



National Academy
of
Community Organising



A GUIDE TO FACILITATING SMALL GROUPS

Powered by

**Community
Organisers**



LISTEN

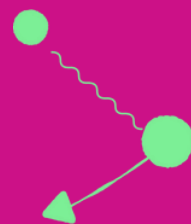
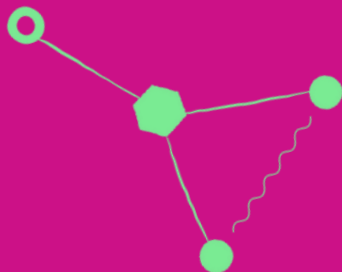
POWER

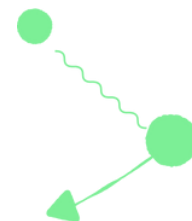
ACTION

We believe in the power of listening.

We believe in the collective power of people.

We believe that the actions of people are powerful and can change things for good.





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Background information



Who we are

Community Organisers is the national charity, and leading organisation for community organising training, support, and action in the United Kingdom.

We are inspiring thousands of people to get involved in community organising practice. Joining the growing movement of people up and down the country coming together and taking action – whether setting up a new community-led housing project, lobbying for better public transport, challenging cuts to health services, finding local/wider/national solutions to the cost of living crisis, launching campaigns, or establishing community-owned enterprises – people who are transforming their neighbourhoods for good.

We are also the home for the National Academy of Community Organising which is a collective of locally rooted organisations (Social Action Hubs), committed to training and supporting people to develop their understanding and practice of neighbourhood community organising.

**Community
Organisers**



National Academy
of
Community Organising

Our history and experience

In 2011, community organising was supported by the Office for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office and most recently as part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Support has come via two main programmes; the initial Community Organisers Programme (COP) which funded the employment and training of 500 Community Organisers and the Community Organisers Expansion Programme (COEP) which funded the training of 3,500 people in community organising.

These 4,000 people were hosted by organisations across the country working in a range of contexts. These initiatives brought community organising approaches and skills into places they hadn't been used before, and, as an organisation we supported these hundreds of organisations to embed new practices. Many have signed up with us to be part of our network of Social Action Hubs to continue to provide training and support to local people.

As well as working with local organisations we have also worked with national bodies to adapt and adopt community organising.



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INTRODUCTION

This Guide has been written to support and equip facilitators who are working with small groups using a community organising approach. It discusses the philosophy behind our facilitation approach, explores some theory relevant to group development, gives some practical tools and ends with a list of useful phrases you could choose to make use of. Hopefully, you will find it a helpful resource for the ongoing journey we are all on to become even better facilitators

The Art of Facilitation

Whilst the community organising process typically begins with a one-to-one conversation, if we are to build collective power we will need to become adept at working with both small and large groups of people. This guide focuses on the small group setting, but a lot of the theory and practical tips will be applicable in a large group as well.

There is a real art to effective facilitation in line with the values and principles of the community organising approach. But this is a skill that can be learned and developed with practice. Perhaps the best description of a group facilitator's role is as described by the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu – “A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say ‘we did it ourselves’”. If we swap ‘leader’ for ‘facilitator’ and ‘he’ for ‘they’ we will discover a very relevant summary of the facilitators’ role. We need to be guiding but not controlling, discreet but very aware of power, and know when to ‘lean in’ to a more leading role and when to step back and allow the group to work things out for themselves. The following pages of this guide aim to help you learn more about facilitating in this way. As always, bear in mind that we all need plenty of hands-on experience to reflect on and turn theory into practice.

