

Introduction to facilitation skills and group management

Understanding the different roles of those running an event

It is vital that you know who is doing what during your events. Without a 'leader', roles can become blurred giving an impression of disorganisation and undermining the belief of attendees that you really can pull this project together. What follows is a brief, practical introduction to the different roles people might play at your events. For an introduction to the theoretical side of facilitation, you might want to look at one of the books we have recommended in the reference section.

The Event Planner

This is the person (or small team) who plans the outline of the event and manages the venue bookings, catering, registration list and setting up the venue. It may well include the Lead Facilitator on the day, but quite often the skills that make someone good at planning an event don't necessarily mean they would be good at leading the event, so this may not be the case. The Event Planner (or small team) will also act as Supporters on the day, unless they are also the Lead Facilitator.

The Lead Facilitator

This is the person who is perceived by all the attendees as being the person in charge of the event. They will be carrying out a tricky balancing act. Some people do this sort of work as a full-time job; they are hired by bodies

such as local authorities or large housing developers to run consultation events in order to try to reach consensus on large projects, or how a service ought to be delivered. *Professional* facilitators benefit from being neutral in the process – they usually aren't local, they have lots of training in non-confrontational discussion techniques, and they have no emotional attachment to the proposed project. They are also non-expert – for example they probably won't be the person who gives a presentation setting the scene for what will be discussed.

If you are using this pack as a group of Community Activists, then the Lead Facilitator at your event (along with the rest of the team) doesn't have any of those advantages! You are local, you are emotionally attached, and you are in fact a key stakeholder. Don't let that get in the way of your role as Lead Facilitator. During the events you must not get drawn in to having a debate with members of the audience – it is not about your view versus the view of some audience members. Your role is to promote and manage the debate between members of the audience.

Secondary facilitators

Where the audience is quite large, and will be split into groups for certain exercises, it can be helpful if there are more people who are able to help the groups when they are doing exercises. This means that the Lead Facilitator doesn't have to rush around from group to group, helping to re-frame questions or calm down heated

What is a facilitator?

A facilitator is neutral in a decision-making process. Their role is to ensure that people attending an event make the best use both of their time and of the information presented to them.

Facilitators use a range of methods to draw information from people, and are responsible for ensuring that the outcomes of meetings are properly recorded and all views taken into account. They must *actively* listen, re-frame, summarise and pass back comments to the audience to generate further discussion where needed. They must keep discussions on track, focus on the task in hand, acknowledge people's complaints and make sure they are addressed.

Above all, the facilitator deals with the *process*, not the *content* of a meeting. In a perfect world this would mean that someone else would deliver presentations containing information relevant to the topic. In reality, this is rarely possible, so it's important for a facilitator who is also a stakeholder to maintain a professional detachment at all times.

Deliver information, but always revert to the position of drawing out what the members of the wider group think, and allow them to debate between themselves, not with you. A facilitator never makes a decision for the group – for example when grouping a series of post-it notes from a brainstorm, facilitators will use phrases like "do we think this should go with this?", rather than "I'm going to put this here".

debates. It can sometimes be very useful to have someone with each group to help prompt debate, since people can be a little shy of group work if they haven't been involved in it for some time.

Supporters

These are the people who will make sure that the logistics of the event run smoothly – the Lead Facilitator shouldn't really have to do any of this as it can result in them getting side-tracked from the process.

- Welcoming arrivals, setting up and checking people off on the sign in sheet
- Acting as a timekeeper for the overall process (and providing subtle reminders to the facilitator)
- Exercise support – e.g. handing out pens and post-it notes while the facilitator explains to people what they will be doing
- Refreshments – setting up tea and coffee, sandwiches etc ready for scheduled break times
- Technical set up (Setting up powerpoint etc before the event starts)
- Physical set-up (tables and chairs etc)
- Liaising with the venue manager to get in on time to do all this!
- Provision of all equipment – making sure all the relevant laptops, pens and paper are there on time (For a series of events, it's worth having a big box that contains all of this sort of stuff so that you can ensure everything is collected together again at the end)

Questions that facilitators ask

As a facilitator, there are three things you want to get people to do, and three ways of questioning people to get them to do it.

1) To confirm or deny something you need a 'closed question' (one that can only result in a 'yes' or 'no' answer) such as 'So, do we think that a solar project is too expensive to pursue further?'

2) To explain something you need an 'open question', to which they cannot answer 'yes' or 'no', such as "For what reasons do you think wind turbines are inappropriate in the countryside?"

3) To make a decision. This is the sort of question that makes people do something, e.g. "Shall we come up with some ideas of how we can get more people along to the next meeting?"

