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Facilitation Skills and Guidelines

When issues are addressed in a group setting, respectful and insightful discussion may be very difficult to achieve. In order to make the discussion as productive and positive as possible, it's best to begin with some ground rules and guidelines on which people can agree. Before the group discussions begin, consider how they will develop, and have an adept facilitator to guide the process. These preparations will help clarify situations that will arise later on during the discussion. In any planning process there will be strong opinions and special interests. There will also be people who are not comfortable in a group, stating their opinions, questioning others, or arguing points of disagreement. Many people will sit quietly and not participate for fear of confrontation or of breaking some unwritten rule. Displaying, discussing, and agreeing to the rules or guidelines before you begin your work will encourage participation, and the process will be much more successful.

Eight guidelines to consider:

1. Speak so everyone can hear you; one person speaks at a time. Speak the truth without blame or judgment.
2. Give the speaker your full attention. Stay open to new ideas, stop the mind chatter, and listen without making assumptions or judgments. Please do not have side conversations while one person is speaking.
3. Make an agreement with each other to begin and end the meeting on time. Show up on time prepared to share the results of your effort.
4. Focus on the system as the problem, not the people.
5. Be open to the outcome; we don't usually know what the results of group process will be until it's done.
6. Keep your agreements; be impeccable with your word.
7. Avoid using hypothetical instances to make your point, but do formulate scenarios that create opportunity pathways to where you want to go and what you want to accomplish.
8. Always do your best.

The Elements of a Successful Meeting:

- *A Meeting Plan:* Good facilitation begins with a plan for the meeting agenda. There is a balance to strike between giving the participants some input into the agenda and planning it enough in advance so that you can include activities and topics that will keep the meetings engaging and meaningful. This is especially true of a retreat, where you need to both cover important decision-making and offer activities that will inspire people and get them thinking outside the box.

- *Opening:* The opening of the meeting sets the tone for the gathering. To create a respectful and safe meeting environment, you must consider carefully how it

is to be opened. One mandatory feature of every meeting opening is to ask those assembled to introduce themselves to the group. If people are still learning each other's names and positions, then this information should be included in the introduction. If they all know each other, then a brief check-in introduction is helpful. Ask each participant to state something about him or herself. Each introductory statement should last less than a minute — as a facilitator it's up to you to keep time. Some sample opening statement topics:

- The most exciting event of the week.
- What they did that morning before work.
- The book they're reading now or just finished.
- What they like about the weather today.

As you can see, it doesn't have to be particularly topical, or central to the purpose of the meeting. Its purpose is to establish communication and identity before the business of the meeting begins. Once everyone has made their statements, it can be nice for the facilitator to read a short passage that relates to the work of the group — some inspirational writing, a poem, a paragraph from the newspaper — just to set the stage for the work to come.

- *Reports*: It is a good idea to set aside time at the beginning of the meeting for people to make reports on any progress made since the last meeting. Ideally, a lot of the information in these reports will have been circulated in writing beforehand. If so, this would be the time for group members to address questions and concerns they may have about what they read. The facilitator should keep this section of the meeting concise, so that it doesn't drag down the momentum.

- *Brainstorming Sessions*: When it's time to generate new ideas for projects, programs, and other activities, it's time for a brainstorming session. To brainstorm on an idea, the facilitator would go around the group and ask each member to offer ideas. No idea is too crazy or farfetched, and no one is allowed to say anything negative about the suggestions offered. This round robin can continue several times, until people have exhausted all the possibilities.

- *Prioritization Exercises*: There are several ways to help a group prioritize. Whether it is items in a work plan, strategies to pursue, mission statements, goals for the organization, or whatever, you want to rank them as a group to discern which is the most important. One way is to set some agreed-upon criteria, and apply them to the suggested list of priorities. Another way is to have the group members rank their priorities by number, and add up all the numbers submitted to determine the consensus of the group as a whole. Still another way is to give group members several votes that they can distribute as they will to the different priorities on the list. Whatever technique is used,

being clear on how it will work, and the reason for the prioritization in the first place, is the facilitator's job.

- *Structured Sharing*: Often, the topics you need to discuss will require that the group put all the information they have collectively on the table, in order to appreciate the different points of view that are present in the room. In a group where trust and communication levels have not been well established, this can be very intimidating. The level of discomfort will increase depending on the divergence of opinions about the issue at hand.

  There are techniques that can create a safe environment for this type of sharing. One is to break up into smaller groups of no more than four or five people. Each person will be responsible for speaking, without interruption, for two minutes on the subject, while the other members listen and someone takes notes. No reply or debate is allowed— simply a straightforward airing of different perspectives. The facilitator will serve as a timer, and recruit other members of the group to rotate as recorders. The recorders will then present the summary information to the group as a whole, without identifying the people who had the specific input.

- *Dialogue*: A very productive way to structure part of every meeting is to have a group dialogue about a topic that is relevant to the work the group is doing. With dialogue, it is important for people to suspend judgment and use their listening skills to really explore the deeper meanings of the issues presented. The facilitator must mind this process with careful attention to whether some people aren't participating, or are participating in a way that is critical or negative for the rest of the group.

- *Closing*: As with the Opening, the Closing of the meeting is another opportunity to reinforce a sense of teamwork and community. It is also a good way to make sure the group is feeling positive about the progress made during the meeting. This is a good time to go around the room and get people to reflect (briefly) on the results of the meeting. Did they accomplish their objectives? Was the meeting productive? Were there any things that needed follow-up?