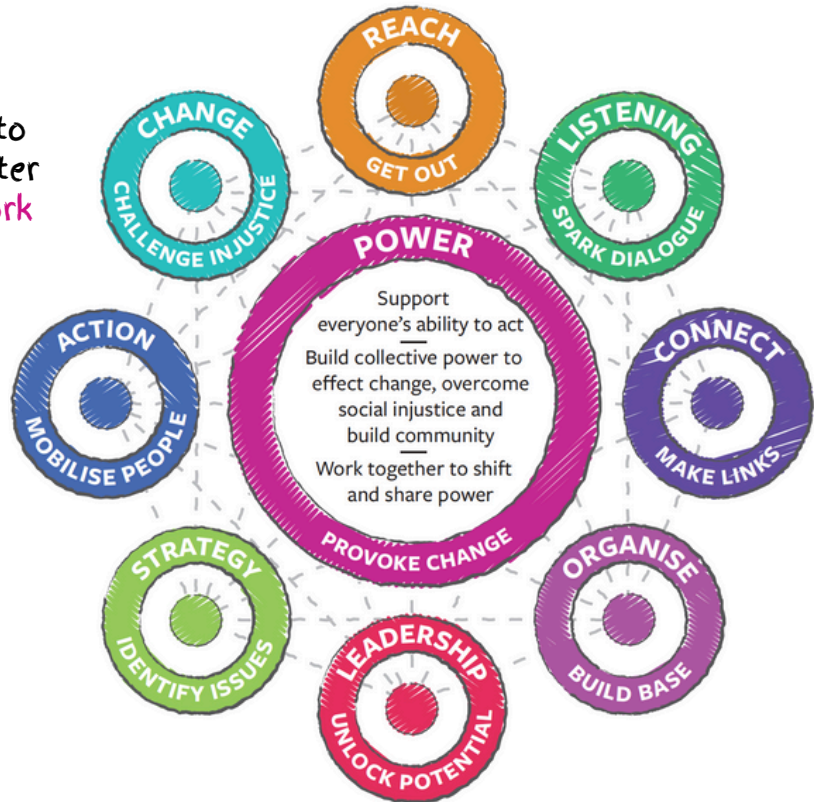
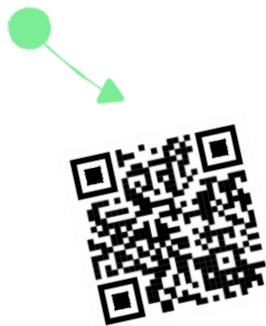


A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say ‘we did it ourselves

LAO TZU

THE COMMUNITY ORGANISING FRAMEWORK

Click below or scan the QR code to download the full Framework poster www.corganisers.org.uk/framework



The Framework sections in more detail



REACH

- Engage everybody and anyone ensuring inclusivity and equality
- Go to where people are



LISTENING

- Develop relationships and identify passion, interests and potential leaders
- Build a picture of people's life in the neighbourhood
- Encourage reflection and explore possibilities
- Challenge people about the way things are



CONNECT

- Connect and create groups of people with shared interests and concerns
- Build bridges between different groups
- Identify community resources needs and visions
- Share stories



ORGANISE

- Build local democratic and accountable associations of people that can start to act co-operatively and collectively
- Build your power base
- Build a structure



LEADERSHIP

- Develop a culture of possibility where people believe in their ability to create change
- Motivate and support people to take and share leadership
- Identify natural leaders



STRATEGY

- Use stories and information to identify issues
- Understand power and tactics for shifting it through people taking action together
- Analyse information and agree tactics, targets and allies
- Address root causes of concerns whilst tackling immediate symptoms



ACTION

- Facilitate local, regional and national collective action on the issues that matter most to people
 - DIY Action
 - Campaigns
- Bring together and use resources
- Engage with power-holders



CHANGE

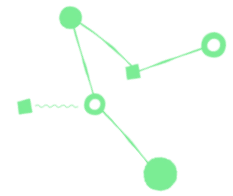
- Fight for sustainable change for good
- Strengthen democracy – government by people
- Bring together and use resources
- Engage with power-holders



POWER

- Support everyone's ability to act
- Work together to shift and share power
- Build collective power to effect change, overcome social injustice and build community





PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

Whilst there is not a single agreed upon set of values and principles in the wide field of community organising, the Principles of Practice created by Community Organisers go a long way to covering the main ones. Here we will reflect on a selection that are key to informing our approach to group facilitation in a community organising way.

‘Help people to develop their collective power to act together for the common good of the whole community’



to be part of the process.

