major discussions.
- Start an item off with conversations in pairs or small groups before coming back to the whole group. Often you'll get deeper this way.
- Do a go-around to hear from everyone. (People can always pass if they'd like.)
- Taking a straw poll (a non-binding vote) can help you get a quick read of how close the group is to a decision. You can check in with folks whose opinions diverge most from the majority to see what's going on for them. Straw polls can look a lot of ways:
 - Vote yes/no/maybe
 - Vote for your one favorite of multiple options
 - Vote for all the options you support (more than one is ok)
 - Rate how you feel about the proposal/idea by holding up fingers, with one finger meaning "I really do not support this," five fingers meaning "I love this."

TIPS ON NAMING, INTERVENING, AND ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC POWER

Name it when it's happening.

- "I'm noticing..."
 - "that there's a lot of interrupting happening, and that it's happening along gender lines. I want us all to work to become more aware of that and change it."
 - "some people seem like they were hurt by what you just said."

Refrain from saying things that people hear as name-calling.

Rather than what you just said is "racist." You can say: "What you just said is hurtful to people." Or ask questions.

Ask questions to support self-inquiry.

- What makes you say that?
- Where did you hear that?
- What do you mean by that?
- Can you tell me more about that?

Support the leadership of marginalized voices.

- Allow people to respond on their own behalf.

Create space for those who we are not hearing from.

- E.g. We've been hearing from a lot of men. I'm going to take a moment to see if anyone who hasn't spoken in a while has something to say.

COMMON MISTAKES (WILL HAPPEN. KEEP AN EYE OUT!)

- Not having a co-facilitator when you need one (especially in long meetings!).
- Rushing the group.
- Not setting clear boundaries for yourself in your role as facilitator.
- Not taking a break when YOU need one. (When the facilitator needs a break, it's to everyone's advantage to have a break!)
- Spiraling down into group process about group process.
- Not leaving time to discuss people's feelings.
- Becoming unwilling to adapt the agenda/plan to meet the group's evolving needs.
- Forgetting to get additional support—a note taker, logistics coordinator, someone to set up the meeting space, etc.
- Meeting for too long a time period without food, water, and/or breaks.

RED FLAGS AND DYNAMICS TO WATCH OUT FOR

- Unhealthy, unchallenged, or unnamed power dynamics.
- People interrupting each other or the facilitator.
- People repeating or re-stating what others have said.
- Tone and body language: Do people look upset? Checked out? Bored? Angry? If you see this, check in with the group as a whole, or quietly with individuals.
- Individuals monopolizing conversation.
- Individuals or small groups bringing a fully-formed idea to the meeting, without any group conversation, brainstorming, or feedback, and wanting it passed that very day.
- Back-and-forths between individuals.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU GET STUCK

- Use the agenda and expected actions. Have you switched into “decide” mode when the desired action was “feedback?”
- Take a break: Have small groups work out a proposal based on what they’ve heard about the needs of the group.
- Ask questions to initiate discussion, as opposed to jumping directly into concerns.
- When people voice concerns ask them what can be done to address their concerns.
- Do people need a refresher about the decision-making process?
- Listen for agreement and note it, no matter how small. This both builds morale and helps clarify where the group is at.
- Reflect back what you’re hearing. Practice synthesizing and summarizing.
- Break big decisions into smaller pieces.
- Don’t allow back-and-forths between two participants to dominate a discussion or agenda item: ask for input from others.