The Recorder

The role of the recorder is to ensure that important outcomes are noted in a public way. The easiest method is to write up the comments on flipchart paper, clearly and in full view of everyone. It goes without saying that a recorder needs legible writing, and if they haven't done it before, it's worth doing a quick practice. It makes it much easier to write-up the event afterwards if the flipchart pages have a heading and are numbered. It's a good idea to set up your paper beforehand, about 5 or 6 sheets next to each other, so you can continue to write without interruption – and test that your pens don't bleed through onto the wall!

An event that generates a lot of discussion can result in a lot of such 'wall-writing'. Never remove or cover over sheets to make more room – just move them to a different part of the wall so that all valid points remain visible throughout the meeting.

The recorder needs to be very careful of changing the meaning of what is being said, and the facilitator can help by asking the speaker directly 'are you happy with that?' or, where the written point is a summary of the consensus, by asking 'before we move on, are we all happy with how that has been summarised?'

The recorder should differentiate between points that had general agreement from the floor, and those that were hotly contested. It may be that you need to note some things on different sheets to make this distinction, or put a passionately held minority view on the 'Unresolved issues' sheet for addressing later.

Dealing with confrontation and difficult situations

In any process that involves getting groups to work together, you will encounter behaviour that makes your task more difficult. There are two key things to remember:

- 1) Recognise that the difficult thing to deal with is the *behaviour*, not the person.
- 2) Understand that there are a range of different 'difficult behaviours' which usually reflect the underlying concern of the person displaying them.

And while you are dealing with that difficult situation, try to remember a time when *you* have demonstrated difficult behaviour and refused to engage in an adult way – we all do it, usually as a reaction to a fear or concern we have, or an ingrained behaviour that we have got away with over a long time.

Your behaviour is what matters most

Difficult behaviour is guaranteed to set off a reaction in your behaviour – when someone won't engage in an 'adult' way, it's very easy for your behaviour to alter in response – you will become defensive, irritable and will adopt body language that suggests this (arms crossed, hands on hips etc).

You must rise above this. While you can manage the behaviour of the difficult person, and in some cases change it, the easiest behaviour to control is your own, and you must at all times remain calm and empathetic, with a warm tone of voice. This doesn't mean being passive; rather you should remain assertive, looking for solutions and moving the situation on. If you remain calm you will bring the rest of the group with you and the person behaving badly will feel more isolated. If you rise to it, they are likely to take sides.

Types of difficult behaviour

Here are some caricatures of the sorts of behaviour you may come across, and the best techniques to deal with it. Note that one person may demonstrate several different behaviours at once. You will find many versions of these caricatures in the facilitation literature, and more information can be found in the books on facilitation skills recommended in the reference section.

Bullying

Some attendees may display aggressive verbal behaviour towards both the facilitator and other participants, including interrupting proceedings with exclamations such as "this is nonsense" and "you're wrong". Their behaviour is probably triggered by fear and worry, and, finding that aggression and non-engagement has got them what they want in the past, they hope to block and derail your process by repeating this behaviour.

Your response should be to retain control, and not be provoked. If they say "this is nonsense" don't respond with "no it's not!" You must draw them in to explaining themselves, but on your terms. Acknowledge the interruption (e.g. "okay Peter, clearly we are in disagreement about this point. Let's finish off this discussion and then I'll ask you to explain your point").

Ask others if they agree with the comments made – note this on the 'unresolved issues' sheet and finish whatever activity you were doing. Then ask the person to explain their point. This technique will ensure that they always have to back up their comments with facts. Once they

Moving things on

A tricky situation for a facilitator is when someone feels that they cannot let the debate move on until they have 'won' their point.

One of the ways to deal with this is to give them a sense of confidence that their overall opposition has not been dismissed. You can do this by marking their point on a flipchart, maybe entitled 'Unresolved Issues'. But if you do this, it is vital that this issue is included in the write-up and addressed publicly, and that you explain what you intend to do to address it after the event.

Part of your post-event work will be to research questions that were raised that you could not answer on the day, and ensure that they are circulated.

have been put on the spot a few times they will feel less keen to keep interrupting loudly. If their concerns seem to hinge on a specific issue, offer to discuss this one-on-one with them at a break point, or even away from the meeting if it appears to be a complex issue.

This sort of loud and aggressive behaviour often goes hand-in hand with downright rudeness to you or other individuals, which you must counter with a very teacherly response – e.g. "we have listened to what you have to say in a civil manner, so it's only fair that you treat others here with the same respect."

On the plus side, this sort of behaviour is unattractive that people displaying it will find themselves isolated as the meeting progresses.