Often referred to as the ‘Iron Rule’ of community organising, this principle must be foremost in our minds whatever we do as community organisers. If we are to develop leadership within people and help them discover their personal and collective power, we must give plenty of opportunities for them to lead, try new things, fail, learn and grow. When we apply this rule at the group level, we see that we must not allow the group to become dependent on us and should always be working to increase the amount of responsibility that participants take. Our ultimate goal is for the group to be able to convene, discuss, make decisions and take action without needing us

To achieve the group’s independence from us, it is important that we adopt the ‘Iron Rule’ in our way of working from the start. It can be incredibly hard to step away if we have inadvertently encouraged and enabled people to become dependant on us by doing everything for them. A good community organiser will always be reflecting on this, and asking themselves when the group can function without them, and whether dependence is being reduced or increased. As influential educationalist Myles Horton put it, “I don’t know what to do, and if I did know what to do I wouldn’t tell you, because if I had to tell you today then I’d have to tell you tomorrow, and when I’m gone you’d have to get someone else to tell you.”

‘Manage conflict constructively and non-violently’

Hopefully you will not need to deal with any physical violence when facilitating groups! But of course it goes without saying that it should not be tolerated. What is more typical, and often challenging to manage well, is conflict within the group. As we will see later, there is actually a healthy level of conflict that we need in our group to ensure they can disagree with each other and resolve personal clashes. But whilst we want to avoid an artificial harmony where everything is hidden under the surface, we also want to ensure there are not personal attacks that jeopardise the relationships people have been building. Knowing how to harness conflict to build the group’s purpose and strengthen relationships is a real key to being an effective facilitator. How to handle conflict, and a discussion of the concept of conflict transformation rather than conflict resolution is discussed in a later section of this Guide.





Conflict is often the midwife of change, something not to fear, something to recognise, something to embrace, and something to turn to constructive purpose

MARSHALL GANZ, COMMUNITY ORGANISER

‘Use the community’s starting point as your own, and move at their pace according to need’



If for the moment we limit our definition of ‘community’ to the group in front of us, this principle reminds us to start where we are from rather than where we want to be and to work at the group’s pace. We may want to quickly skip ahead to a fully functioning and productive state, but the group development theory we will look at later reminds us that we will likely need to go through a process first. This is true of any group, but especially so with a new group that has just come together, where it will take time to agree ways of working, assign roles and create a set of group norms. As facilitators, we may have our own external pressures such as deadlines to meet and funders to satisfy, or

just our own personal desire to see things happen quickly. But if we want to build a long lasting and sustainable group dynamic, we will need to invest time and effort to make that happen and move at the speed the group is willing to go. Of course, sometimes the group is keen to move and take action quickly, and our challenge then becomes not to hold them back!

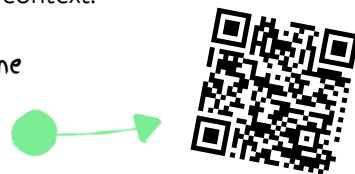
‘Do not promise what you cannot deliver’

In our role as facilitator, we need to be careful about the promises we make and have clear boundaries between what we are willing to do and what the group is expected to do. We may be able to help create a safe environment for the group to form, but we cannot take full responsibility for how people react and for achieving the goals they want to pursue. We need to always be clear in our language what we will do and what we expect others to do and avoid setting unrealistic expectations for what our role entails. Phrasing such as “a group is coming together to look at x issue” is far better than “this group is going to solve x issue”, and we need to make clear that it might take a long time or even not work at all. Setbacks are an inevitable part of the change process, and if we can help people to expect them and know how to learn from them, they will be much better prepared to be resilient and keep going when things get hard.



The remaining Principles of Practice are also relevant to our approach to group facilitation, and we need to bear in mind all of the values and principles of community organising in every stage of the group’s development. And even more than that, another vital part of our role is also educating the group in these values and principles so they themselves understand them and can implement them in their unique context.

Click below or scan the QR code to download the full principles of practice poster
www.corganisers.org.uk/principles





BRINGING GROUPS TOGETHER

Before we consider how to facilitate small groups in community organising, we need to take a moment to think about how they are formed in the first place.

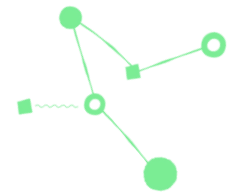
Sometimes we will be invited to a group that already exists, but it is more likely we will be forming a new group from people we have connected with directly and those who are part of their wider network. Often this process will begin with a one-to-one listening conversation, where we can find out what issues and ideas people have, find out who they know already and consider who to connect them with so they can begin to take action. Bear in mind that it is far easier to work within people's existing networks of colleagues, friends and family than bring together a new group of strangers from scratch. Asking people questions such as, "who else do you know who cares about this issue?" can help to determine the size of their network and identify key people to form a group with. This process can be as informal as asking them to get people they know together at their house or café etc. for a conversation. A good initial test for a potential leader is whether they are willing to arrange a first meeting with others.

