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FACILITATION
EXPERT
REFERENCE
GUIDE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of a facilitator is to guide and structure productive conversations that enable a group to solve problems, make decisions, learn together, and achieve its objectives. Whether conducting in an in-person, virtual, or hybrid setting, good facilitators make their work look effortless. Yet, the basis of flawless delivery is on careful planning, preparation, and practice.

How do you ensure the discussion flows well and participation is maximized? How do you get groups to develop workable, realistic solutions? What factors must you consider when running a virtual facilitation? The most essential skills, knowledge, and techniques for facilitators are summarized in our *Facilitation Expert Reference Guide*.

In this guide, we share with you best practices for each stage in the facilitation process, covering topics such as how to provide a safe and productive space for sharing, how to keep the group on track, how to build consensus, how to manage dysfunction, and how to balance objectivity.

The foundations covered in this eBook are universal to both in-person and virtual facilitations, but we do provide some additional advice for each setting. While mastering the art of facilitation takes time and lots of practice, we hope the practical tips in this guide extend your knowledge and give you the tools you need to effectively and confidently facilitate your next workshop or meeting.



I. INTRODUCTION

Getting the most out of a group of people working together in a meeting or workshop is not always easy. That's when a skilled facilitator can step in. The role of the facilitator is to help guide and structure productive conversations that group may have difficulty doing on their own. This person ensures that group members are fully engaged and that the group is working effectively toward a defined outcome. By improving process and structure, facilitators keep the group on track to meeting its desired objectives.

II. PREPARATION BEST PRACTICES

With any facilitation, preparation is key to success. The goal of doing pre-work is to stay ahead of the conversation so that you, as a facilitator, can be present in the moment and confident in knowing the next three steps. This lead-time advantage is important because it gives you the ability to anticipate and shape the current and future outcomes of the conversation. To prepare for your facilitation:

Know the Audience

- Get to know the organization and the people who you are facilitating. Know why they are there. What is the aim of the meeting as well as the long-term goals of the group? What are their passions, barriers, and pains? Do some background research to surface any potential pitfalls, sensitivities, and obstacles to success. Figure out the political dynamics, interpersonal dynamics, demographics, perceptions and knowledge base of the participants. Spending time getting to know people develops trust and allows you to ask the hard question later on.

Know the Leadership

- Communicate with the leadership team throughout the design process. What are their goals? What insights do they have about the group? Knowing their opinions is important, especially if they are the ultimate decision makers.

Know the Facts

- Not only do you need to know the people you are facilitating, but you also need to know the facts. Be familiar with the issues. What problems are the group experiencing? What actions have already been taken in the area you are facilitating? Even if you need to be an independent facilitator, have an opinion. Knowing what you want from the conversation shows everyone you've gone through the hard work of understanding the subject for discussion so you can facilitate from a place that is more informed. This gives the group comfort that they are being led down a path that someone has thought about already (and not into some potentially dangerous uncharted territory).

Know Your Team

- Clarify team member roles and responsibilities. For instance, if a question comes up at a meeting that requires some instant data crunching, you should know who to go to on your team to help with this task. If you're co-facilitating a workshop, make sure you meet with the other person beforehand to plan how you will work together. During the meeting, you should be comfortable enough to look at your co-facilitator in the eye and know that they will respond in the way in which you expect.



50% of all team meetings are considered a waste of time due to lack of clarity, scope creep, wandering generalities, and lack of action. An effective facilitator guides the process and brings needed deliberateness to the meeting.”

Know yourself

- Know your strengths, weaknesses, and limits. What areas do you excel in and what do you need to improve? What are your moral commitments with each engagement? A skilled facilitator can significantly influence the outcome of the conversation. Know in advance your boundaries of exerted influence. Be aware of what you are trying to do and for what purpose. If your purpose is to be a blank slate, then be a blank slate. Also, be aware of your own inherent and implicit biases regarding age, race, ethnicity, gender, educational level, etc. Once you know yourself, you can better understand others.

Know Your Scenarios

- When working with any large group, there's a countless number of different scenarios that might unfold. While you can't possibly predict and plan for every decision that might be made or each person's reaction, you can think through some responses for best case, worst case, and most likely scenarios. This allows you to anticipate and prepare for what might be coming.

