Facilitating fun and effective meetings

Good facilitation makes meetings more useful and more enjoyable for everyone there, and helps groups become more effective. The facilitator serves the group, helping them to keep to agreed meeting processes and attempting to maximise the democracy and inclusivity of those processes.

This handout sets out some key facilitation roles and responsibilities, then lists a series of practical tools you and your group may find useful in fulfilling these roles.

Remember, these roles don’t necessarily need to be all fulfilled by one “facilitator” – good facilitation relies a lot on the whole group sharing responsibility for taking on the roles which are needed for a meeting to run well.

Facilitation Roles and Responsibilities

Preparing for a group meeting

The meeting space must be chosen and prepared appropriately. Ideally it should be comfortable, and set up to encourage participation. A circle of chairs works well — everyone can see each other and there is no automatic hierarchy in a circle. Make sure there’s enough light, air, food & drink to suit the meeting. Are you competing with any other noise? Tea & coffee slow a meeting down, so if you want it short and focussed, it might be best to give it a miss, or wait until afterwards.

Think about meeting times —will people have to skip a meal to attend? Falling blood sugar leads to irritability and lack of focus, so have snacks on hand and plan to take breaks where needed. Will people need to leave in a hurry? If so make sure all important discussion is at the start of the meeting, or time keep so you finish on time.

Prepare the Agenda — work with the group to prioritise agenda items, allocate time to each, etc. Have all the action points from the last meeting been completed? If people are due to report back to this meeting, are you sure they are coming? If not, can someone else fill in for them? Will all the information needed to take decisions be available at the meeting?

However your group sets its agendas, always leave room for additions, so that the whole group can take part in forming the plan for the meeting and thus feel more involved in the discussions. It might be worth talking through suggested agenda items and prioritising them with the group in the first few minutes of the meeting. Finally, make a sensible estimate of the time the agenda will take. If you only have an hour to meet, and two hours of stuff to discuss, make that clear at the start of the meeting, prioritise and arrange another time for the remaining items.

Do you need support? For example, if you are planning on contributing to the discussion, you will need to ask someone to co-facilitate. They can step in to the facilitators role for the relevant agenda item, so you can express your opinion without risk of prejudicing the discussion. Can you keep an eye on the time, and still focus on the way the meeting is running? If not ask someone to timekeep.

Make sure the meeting is publicised properly in advance. Does everyone know it’s going to take place? Are there things people need to be asked to bring along or prepared in advance? Were there action points from last time which it’d be worth chasing up to make sure they’ve been done?
During a meeting

Once the meeting begins your role as facilitator can be broken down into two areas – Task roles and Maintenance roles.

Some Key Maintenance Roles:

Establishing common ground – any action group comes together because of a shared belief in the need to make change. This is your common ground. Bringing the group back to focus on what they share helps prevent small conflicts getting out of proportion. If the group seems caught up in disagreement, remind it of the common ground it shares.

Bringing out and resolving conflict – following on from ‘common ground’ is resolving conflict. It can be tempting to brush disagreement under the carpet, and hope it’ll somehow disappear. It rarely does. It’s worth bringing the conflict into the open and working to find resolution early on. The longer you leave it, the harder this will be.

Maintaining democracy & participation – a healthy group needs equality and respect. It’s therefore important for you to make sure everyone not only gets the chance to air their views, but feels like they have been listened to, and their contribution valued. So part of the role of the facilitator is to encourage the quiet people and keep some control on the loud and dominant ones.

Some Key Task Roles:

Keeping to agenda – once the group has agreed an agenda, it’s important to try and stick to it. The facilitator may often have to bring rambling discussion back to an agenda item, or stop it running on to the next item before the previous one is resolved.

Reworking the agenda – sometimes it will become apparent that the agenda needs to change. Maybe new items emerge, or it’s obvious that more time is needed for a sensible discussion on an item. Rather than just letting the meeting run on, the facilitator can work with the group to rearrange the agenda – altering time allotted to items, or agreeing that certain items can wait until another meeting. As a last resort the group can agree to overrun on the time allowed for the meeting, but try not to let this happen regularly.

Maintaining group focus – bringing the group back to agenda items when it gets sidetracked, looking out for areas of agreement and clear proposals for action, and making sure they are given a proper hearing. As facilitator your key role is to help the meeting achieve its purpose - moving ideas forwards and translating them into action.

Recording decisions and action points – it’s surprisingly easy for decisions to get made, then get lost in the other business of the meeting; or for someone to volunteer, but never get the approval of the group to do the task; or for a task to arise for which no-one volunteers, but yet the meeting moves on anyway. As a facilitator, you should bring the group back to these tasks and volunteers and make sure one job is done before the next is started.

Testing for agreement – Often it will fall to the facilitator to notice that the group is nearing agreement, and can move on to a firm decision. Groups can waste a lot of time talking around ideas which they largely agree on. It’s worth presenting the group with the ideas you’re hearing and asking for some sign of agreement or disagreement. If you get a clear indication, one way or the other, you can ask someone to present a proposal for action to the group for adoption.

Evaluating the meeting - at the end leave at least a few minutes to discuss how the meeting went, find out what could have worked better, and what lessons need learning (for you and the group) for next time.

After the meeting

Circulate decisions / action points . Your meeting will have been a waste of time if the decisions aren’t acted upon – make sure everyone knows what’s been decided, what they need to get done, and when the next meeting is.