

Facilitation

What is facilitation?

Facilitation is the process of enabling groups to work cooperatively and effectively. Facilitation is important in circumstances where people of diverse backgrounds, interests and capabilities work together.

A purpose and an agenda

It is important that all participants are aware of the purpose of the session. The purpose should be worded clearly and simply. Ideally it should be visible at all times so that participants can be reminded of it if necessary.

A clear agenda helps focus participants on the work at hand, and helps the facilitator enforce time-keeping.

Your job

To keep the conversation moving and relevant to food. If in doubt, always go back to the scenario.

Introduce people

Have participants introduce themselves at the start of a session. As facilitator, introduce yourself first (name and organization); this helps others decide what they will say.

Ground rules

Write a set of ground rules, and ensure that all participants agree to them. For example:

- All ideas are valid, there are no wrong answers
- Everyone has something to contribute, have your say, and listen to others
- No side-bar conversations and no mobile phones
- All participants are equal
- Try not to repeat what's already been said

An open environment

Groups work best when individuals are made to feel comfortable expressing their ideas. Encourage all participants to listen to what others are saying. If a session is splintering into separate discussion groups, halt them politely and ask them to deal with one discussion at a time.

Involving all participants

In any group, individuals will be more or less inclined to speak up. Watch out for signs that people are not involved.

Be aware of any participant keeping their head down, doodling, or showing similar lack of engagement. Some people may be so quietly spoken that they are susceptible to interruptions by others. To engage and encourage these people, ask them for their opinions and comments.

Also be aware of people who are dominating the conversation or side tracking it. Don't interrupt them but when they pause thank them for their input and move the conversation along.

Lead by example

You can encourage cooperative behavior by behaving in a way that is at all times honest, open, respectful and non-partisan. If a disagreement arises, do not take sides. Instead, ask the group to resolve the issue.

Relax

Many people are nervous about facilitation. Your nervousness is much more apparent to yourself than to others.

Remember that it is the responsibility of group to work towards the required outcome - your responsibility is simply to support the process.

Pay attention and keep quiet

Remember, as facilitator, you are not a participant. You must be attentive to what is happening at all times. Do not get side-tracked into long discussions with individuals. Try not to let the conversation get bogged down, move it along at a natural pace.