Know Your Questions

- Identify questions that you or the audience might ask in advance. What are your softball questions to the group? What are black box questions that you hope no one will ask? Just asking "any questions?" isn't specific enough.

III. IN-MEETING BEST PRACTICES

Create a foundation for working together at the start of the meeting. These start-up processes and structures set the session's tone and create a safe environment that encourages open and respectful communication. To begin the meeting:

Make introductions

- Welcome everyone to the space and introduce yourself. Have participants make introductions and make an effort to learn everyone's names. If you know who will be in the meeting beforehand, print out namecards. On one side, print each participant's name and on the other side, print the ground rules for the meeting.

Use the introduction time to layer in an ice-breaker with intention. Instead of asking "Tell us something we don't know about you," inquire "What brought you to want to work on this issue? Who do you represent? What are you passionate about?"

Establish ground rules

- Establish ground rules to guide how the group will work together in the meeting. You can propose the ground rules as a compact, or agreement. For example, you can state: "In order to do our best work and treat each other with care and respect, do we agree to: participate, listen actively, respect each other and the process, be open to new ideas, etc.?" You can also ask the participants for additions, given their knowledge of the group. The namecards with the agreed-to compact facing inward toward the participant serve as an excellent reminder of these ground rules. Let the group know they will be held accountable to the compact. It takes the gumption of the facilitator to enforce this!
- Laying ground rules early is an important part of the process because it sets expectations about the tone of the room and aids in providing a comfortable environment where people feel safe in sharing and listening. Be sure participants know there should be no judgment. To reiterate this norm, you can use language like: "This is going to be a space for ideas. We're going to privilege the creative process and worry less about evaluation right now. Don't filter or censor ideas because your idea can spark an iteration in someone else's mind." In addition, secure and communicate "safe space permission and encouragement" from the organization's leaders. You don't want people to fear post-session regret for speaking out.

Review the agenda and confirm meeting objectives

- Go over what's going to happen at the meeting and clarify objectives and goals for the team. Ask participants for feedback. For instance, you can say: "This is our agenda, these are our goals, but before we begin, is there anything else you would like to have accomplished by the end of our time together?" This sets parameters for the meeting—what's within the scope of discussion and what's out of scope—and also leads to buy-in among participants. If someone suggests something that is not aligned to the goals, acknowledge the idea, but set it aside in the parking lot (a place to record items that would take the group away from its current task, but could be further explored at a later time).
- Be very clear on the goals of the discussion and how the group will make decisions. Is the group trying to get consensus? A consensus decision is one that everyone involved can agree to, though it may not be their first choice. Is the group seeking unanimity? Simple majority? What is the level of agreement necessary to finalize a decision?

Throughout the meeting, employ a range of tools and techniques to support everyone to do their best thinking. To help facilitate discussion, remember to:

Reinforce the safe space

- Criticism kills safe space quickly so manage the conversation in a way that reinforces the idea that participants can share their ideas without judgement. Be careful not to show judgement in your body language and prevent others in the room (virtual or in-person) from doing the same.

Use inclusive language

- Give a strong message of inclusion in the language you use. You don't want to single people out, "other them", or say anything offensive.

Inspire confidence

- Inspire confidence among your participants in their ability to work together and find solutions by instilling an optimistic "we got this" attitude.

Inject humor

- Inject humor when appropriate. Self-deprecating jokes balanced with demonstrated legitimacy provide levity to the session and create an open atmosphere.

Actively listen

- Demonstrate a keen interest in what the speaker is saying. To have an effective conversation, people need to feel like their voices are being heard. Reflecting their words back to them (e.g., on white-board, group chat, or verbally) gives them confidence they were heard, and final control over their own voice/ words.

Feel the energy and flow

- Pay attention to the overall feeling of the group throughout the meeting. With practice, you'll learn how to measure emotional temperature and energy levels and know when the group is done and can no longer be productive.

Practice compassionate detachment

- Balance being compassionate but also being objective in how you guide the group's conversation. You have to connect with the group as people and display empathy, but at the same time, you can't let that detract from the goals of the facilitation.