If your group already knows each other, there will already be established dynamics and norms between them. Some of these may be unhelpful and need gently challenging, but you should still be able to start from a more advanced position than with a brand-new group. If you are bringing together a group of strangers, make sure you allow plenty of time in your planning for setting ground rules, getting to know each other and taking roles. More on those topics can be found in the later sections of this Guide.



Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.

HENRY FORD, FOUNDER FORD MOTOR CO.



THEORETICAL MODELS

Before we consider the practical aspects of facilitating groups, it is a good idea to ground ourselves in some of the key theory that underpins our practice. There are of course a wide range of theories and models relating to working with groups so we are just going to consider three of the most relevant here.

Tuckman's Four Stages of Group Development

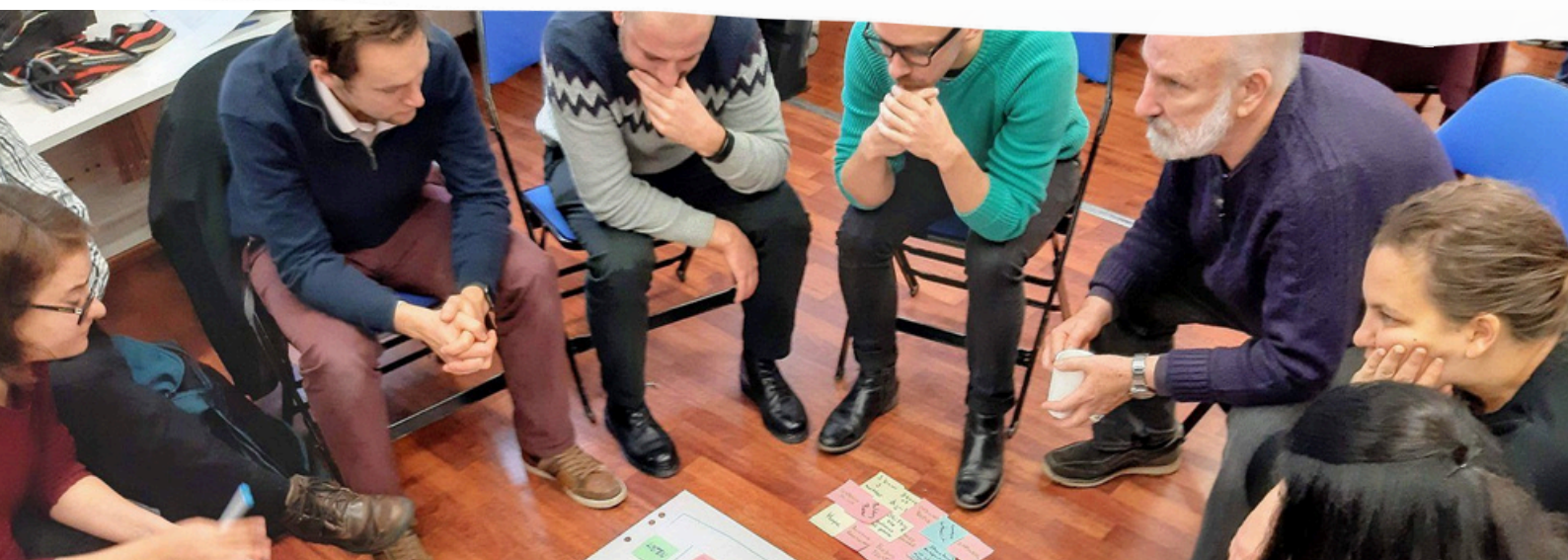
Tuckman's model (1965) is a classic theory that describes how groups typically come together and develop. He posited that groups will usually transition through four distinct stages, and he later added a fifth to the end. These stages are as follows:

Forming

The first stage naturally begins at the first time the group is brought together. In this initial phase, the group members are getting to know each other, discussing the purpose they are convening around and working out where they fit. This can be a time of artificial harmony as people are typically on their 'best behaviour' and seeking to make friends. It may be a shorter period where people already know each other, but even an existing group focusing on a new objective might go through this stage again. For us as facilitators, our role here is to provide opportunities for people to know each other better and ensure there is a safe environment for people to share their thoughts as the group is forming. We should also introduce the concept of ground rules here so the group has clear agreements on how they will operate and what culture they will develop internally.

