

# Facilitation of Meetings

Ever sat through a meeting that has dragged on and on, with tempers running high, people talking over each other and no decisions being made? Or one person dominating the whole meeting and making all the decisions, leaving you to wonder why you bothered turning up? Most of us can manage sitting through such a meeting for a couple of times, but then start finding excuses not to go anymore. Unfortunately this pattern is very common in groups. It leads to frustration, ineffectiveness and loss of group members.

However with the goodwill of the group it is quite easy to turn around the style of meetings and actually make them an enjoyable and inspiring experience for everyone. This briefing explores the concept of Facilitation and how it can help in creating successful and positive meetings.



This briefing is aimed at groups using consensus based decision-making, a process that involves all members until an agreement is reached that is acceptable to everyone. However many ideas can also be applied to other ways of reaching decisions such as majority voting. To find out more about consensus decision-making please have a look at the briefings **Consensus Decision-Making** and **Consensus Flowchart** (Available from our website: [www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)). For a discussion of tools used in facilitation please refer to the briefing **Facilitation Tools**. Terms in *italics* are explained in the glossary.

## The role of meetings in group work

Meetings are a necessary part of working in groups – they give us the chance to share information, to reach decisions and to get jobs done. However, meetings have another important function, which is often forgotten about - group maintenance. A good meeting not only gets work done, but also involves, supports and empowers the participants, creating a high level of energy and enthusiasm. A sense of community and connection to fellow group members is the basis for successful group work and social change. Good facilitation will help you to achieve all of this.

### **Was the meeting successful?**

**Tasks** – what got done? Did you get the needed results? Did problems get solved and things planned to meet the objective of the group?

**Maintenance** – How did it get done? How did people feel and how will this affect morale and group cohesion? Did the meeting make good use of the pooled talents? Was it enjoyable?

## What is Facilitation

A facilitator is essentially a helper for the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. Depending on the group a facilitator might:

- ★ help the group decide on a structure and process for the meeting and to keep to it
- ★ keep the meeting focussed on one item at a time until decisions are reached
- ★ regulate the flow of discussion – drawing out quiet people and limiting over-talking
- ★ clarify and summarise points, test for consensus and formalise decisions
- ★ help the group in dealing with conflicts.

To ensure that the group is using the most effective means of working through topics the facilitator might introduce tools such as *brainstorming*, *go-rounds* or small-group discussion. See our Briefing on **Tools for Facilitating Meetings** for an overview of such tools.

### What the dictionary says:

**Facilitation** \Fa\*cil`i\*ta"tion\  
n. *making easy, the act of assisting or making easier the progress or improvement of something.*

Superficially a facilitator fills a role similar to that of the traditional chairperson. There are however important differences. A facilitator never “directs” the group without its consent. At no time does the facilitator make decisions for the group or take on functions which are the responsibility of the group as a whole. A good facilitator stays neutral and helps the members of the meeting be aware that it is *their* business being conducted. The success of the meeting is the mutual responsibility of the whole group. The facilitator needs to be

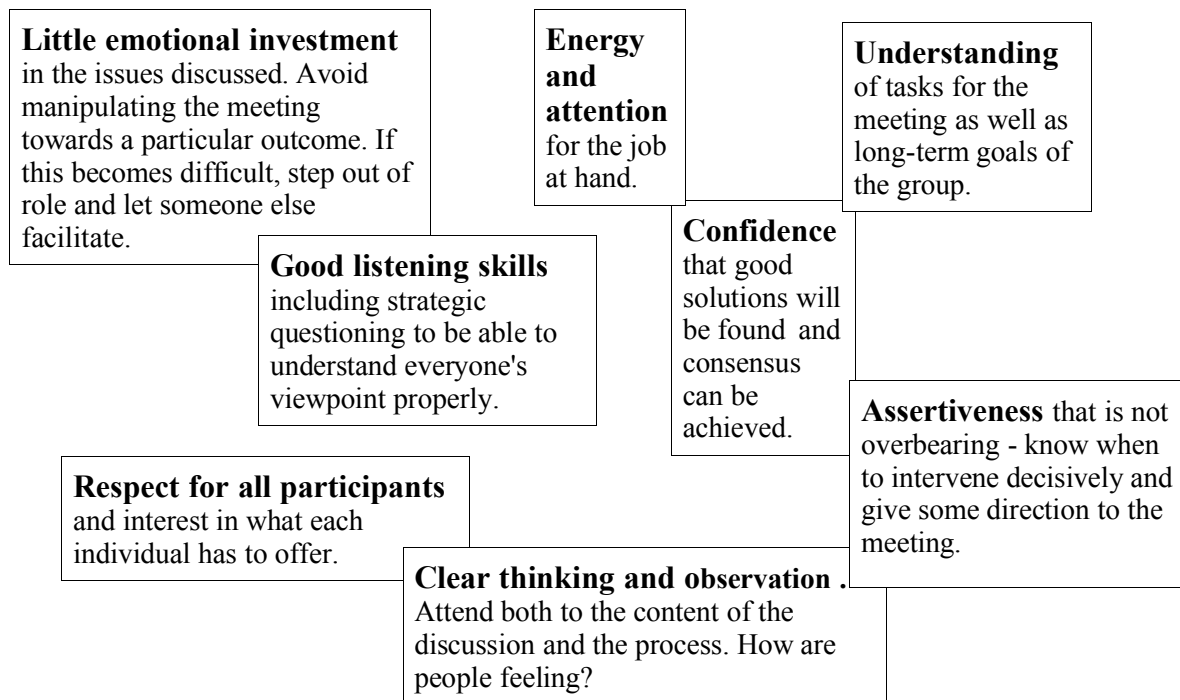
aware of this and always get the group’s agreement before using processes or tools.