Stay flexible

- Stay flexible and ready to change course if necessary. In your pre-work, you should have determined what content, activities, and focus must remain no matter what so that when new ideas or a direction occurs, you know what content and activities could be replaced with that new and organically created opportunity. Articulate that change and give people an assurance that the group did not give up any essentials by the shift, but rather added richness beyond the original plan.

Mediate conflict

- Conflict within groups is natural and inevitable. Be adept at mediating conflict and leading groups to solutions through various questioning techniques.

Manage time

- Effective facilitation assumes efficient time-keeping. Map out time limits for each activity on the agenda and keep the discussion moving productively. Be ready to tweak the agenda during the meeting, as needed, with the ultimate goal of accomplishing meeting objectives while letting everyone leave on time.

Display vulnerability

- Balance bringing some of yourself into the facilitation space. Being too impartial or too clinical can be an inhibitor to reaching the goals of the meeting because people aren't going to trust you. Being vulnerable comes with confidence in who you are as a person and as a facilitator.

Use your IQ, EQ, & CQ

- In a facilitation engagement, your intellectual intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and cultural intelligence all come into play to some degree. CQ and EQ are most important. If you're a brilliant person but can't read the room and connect with the group, you may not get very far as an effective facilitator. At the same time, IQ does still play a role. You have to know what you're talking about. Improve your CQ and EQ skills with training – it might be more innate and easier for some people than others, but it is possible to learn these skills.

Accommodate different learning styles

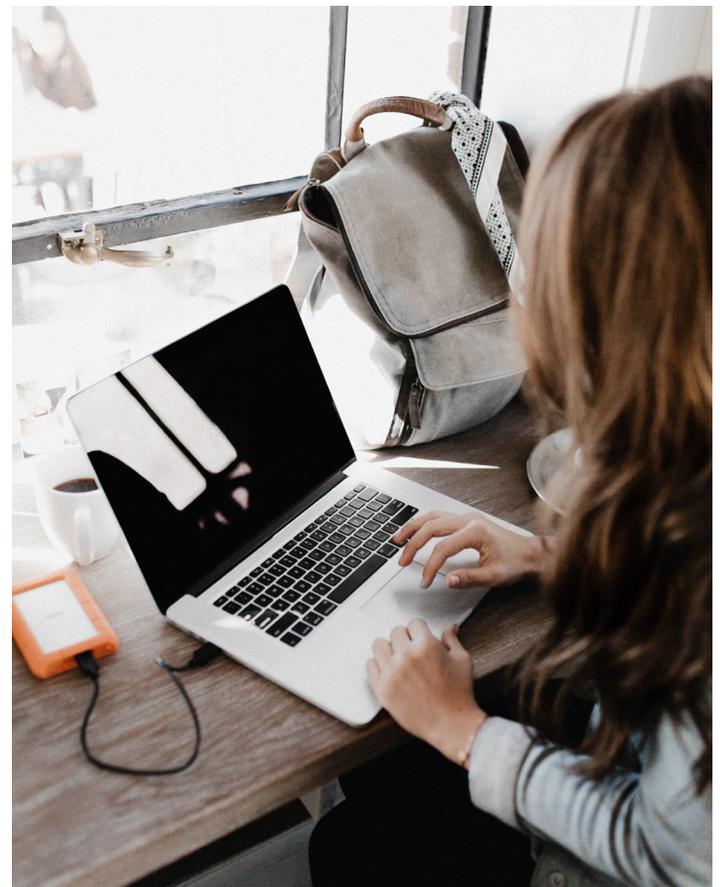
- Utilize all modes of learning. Elements like music, food, and fidget toys serve as an independent modality for learning and allows people to get comfortable, which helps to build trust. In recognizing that some participants are verbal processors and some others are reflective, invite contributions verbally in the session and also in writing after the session to give people time to reflect. This allows participants to stay whole throughout and beyond the meeting. Finally, be sure to utilize visuals, such as whiteboards, flip charts, or annotated virtual graphics (in Zoom or MS Teams). They serve multiple purposes: (1) they allow the facilitator to retain control toward objectives, (2) they allow the participants to see what they are contributing to the conversation, instilling the notion of "being heard", and (3) they help the group remember information and track where they are headed.