Storming

The second stage is where conflict becomes more apparent as people attempt to find their specific roles and the artificial harmony of the first stage lifts. This is a normal part of group development so don't be surprised when it happens! Whilst this stage can be uncomfortable for all involved, it is important to not shut down or gloss over the disagreements that are coming to a head. If we do so, we may achieve a false consensus where people's real thoughts and feelings are buried under the surface. In time, this can turn into a toxic environment that means people choose to leave the group rather than continue to encounter these unresolved conflicts. Instead, our role here as facilitators is to provide some guidelines for conversation to ensure they stay respectful whilst conflict is occurring. We need to separate out individual disagreements from personal attacks, and guide group members through a healthy conflict process (see section on Conflict Transformation below). If we do this well, the group will emerge stronger and more cohesive than if their conflicts had stayed unspoken and unresolved.



Norming

After the Storming stage, the group moves into a time of setting its norms for how it will operate. This is the group's unique culture – it's written, verbal or unspoken agreements for how they will work together. Once these norms are established, they can be difficult to change, so we as facilitators need to pay particular attention to the norms that are emerging and if we need to challenge any of them. This is where our ground rules really come into their own – if the group have an explicit agreed set of ways of working with each other, we can keep drawing people back to them if necessary. Bear in mind that not all norms will be positive ones – for example, an attitude of 'banter' may emerge where people are mocked for the mistakes they make or misogynistic attitudes are tolerated. Whilst this may seem harmless to some in the group, it will prove detrimental in the long run so we need to be ready to confront these unhealthy norms where necessary.

Performing

Here is where the group starts focusing on their objectives and makes real progress towards them. In this stage, everyone knows their roles and responsibilities, the rules and norms are set so little energy discussing them is required, and conflict is largely resolved for the most part. Now everyone can start to deliver results. Whilst this is of course the ideal final stage, bear in mind that groups may go back to an earlier stage from time to time. This could happen when new members join the group, its initial objectives are achieved, or conflict arises again for a wide range of reasons. We need to be prepared to transition back with the group and go at their pace as per the Principles of Practice until they are ready to begin performing again. In this stage, we should be handing over increasing level of responsibility to the group with a view to stepping away when they are ready.

Adjourning

The stage that Tuckman added later is when a group comes to an end – its purpose fulfilled so people go their separate ways. However, from a community organising perspective, if we are to build collective power then this is a stage we want to avoid. Our goal is for our group to stay together and keep taking action, so even if they accomplish their original objective, we should be working with them to focus on something new. For example, if their goal is to put on a local event that brings people together, after the event we can ask them what they want to do next. The root issue in that case may be to build cohesiveness between people, which is a goal they can continue striving towards even if they never fully achieve it.

In summary, Tuckman's model helps remind us that groups go through various stages in their development, and do not just start functioning and performing at a high level straight away. As we work with people at their pace, we can guide them through these stages while maintaining psychological safety (see below).

Ultimately, we can step away and leave a fully functioning and powerful group that continues to build power and take action without needing ongoing input from us.

Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety can be summed up as "the shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking." (Edmondson, 1999). This means that people in the group feel able to say what they really think, without fearing consequences for their genuine views, and that when things go wrong they can discuss their failures openly and without punishment. Google's research as part of its Project Aristotle initiative highlighted the link between high performing teams and the presence of psychological safety. It is clear then that establishing and maintaining psychological safety is a high priority for us as facilitators.

So how do we create this sense that people can say how they really feel and don't fear negative consequences? The first thing we need to do is establish a clear set of ground rules or agreements for how the group will function and how disagreements are handled. There is more on how to do this in the section below, but we will likely need to introduce this conversation ourselves and facilitate it proactively to ensure the group has a clear plan for how they will work together. A non-negotiable part of these rules will be something around respecting the views others hold and practicing tolerance that allows people to say things we disagree with (see the work of Paulo Freire for more information). Obviously, the group will need to set the extent of these boundaries, but it needs to be ok for people to say things that may not be in line with what the rest of the group is thinking. We can help the group see this approach as an asset rather than a weakness, as they will need to be able to be honest, to disagree and to manage conflict well.