Facilitation is a vital role that needs to be filled at every meeting. In small groups this function may be shared or rotated informally. However, difficult meetings or meetings with a larger number of participants (more than 8 or 10 people) should always have a clearly designated and experienced facilitator. All members of the meeting should feel responsible for the progress of the meeting, and help the facilitator if necessary.

## Learn to facilitate

The role of facilitator can be learnt by everyone. Use your own experience of meetings and observe other facilitators. Learn from mistakes, from bad meetings as well as good ones. If the role of facilitator is rotated amongst group members, people can develop these skills. It is well worth conducting training, aside from normal meeting times, to practice facilitation skills. These skills are not only useful in group meetings but also in informal settings, at work and at home. Be aware that individual and group behaviour is influenced by individual needs and past positive and negative experiences in groups. Try to spot your own negative behaviour patterns and work on identifying your own and other people's needs.

## A Facilitator's Skills and Qualities



### Other roles at a meeting

To make the job of the facilitator easier you can introduce other roles to a meeting. Instead of just one facilitator you could have two or more **co-facilitators**. These are able to take turns facilitating and give support to each other. This is useful if the facilitator needs to step out of his/her role because of a wish to participate in the discussion, or to have a break, or when back-up is needed in cases of tension, conflict or confusion. If the meeting is large, the co-facilitator can help the facilitator keep track of who wishes to speak.

The person not actively facilitating can also pay more attention to the emotional atmosphere of the meeting and look after how individual members are affected. This is often called **vibeswatching**. In situations of conflict and distress the vibeswatcher will intervene, for example by taking the role of an intermediary, by taking time out with someone and listening to them or by suggesting breaks and tools to improve the atmosphere of the meeting. To be a good vibeswatcher you need to be able to sense underlying feelings - listen carefully and check body language.

Another role that supports the facilitator is that of **timekeeper**. The timekeeper draws attention to the agreed time frame for the meeting and keeps the group to it, negotiating extensions if needed.

**Notetakers** or **recorders** keep track of decisions, take minutes, collect reports, and also draw attention to incomplete decisions – for example who is going to contact so and so, and when?

In very large meetings it is advisable to have a **co-ordinator**, who is responsible for the venue, equipment, refreshments and notices. The co-ordinator can also gather people together to start on time.

## Facilitating a Meeting - Beginning to End

This section gives an overview of the possible tasks of a facilitator in a meeting. It is important to be aware that every meeting is different. Not all the points mentioned may be appropriate – use your own judgement and innovation. Make sure that the goals of the group and members' expectations of the facilitator are clear to everyone. This allows the appropriate use of tools and suggestions.