Quiet undermining

Similar attempts to derail your meeting may be made by people muttering snide remarks and comments under their breath to those nearest to them. This may be someone who isn't confident that their views are acceptable to the wider group, so are trying to influence those closest to them.

One possible response is to ask them to repeat what they said, so that everyone can hear them. Respond positively to the comment and then ask them to explain themselves. E.g. "sorry Peter, I didn't catch that, could you repeat it for the whole group?" followed by "okay, do you want to give us a bit more detail about why you think that" (but again, since it's on your terms) "we'll revisit that at the end of this section."

Negativity

Some people may come to your event to merely sit and huff silently, using body language to show they are not engaged and making comments of the “we never get anything round here” and “this’ll never work” sort.

Try to get this person enthused and on your side, they can be a really useful ally. The best approach is to empathise but not sympathise, and ask them, and the wider audience what they think can be done to overcome the barriers they insist on raising. They will not persist in being constantly negative if they are asked to come up with constructive actions to counter their own comments.

Over-attention to detail

You may come across someone who wants absolute answers or detail where you are not yet in a position to do this. This behaviour can hold up the process by suggesting that decisions can’t be made or valid opinions given because people are not in possession of all the ‘facts’.

People displaying this behaviour could well be those who excel at project planning or who have a job that requires assembling facts up front. They will be uncomfortable making decisions outside of their usual systems.

Your best response is to acknowledge their needs and explain why you don’t yet have that information. Make sure that you note their concerns, which could be valuable contributions to the next steps of your project. Ask the wider audience what they think.

And recruit them! Not everyone has the right temperament or attention span to be a ‘details guy’, and these could be valuable skills for specific tasks as your project progresses. Let them know you would value input from someone with organisational and planning skills as the project progresses.

Showmanship

Some attendees may enjoy drawing attention to themselves by cracking jokes or making witty comments, and when contributing comments during discussion going off onto lengthy story-telling tangents. This may reflect their behaviour at home or at work where they are used to having a dominant position and a high profile.

This sort of person can be very handy if they are on your side, as their lack of self-consciousness means they will promote the project to everyone they meet.

If their attention-seeking behaviour is too disruptive, use firm signals and language – tell them to wait if they have already spoken – “can we come back to you when X has spoken”. You can also offer them a role – invite them to stand at the front and act as Recorder, but make sure you keep an eye on what they are writing.

Shyness

Some attendees won’t say much at all, either because they are naturally shy or they have some cultural concerns that make them uncomfortable speaking in a group setting.

Although this person is not causing you any trouble, you could be missing out on some really valuable input. Try to get them to converse with you at the break times, or ask one of the other members of the group to do so. If it appears to be a cultural issue (e.g. a woman who does not appear happy talking in front of other men), then think about splitting groups up to make a single-sex group for them to be in.

Splitting people into groups

Quite often people will come to an event in pairs or small groups of their own. It can be beneficial to split them up, at least for parts of the meeting, so that they can interact with and hear the views of others. It may also help to keep creating new groups, so that people don’t become ‘territorial’. So you might have people grouped in one way for the first exercise you run, but in a different way next time round. A few techniques for doing this are given below. They are also fun as they get people to have a quick chat with each other.

Birth month: Ask everyone to line up in the order of their birth month – from January down to December. Then you go along the line and give them each a number in turn, according to the how many groups you want i.e. ‘one’, ‘two’, ‘three’, ‘four’. All the ‘ones’ are in one group, all the ‘twos’ in another and so forth.

Place of birth: Ask everyone to line up in order of where they were born – those born furthest South at one end of the room, and those born furthest North at the other – then number them off as above.

First initial: Get everyone to line up in first name order – people beginning with A at one side and people beginning with Z at the other, then number them off as before. This has the added advantage that people have to introduce themselves to each other.

Sweet tooth: Get everyone to stand in line, then go along and have them take a sweet from a bag of mixed sweets or chocolates – then they must split into groups according to who has the same sweets (you need to make sure you have the right number of sweets of each type).

Loud voices, quiet voices: This is a technique that you can use if you feel that certain characters are dominating the work. Although it can be a little embarrassing for the 'loud voices', they are usually quite extroverted people who don't mind being singled out! When you have groups working together, as they come to the end of the work they are doing, approach each group in turn and ask everyone to nominate the person who they think did the most talking during that session. Lots of (hopefully good natured) accusatory pointing will occur, and then you can take the 'loud voice' from each group and make them into another group on their own.

Whatever selection process you use, be sensitive to culture. For example, it may be inappropriate to split women of certain cultures from their male relatives and put them with other men, but okay to put them in a women-only group.