Once we have created psychological safety in our group, another key part of our role is to help the group maintain it. In the short term we may need to enforce it ourselves, but our aim should be to enable the group to police their own environment in the long term. We will think more about how to do this in the section on ground rules later in this Guide

Conflict Transformation

Our final area of theory to consider is about our attitude to conflict. For many of us, conflict is something to be avoided at all costs – it feels like a disagreement or argument is a bad sign of a deeper problem and should be eliminated. However, the reality is that conflict is inevitable. In some traditions of community organising, it is even encouraged – for example, the widely adopted Alinsky model places conflict at the centre of winning your cause. Other approaches to community organising may be more consensus based, but whatever our school of thought we will definitely encounter conflict between people in the group and need to know how to respond.

John Paul Lederach proposes a theory of 'Conflict Transformation' as opposed to the more widespread 'Conflict Resolution' models when dealing with conflict. The foundations of this approach are, "1) a positive orientation toward conflict, and 2) a willingness to engage in the conflict in an effort to produce constructive change or growth". Rather than seeing conflict as something negative that needs to be removed, Lederach instead talks about the ability to harness conflict to create a greater depth of relationship than existed before. If we can "build constructive change out of the energy created by conflict", and teach those in the group to do so, we can leave them with a positive mindset around conflict and help them work through it as it inevitably arises.

A related theory we can learn from is Patrick Lencioni's Conflict Continuum. This model suggests there is a healthy level of conflict that we can aim for between the two extremes of artificial harmony and personal attacks. Whilst it is very obvious when there is too much conflict, as facilitators we also need to be aware of when there is too little. If everyone is agreeing with every decision that the group makes, is that genuine agreement or because we have low psychological safety? Sometimes our role as facilitators is to unearth a buried conflict and bring it to the surface so it can be dealt with in a productive and safe way. Some tools for how to do this are towards the end of this Guide.

There is naturally much more theory related to group facilitation that we can learn from, but in summary if we can be aware of the stages of group development, create and maintain psychological safety and have a positive attitude to conflict we have the right grounding in our facilitation.



POWER

In community organising, we need to always be thinking about power. Where is it, who has it and how do we start to shift it towards the community we are working with? Power sits at the heart of the Community Organising Framework, and whatever our particular tradition or approach there will undoubtedly be a need to deeply engage with the subject of power.

Power and group dynamics

It is important for us as facilitators to take time to reflect on how relationships are developing within the group and where power is at play. Some key questions to ask ourselves when we step back and look at a typical meeting include:

- Who has power in the room?
- Is power concentrated in one or two people or is it shared more widely?
- What does the physical layout of the space say about power?
- Who is deciding when and where meetings are happening?
- Who is arriving early and who is late?
- Who sits in what position?
- Who talks a lot and potentially dominates discussions?
- Who is quiet and does not take part in the conversation?

By reflecting on these questions and others, we can build up a picture of how the group functions and where power flows. We can then develop our strategy to shift power to both move it away from ourselves and make sure it is shared more equally among group members.

We also need to consider group dynamics more widely. It might be that some of our group members are very close, with family relationships or friendships that go back many years. This can give them a strong relationship

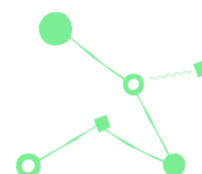
together, but might be felt as exclusive by others who are newer to the group. Or perhaps two other individuals have personal conflicts that prevent them getting on at all, and the fallout affects the wider group and forces them to choose sides. These are just some of the many issues that we can encounter as facilitators. Helpful tools we will discuss later such as ground rules can ensure we overcome these barriers and maintain the group's all-important psychological safety.

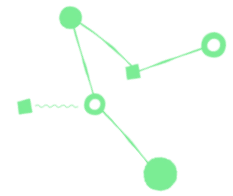
Group Roles

A final aspect of group facilitation that links to power is considering the roles that people take within the group. Whatever size the group is, there will be a mix of individuals each with their own unique background, experience, skills and strengths. During the Storming and Norming stages, a key underlying process that occurs is for people to find their role in the group. These roles could be explicit or implied, but we need to be clear to everyone that all roles are vital for the group – even the seemingly less important ones. For example, someone who is willing to take notes for everyone else may seem to play a minor role, but their work is critical to the proper functioning and sustainability of the group. The factor we need to emphasise is that the group values each and every role that people are prepared to take up.