### Preparing the meeting

- ★ Collect agenda items and plan a tentative agenda. Estimate and write down time needed for each item. Think about priorities for this meeting – which items could be tackled another time or in smaller groups? Think about effective processes/tools for difficult or controversial topics. Deal with difficult items after the the group has warmed up but before it is tired. Alternate short and long items. How should the meeting start and end? Consider a process to gather the group such as introductions, games or *excitement sharing*. See our briefing **Tools for Facilitation** for some ideas. Plan in breaks, especially if the meeting will be longer than 1½ hours. Plan in time for an evaluation of the meeting near the end.
- ★ Write the proposed agenda on a blackboard or flip chart or give individual copies to everyone. This will be helpful during the meeting as well as democratising the process of agenda formation.
- ★ Ensure that everyone is informed about time, place and content of the meeting. Distribute pre-meeting materials if necessary.
- ★ Be aware of the physical arrangements such as temperature, air quality, ability to hear and see. Consider any special needs participants might have and how to cater for them. Arrange the seating in an inclusive way – some groups find circles are best because they allow everyone to see each other, while other groups prefer rows so that people can seat themselves according to how committed they feel to the group. In the case of rows, many groups have found a V formation to be useful, like sergeant's stripes with the point away from the front. In our experience the best seating arrangement is when there are no seats and people choose their own positions on big cushions or on the floor.
- ★ Gather materials needed for the meeting, e.g. pens, marker pens, flipcharts, written presentations and proposals.
- ★ Find an alternative facilitator who can step in in case of emergency, or if the main facilitator tires or wants to participate more actively in discussion.

### During the meeting

- ★ Introduce yourself.
- ★ Introductory process to gather the group. This really depends on the group – make sure not to alienate newcomers. Examples are *excitement sharing*, games, singing, sitting quietly in a circle holding hands (or not). If people don't know each other or there are newcomers to the group, get everyone to introduce themselves. This is really important for welcoming new people. Encourage people to share more than just their names. You could ask everyone to state in a couple of sentences why they are here or to share an interesting skill they have (e.g. 'I can compose poetry in Mongolian'). Or ask for their favourite colour, food etc. If there are too many people this could be done in smaller groups.
- ★ Set the boundaries of the meeting: explain the time frame, subject, aims of meeting, responsibility of facilitator and what you aim to do. Outline what behaviour is acceptable/not acceptable in meeting (e.g. one person speaking at a time, non-sexist/racist language, no dominating/threatening behaviour).

## Glossary of Tools

**Brainstorming** - A way of quickly gathering a large number of ideas. Start by stating the issue. Ask people to say whatever comes into their heads as fast as possible - without censoring it. This encourages creativity and frees energy. Write down all ideas for later discussion.

### Excitement sharing -

People share something good or exciting that has happened to them recently/since the last meeting. Good at start of meetings as it creates a lot of positive energy and puts people more in touch with each other's lives.

**Go-rounds** - Everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas as well as slowing down the discussion and improving listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

**Talking stick** - People may speak only when they hold the talking stick. This makes people conscious of when they interrupt others.

→ For more tools see our briefing *Tools for Meetings*.

- ★ See that an agenda is formed and agreed upon. If you have prepared an agenda, explain your ideas. Go through the whole agenda, then ask for comments and make necessary changes. Be careful not to spend half the meeting discussing which item should go where. Be firm if necessary. Allocate time for each item and set a realistic finishing time. Keep to this. If using consensus decision-making make allowance for extra time to go deeper into the issue if necessary.
- ★ Ensure that the other roles such as recorder, timekeeper and vibeswatcher are covered.
- ★ Use short agenda items, fun items, announcements and breaks throughout the agenda to provide rest and relief from the more taxing items.
- ★ Go through the agenda item by item. Keep the group focussed on one item at a time until a decision has been reached, even if the decision is to shelve it for some other time. Decisions on action steps include **what, how, who, when** and **where**.
- ★ If new items come up in the discussion make sure they get noted down to be dealt with later.
- ★ Invite and regulate discussion. Clarify proposals put forward. State and restate the position of the meeting as it appears to be emerging until agreement is reached.
- ★ Make sure the participants are using the most effective means of accomplishing tasks and reaching decisions. Introduce tools such as *brainstorming* options, forming small groups for discussion, delegating to committees, *go-rounds* etc.
- ★ Regulate the flow of discussion by calling on speakers.
- ★ Help everyone to participate - draw out quiet people, limit over-talking, don't let anyone dominate the discussion. Use tools such as *talking sticks* or breaking into small groups to equalise participation and to create a safe atmosphere for

expressing opinions and feelings.

- ★ Tune in to the overall feeling of the group throughout the meeting - check energy levels, interest in the subject, whether the aims are being fulfilled, is the structure appropriate (large/small groups), time.
- ★ Encourage individuals to pursue on their own projects or ideas in which they have a strong interest, but in which the group does not.
- ★ Be positive: use affirmation and appreciation, and comment on special contributions of members and accomplishments of the group.
- ★ In tense or tiring situations try humour, affirmation, games, changing seats, silence, a groups nap etc. Some group might rebel at the suggestion of "wasting time" on a game, but will welcome a stretch break or informal hilarity.
- ★ Challenge put-downs and discriminatory remarks.