Facilitation Skills and Responsibilities

Group facilitators wear many hats. They need to be able to simultaneously be a cheerleader, a negotiator, a mediator, an interpreter, and a guide. The work of a group facilitator takes a lot of energy to do right. Don't go into meetings halfheartedly, but prepare yourself in advance— study the materials you'll be discussing, and try to envision challenges ahead of time, so you can be prepared for anything that happens.

The Moderating Role
Facilitators are responsible for keeping the meeting on topic and on time. To do this, they need to:

- Clarify the task or objective for the group.
- Encourage active participation.
- Pick up the contributions from the group and help structure different ideas.
- Mediate conflicting positions.
- Use different methods for visualization (e.g. small cards, pictures, paper, black board,
  3-D models etc.)
- Help the group in participatory decision making
- Define conclusions and/or action plans.

The Listening Role
Facilitators must be skilled listeners on behalf of the group, summarizing what's been said, clarifying people's points, etc. To do this effectively, they need to:

- Ask questions to clarify situations and opinions,
- Ask open questions: How? Why? When? Who? What?
- Use questions to foster analytical thinking: Strong points? Weak points? So, what is the conclusion?
- Ask the speaker to go deeper with the point they are trying to make … probe, dig, query.
- Listen actively: summarize the point that has just been made, identify the underlying criteria the speaker seems to be using, affirm their position before asking for reactions.
- Give feedback, and invite feedback from the participants

The Empathetic Role
Facilitators also need to be very sensitive to the feelings and dynamics of the group — both the individuals in it and the group as a whole. A good facilitator can make the difference between a positive or negative meeting experience for each individual participant. To be empathetic, the facilitator will:

- Express enthusiasm and commitment to the work so participants enjoy the session.
- Listen actively to the people's experiences and needs.
- Give positive and helpful feedback.
- Be respectful of and interested in the participants' experiences
- Build up mutual understanding and trust, and encourage participants to respect mutual comments, especially of weaker group members. This is critically important for good facilitation.

These are lists of facilitation techniques that have been compiled from a variety of sources. No plagiarism is intended, but I'm sure that some of these pointers have been printed elsewhere.

- As facilitator, you may want to stand up.
- Work to create a safe, creative, and cooperative environment -- an environment in which disagreement can be expressed without fear. Criticisms can be heard not as attacks, not as attempts to defeat a proposal, but as a concern which, when resolved, will make the proposal stronger.
- Clarify and rephrase complicated or confusing discussion or have speaker do so.
- Don't tolerate side conversations and interruptions.
- Note digressions and gently, but firmly remind members to stay on track.
- Watch for comments which create a negative environment and make people afraid to speak and point those comments out to the group.
- Identify problems with the group's process and attempt to remedy them or at least ask others to help remedy them. Watch for hidden agendas and suppressed conflict.
- State the obvious about what's going on with the process. For example: "I hear a lot of excitement about this proposal, but some people don't seem to understand it fully. Is there something that can be done to explain it further?"
- Watch for dominance of speaking time and guide members who speak too much to be briefer and those who are quiet to contribute more.
- Make sure you make eye contact with the people you speak to and when you get the group's agreement on anything.
- Listen for and watch body language to catch any unexpressed issues or feelings. Open expression of feelings is vital for a healthy process.
- Summarize points and clarify discussion frequently.
- Get the group's or the speaker's concurrence whenever you summarize, clarify, rephrase, or in some way draw conclusions for the group or a speaker. This helps ensure that you share the same understanding with the others.
- If you wish to participate in partisan discussions, have someone else facilitate who is not involved in the discussion.
- Manage the clock (either by yourself or with the help of a Time Keeper).
- Watch time assigned for items. Let the group know when time is running low. If an item's time runs out, let the group decide whether to continue on the item or to move on.
- Keep the pace comfortable. Not so slow that the meeting drags and not so fast that members feel rushed.
- Watch for restlessness and take breaks when you sense the need for one. Try not to allow more than an hour between breaks.

- Generate a wide variety of proposals - not just 2 or 3.
- Summarize underlying agreement and disagreement.
- Identify new issues as they arise.
- Ensure that all viewpoints are heard and understood, but without repetition.
- Catch any items which have not been resolved and ask the group what to do with them. Use "Parking Lot".
- For contentious issues: 1) clarify; 2) validate; and then 3) deal with it or defer it.
- "I'm not comfortable with . . . . ." is a good, non-aggressive statement.
- In case of disruptive behavior, instead of reprimanding with a statement, ask for a change in behavior. Most disruptive behavior will change with direct, gentle feedback. For example: "Mr. Brown, could I ask you to make your comments on this subject a bit more concise, so others will have a chance to speak?"
- In case of disagreement, get: 1) facts; 2) implications; and then 3) alternatives.

Conclusion   The emphasis here is on *guided dialogue* – where participants will be led through a process of gathering information, hearing people's opinions, and coming to some sort of conclusion about the material that has been presented over the course of the meeting.

The way each session is structured will have a significant impact on whether or not the participants feel as if they've had a good experience. Please try to pay attention to the group process in each session, and seek guidance from people with more experience if you think that it will be difficult to meet these expectations. If you are respectful, attentive, and allow people to feel safe and comfortable in the group, this conference will be meaningful for everyone.