Telegraph questions

- The way that questions are framed can help create a discussion that is meaningful, engaging, and inclusive. Telegraphing questions is a great way to ask participants questions without stressing them out. When using this technique, say the participants' names to signal they have to pay attention. Tell them you have a question to ask. Then go ahead and ask your question, seeding the answer in the question. This gives participants the support they may need to answer the question and avoids shame. If you do cold-call, be respectful, and insert some telegraphing. You don't want participants to resent you for cold-calling.

Record Results

- Record key points of conversation and group decisions in a visible way to keep group progress on track and avoid circling back to the same topics. Action points should be written down along with who will do them and any deadlines.



IV. FOLLOW-UP BEST PRACTICES

Conducting a facilitation is exhausting. But you have to carry that energy from the facilitation to the follow-up. When it comes to this last step, be sure to:

Schedule time in advance

- Schedule time in advance to make sure the follow-up gets done. It's important to not drop the ball on this important last step or you'll lose trust.

Identify next steps

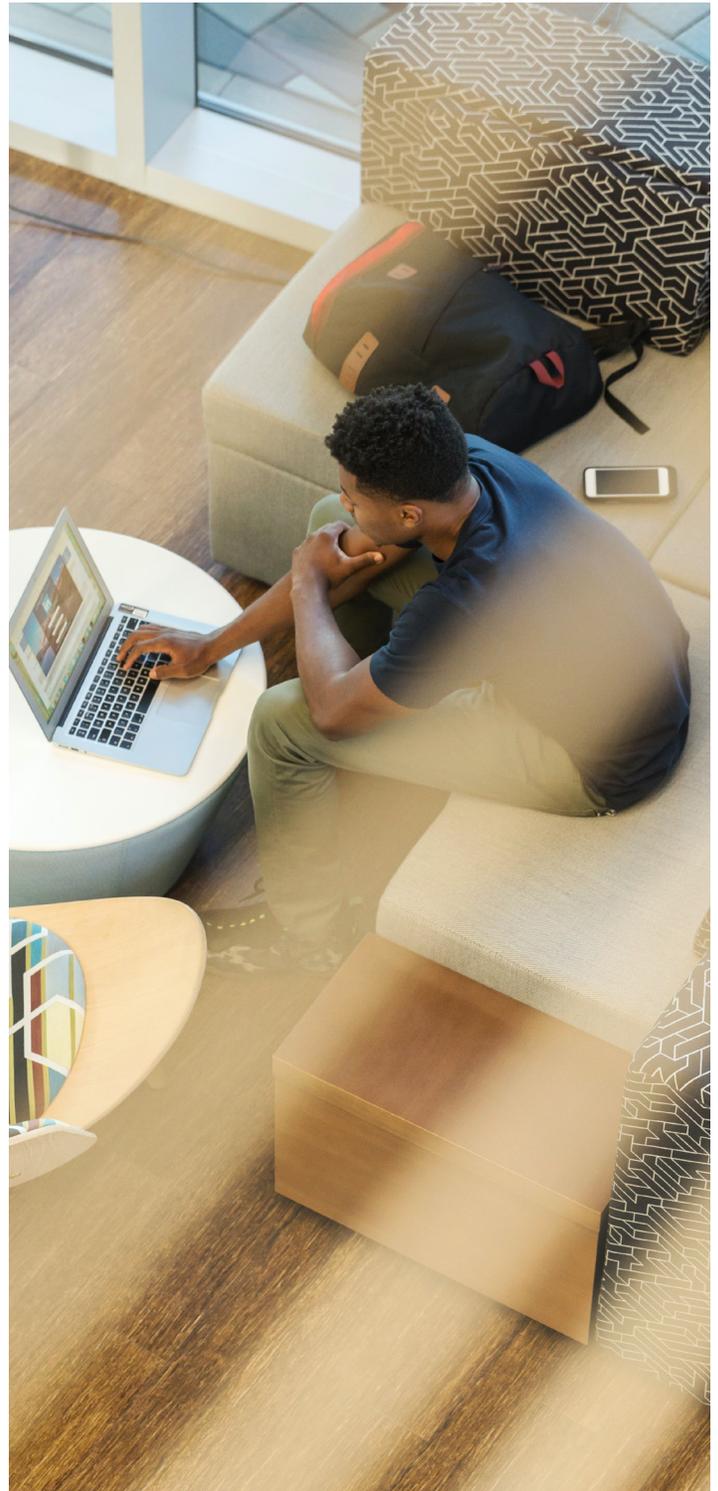
- At a minimum, follow-up materials should contain action items and next steps, including ownership and due dates to ensure accountability.