- ★ Make sure a time and place for the next meeting has been agreed and that people leave their contact details if they want to be updated. Do this before people start leaving.
- ★ Sum up and provide some satisfying closure to the meeting.

## Facilitating for consensus

- ★ Below are some tips for facilitating a group that is using consensus decision-making. For an in-depth discussion of consensus please have a look at our briefing **Consensus Decision-making**.
- ★ A real consensus comes only after bringing differences out into the open. Encourage everyone to present their viewpoints, especially when they may be conflicting.
- ★ Listen carefully for agreements and concerns. When a decision cannot be made, state points of agreement and of hesitancy. Find out where worries come from, so that they can be resolved or new proposals can be drawn up that take them into account.
- ★ Test for agreement periodically. This helps to clarify disagreements. State the tentative consensus in question form and be specific. If you are not clear how to phrase the question ask for help.
- ★ Do not mistake silence for consent. Insist on a response from every participant. The group needs to be conscious of making a contract with each other.
- ★ When there is time pressure or the group has lapsed into nit-picking, it can help to state the perceived agreement in the negative: Is there anyone who does not agree that...?
- ★ Be suspicious of agreements reached too easily – test to make sure that members really are fully supportive of the decision and do agree on essential points.
- ★ When no agreement can be reached, try the following: Ask those disagreeing for alternative proposals / Propose a break or silence or postponing the decision to give people time to cool down and reflect / If the decision is postponed it is often a good idea to engage conflicting parties in conflict resolution before the issue is brought up again.
- ★ When one or two people are blocking consensus, ask if they are prepared to stand aside, to allow the group to proceed with the action (standing aside = not being involved in a decision and its consequences). It may help if the group assures them that the lack of unity will be recorded in the minutes, that the decision does not set a precedent and that they are not expected to carry out the decision.

### Top Tips for Facilitators

- ◆ Design a good agenda. Set time limits and tackle all points.
- ◆ Watch both for content and process.
- ◆ Keep the group moving towards its aims.
- ◆ Use lots of facilitation tools.
- ◆ Get the best possible contribution from everyone.
- ◆ Create a safe and empowering atmosphere.
- ◆ Put a stop to domineering, interrupting, put-downs and guilt trips.

## Further Reading

Try your local library first - they are generally quite happy to order or even buy books for you. If you decide to buy a book, get it from one of the radical/independent bookshops - they all do mail order! Try News from Nowhere in Liverpool (0151 708 7270) or Housmans Bookshop in London (020 7278 4474).

### **Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making**

Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger, New Society Publishers, 1996, ISBN: 0-86571-347-2

### **Democracy in Small Groups - Participation, Decision-Making and Communication**

John Castill, New Society Publishers, 1993  
ISBN: 0 86571 274 3

### **Resource Manual for a Living Revolution**

Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, Christopher Moore, New Society Publishers, 1981,  
ISBN: 0-86571-008-2

### **Working with Conflict**

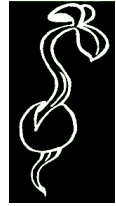
Fisher et al, Zed Books, 2000  
ISBN: 1 85649 837 9

### **The Mediator's Handbook**

Jennifer E. Beer with Eileen Stief, New Society Publishers, 3rd edition, 1997,  
ISBN: 0-86571-359-6, developed by Friends Conflict Resolution Programs

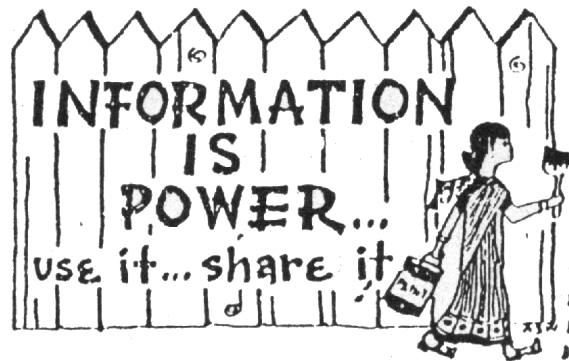
### **From Conflict to Cooperation - How to Mediate A Dispute**

Dr Beverly Potter,  
Ronin Publishing, 1996  
ISBN: 0-914171-79-8



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