Send thank-you notes

- Individual thank-you notes are also a good idea. Use them to express gratitude toward your client for their willingness to be there and do the hard work.

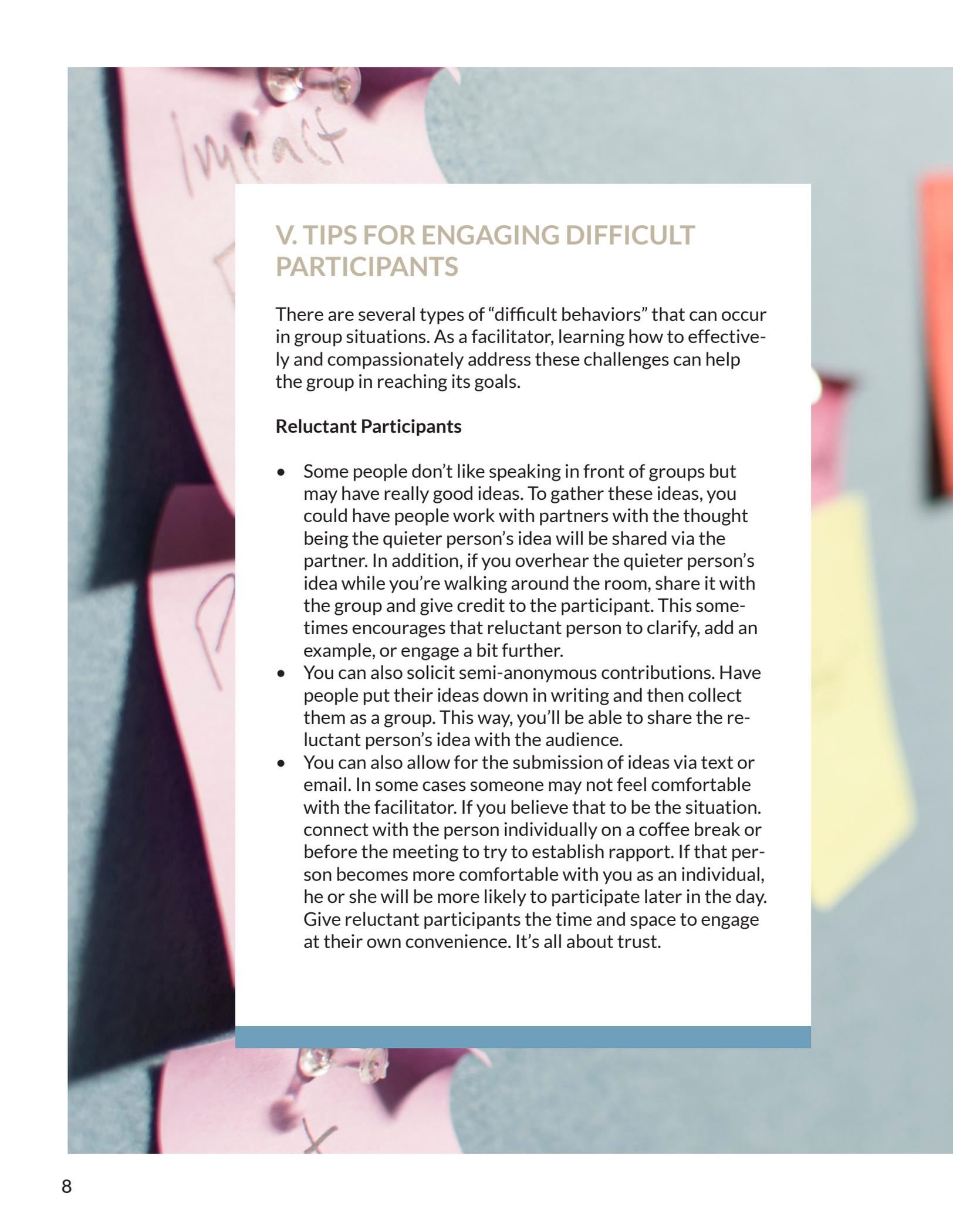
Continue the conversation

- After the engagement ends, serve as a source and/or mentor to the client, as time permits. Conduct periodic check-ins to see how things are going and send information or articles that you know the client may need or want in terms of their own development and self-improvement. Clients get more excited for facilitators who maintain contact and interest in the organization than for those who come in, do their gig, leave, and then are done.



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In the U.S. alone, \$37 billion a year is wasted on ineffective meetings. Facilitation provides consistent structure, manages interpersonal dynamics, and incorporates team norms to make meetings meaningful and impactful.”



V. TIPS FOR ENGAGING DIFFICULT PARTICIPANTS

There are several types of “difficult behaviors” that can occur in group situations. As a facilitator, learning how to effectively and compassionately address these challenges can help the group in reaching its goals.

Reluctant Participants

- Some people don't like speaking in front of groups but may have really good ideas. To gather these ideas, you could have people work with partners with the thought being the quieter person's idea will be shared via the partner. In addition, if you overhear the quieter person's idea while you're walking around the room, share it with the group and give credit to the participant. This sometimes encourages that reluctant person to clarify, add an example, or engage a bit further.
- You can also solicit semi-anonymous contributions. Have people put their ideas down in writing and then collect them as a group. This way, you'll be able to share the reluctant person's idea with the audience.
- You can also allow for the submission of ideas via text or email. In some cases someone may not feel comfortable with the facilitator. If you believe that to be the situation, connect with the person individually on a coffee break or before the meeting to try to establish rapport. If that person becomes more comfortable with you as an individual, he or she will be more likely to participate later in the day. Give reluctant participants the time and space to engage at their own convenience. It's all about trust.

Distracting participants

- There are many different ways to handle distracting participants. First, you have to take back ownership of the conversation. Let these participants know you hear what they are saying and acknowledge their input, but then take back control. Putting their comment in a parking lot is one way of doing this that allows the participant to remain whole.
- With participants who are constantly critiquing, try giving them a “magic wand.” Ask: “If you had a magic wand, how would you solve the problem?” This makes the distractor aware they are being critical and puts the onus on them to provide solutions.
- Some distracting participants are just extra enthused; they just really like the topic and really want to participate. If you hint that you want to hear from others by saying something like, “I’d like to hear from the other side of the room,” they are often self-aware enough to understand that it’s time for them to simmer down. Another technique is to give the distracting participant a task, like taking notes, which forces them to multitask. This causes the participant to partially disengage from what’s going on. In addition, if you’ve have done your homework beforehand and have a sense of why a person might be acting out, you can address the issue early on and develop a strategy to keep it from getting out of control.
- Finally, you may need to flat out call someone to task, but you have to do this in a kind and loving way. For instance, you could say: “We appreciate your contributions today. However, we set the ground rules upfront and are holding everyone accountable to focus on what we’re doing.” By using this language, you confidently call out the person but then bring them back into the community.

VI. TIPS FOR MOVING TOWARD GOALS AND/OR CONSENSUS

Finding common ground

- As a facilitator, it is your job to help the group find common ground among varying opinions. Part of this involves identifying and addressing disagreements that may prevent the group from reaching its goals. You have to get people in the mindset of finding the root cause of why they don't agree. Are people disagreeing because they have fundamentally different assumptions about everything? If so, you'll have a hard time getting them to agree on anything. Is it self-interest? Did the last conversation they had with their boss make them angry? Once you have a better understanding of the cause of the disagreement, you can take steps to resolve it.

Call the question and keep it moving forward

- Facilitators also have to keep conversations productive. Non-verbal aids can help. Straw polls give you a sense of the order and allow you to move forward from a sticking point of 1-2 vocal minority detractors. Ranking (e.g. 1-10 or thumbs up/thumbs down) also provides a good opportunity to pivot a conversation, summarize current thinking, and chart a path forward.

Synthesize and Summarize

- Sometimes several different conversation themes emerge simultaneously in a meeting. As you listen to unorganized thoughts, try to connect the ideas to one another and to the goals of the meeting, and reflect these ideas back to the audience in a way that makes sense. This synthesizing in real-time helps connect divergent threads of the discussion and keeps things moving forward. For example, you might say: "What I'm hearing you say is _____. Is that acceptable to all? If so, the next steps include _____." Once a final solution is reached, people then feel that they were part of the decision.
- During this part of the process, some facilitators are very cautious about never leading the group. Other facilitators believe it's okay for the facilitator to lead on some issues, but on other issues, the group has to completely own. Make sure you acknowledge in advance how comfortable you are about leading on any given issue.

VII. TIPS FOR TIME MANAGEMENT

Be realistic and flexible

- One of the facilitator's responsibilities is to make sure the group stays on track. This is managed at both the planning stage and the execution stage. When preparing for the facilitation, set a realistic plan of how you are going to spend your time and be sure to build flexibility into the agenda, including strategically placed breaks. If you know your audience in advance and have done your pre-work, you should have an estimation of how much flexibility you're going to need.
- When you're executing the facilitation, be firm with the goals and agenda of the session but also adaptable to emerging energy/conversations. You don't want to cut off a conversation too soon and too abruptly. At the same time, if your group is going off topic and the conversation is not driving to the meeting goals and the group's long-term objectives, you need to shift the conversation back into focus. This involves some agility on the fly as well as an internal awareness of time and people's energy. When it does look like there are some good discussions going on, communicate to the group the emerging trade-offs with respect to the goals and evolving dynamics of the discussion. You can ask: "Are we hard-bound by the timeliness of the goal or are we hard-bound by quality? If we are bound by quality in a particular area, then we can amend the agenda accordingly." Have the group explicitly confirm the new direction of the meeting.

IX. CONSIDERATIONS FOR VIRTUAL FACILITATIONS

Hosting a virtual facilitation offers some unique advantages, but there are also some challenges to consider.

Audience Reactions

- One of the neat things you'll notice about running a virtual facilitation is it's possible for you to see everyone in the audience simultaneously on your screen; your back is never to the audience. This can allow you to gauge the emotional state of all of your participants. However, this advantage quickly becomes a disadvantage when cameras are turned off or if the group is so large you can't see everyone on one screen. Pay attention to tone of voice, responses to questions, and the types of questions that are being asked to gauge reactions and understanding.

Audience Engagement

- Virtual facilitators are also competing with distractions at home and participants who might be multitasking. Thus, you have to go into a virtual session with extra energy and give the audience a reason to pay attention. To increase audience engagement, use tools such as annotating, whiteboards, polling, hand raising, and screen sharing. Chatterboxes are also a nice way for you to crowdsource ideas (especially from quieter participants). You can also propose to hold shorter, more frequent meetings.

Technology Barriers

- Technology malfunctions or glitches are difficult to anticipate and can impact a session. The main thing for you to remember in these situations is to remain calm. You could call for a short break while you work on resolving the issue. Uneven levels of technological comfort among participants can also impact a facilitation. It is your job to put those who are unsure at ease and help carry them through.

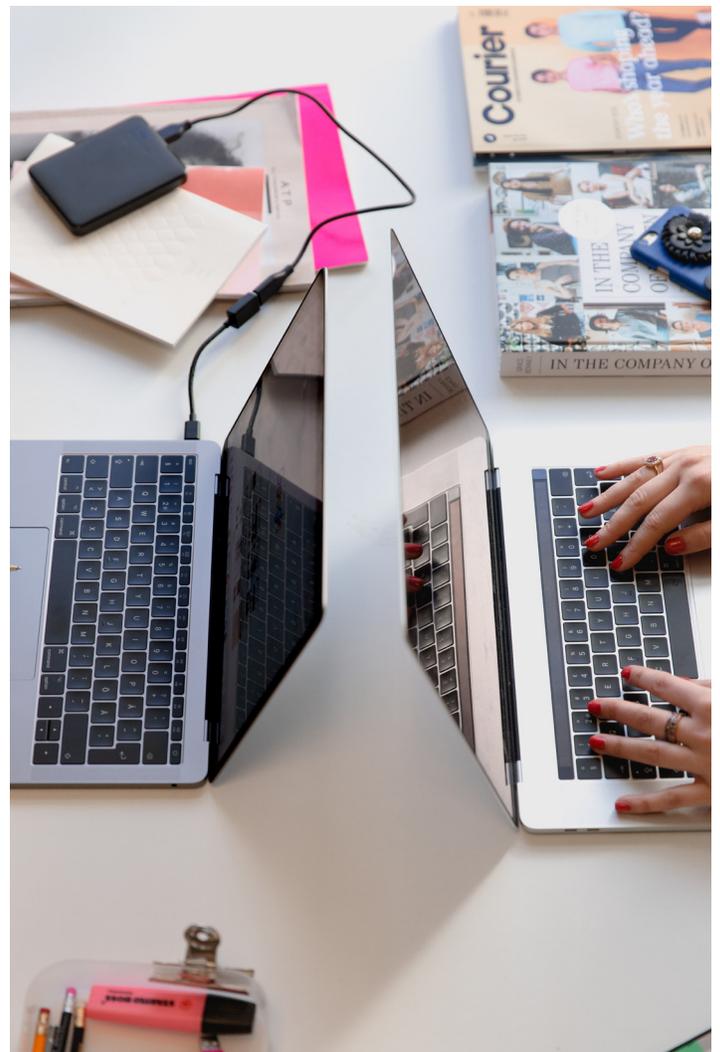
The challenges that you encounter during a virtual facilitation doesn't mean that the facilitation can't be effective; you just have to go in understanding it might require more energy, more technological coaching, and more strategies to increase engagement. Don't forget, your team is there to help! With any engagement, you can set up a "virtual shared war room" where one person facilitates with a camera pointed toward a real whiteboard, one person monitors the chat-function and the participants' response/emotions, and one person takes notes.

Here are some other things to keep in mind when running a virtual facilitation. Everything that you would do for an in-person facilitation, you still have to do for a virtual facilitation. You have to set the ground rules, have an agenda, earn people's trust, use telegraphing techniques when calling on participants, etc. In addition, keep diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) top of mind. For instance, some people don't want to be on video or have access to high-speed internet and you cannot diminish their experience. Be sure to apply a DEI lens as you prepare and design your digital engagement.

X. CONCLUSION

Be realistic and flexible

Knowing how to plan and facilitate an effective meeting is a highly valuable skill. There is a growing need for increased facilitation skills as decision processes strive to become more collaborative, participative, synergistic, and unifying. Becoming a skilled meeting facilitator doesn't happen overnight — it takes lots of patience, continual learning, confidence, and practice. As you continue to find your facilitator voice and get more comfortable, remember to always be authentic. In sharing your true self, you'll create a safe space that encourages others to open up, have meaningful conversations, and work together towards a common purpose.



FACILITATION CHECKLIST

Pre-Meeting Preparation

- Know the Audience
- Know the Leadership
- Know the Facts
- Know Your Team
- Know Yourself
- Know Your Scenarios
- Know Your Questions

Post-Meeting Follow-Up

- Schedule Time in Advance
- Identity Next Steps
- Send Thank-You Notes
- Continue the Conversation

Virtual Meetings

- Assess Audience Reactions
- Keep the Audience Engaged
- Address Technology Barriers
- Prioritize Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Meeting Execution

- Making Introductions
- Establish Ground Rules
- Review the Agenda
- Confirm Meeting Objectives
- Reinforce the Safe Space
- Use Inclusive Language
- Inspire Confidence
- Inject Humor
- Actively Listen
- Feel the Energy and Flow
- Practice Compassionate Detachment
- Stay Flexible
- Mediate Conflict
- Manage Time
- Display Vulnerability
- Use your IQ, EQ, & CQ
- Accommodate Different Learning Styles
- Telegraph Questions
- Balance Objectivity
- Engage Reluctant/Distracting Participants
- Keep Moving Toward Consensus
- Record Results

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