To discover who is best for each role, psychometric tools such as StrengthsFinder or Myers-Briggs can be useful but should not be taken as the sum total of someone's personality. The real goal we are working towards is for the group to recognise the value of the differing skills and experiences that others bring and that together they are stronger than they are on their own. We can link this into the concept of self-interest – that they need each other if they are to fulfil their goals and make real change happen by building collective power. Linking back to the Iron Rule, it is much better if people can choose their own roles rather than being assigned them by us or another group member. We might broach this subject by listing out the roles that need filling and inviting people to say which one they would prefer or be happy to do. We should also be clear how long they are expected to do it for and if there will be opportunities to move the roles around. It could be for example that they decide to rotate who is chairing the meeting each time rather than having a permanent person in that role.

Now that we have considered how power relates to group facilitation, we can move on to considering some of the practical tools that facilitators can use to implement the theory we have explored.





PRACTICAL TOOLS

Setting ground rules

A critical tool in our armoury of facilitation is helping the group to set their own ground rules (or freedoms if you prefer). If we can introduce these at an early stage, it will pay dividends for us further down the line and especially as we encounter conflict. The simple idea of ground rules is for the group to have an agreed set of principles that will govern how they work with each other. In essence these are the group's norms but made explicit and discussed before they are implemented. We will find that any group that has been together for a while will have a set of unspoken rules, even if they have never discussed them with each other. Some of these could be negative or unhelpful behaviours – for example, it may be normal for people to talk over each other and shout loudest to win an argument. However, if we are to create psychological safety, we need to ensure that the rules our group is governed by are respectful and inclusive. Therefore, the process of setting out some agreed rules is critical to the long-term success of the group.

It is highly unlikely that the group will naturally discuss this subject on their own without our intervention. We will therefore need to explain the concept of ground rules and spend some time with the group working through them. It can be tempting to skip this stage as it can feel like slowing things down, but we need to be quite firm and insistent that the group goes through this process. Later on, when we reach the Storming stage, we will be very glad that we did!

In practical terms, a good way to start this conversation is by asking something like, “How do we want to work together as a group?”. It is really important that everyone has an opportunity to contribute here and that we don't just let the loudest voices set the rules. Depending on the group, you might want to ask the question then use silence to have them talk (see below), or you may want to ask them to have a discussion in pairs/small groups first before bringing their ideas to the whole group. Another way of doing this is to give everyone post it notes and ask them to write down their ideas. Then these can be anonymously placed together for people to look at and perhaps vote on which ones they want to become part of the group's set of rules. Or perhaps people can all hold up their post it notes at the same time to avoid influencing each other. There are many ways to do this, and a lot will depend on how well the group know each other and what their dynamics are like.

A final note on setting ground rules – here is where we need to be especially conscious of power. The worst outcome can be that one or two louder and more vocal individuals dominate the conversation and set the tone for the way the group will operate in future. We may need to be quite firm and direct here in making sure everyone has a say and be willing to challenge rules that we don't feel are actually going to benefit the group. We may also have our own personal or organisational values that we need to make sure are not compromised. For example, if a group agrees to be exclusive and never allow new members, we may decide this contravenes the



values and principles of community organising and we can no longer work with them. This is hopefully unlikely to happen, but we should be prepared to facilitate a healthy debate here.

Once the ground rules have been set, there is then the process of policing them when they are broken. And rules will be broken! We need to be prepared for when it happens rather than caught by surprise. In line with the Iron Rule of community organising, our ideal outcome is for the group to enforce the rules themselves. For example, if a group has agreed to respect each other and not talk over others, and then someone starts doing so, we would hope that another member of the group would remind them of what they have agreed. This will take a certain level of group maturity however, so in the short term we may need to challenge such behaviours ourselves.

Practically speaking, when someone contravenes the rules, it is normally a good idea to leave a moment's gap before responding, to give opportunity for another group member to say something. However, if no challenge is forthcoming, we will need to step in to preserve the psychological safety of the group. A good way of doing this is to remind everyone of the rules they have agreed by saying something like "I'm just thinking about the rules we agreed – let's remember not to talk over each other". This can be done in a non-confrontational way at first without singling anyone out. If someone does persist in their behaviour, it may be best to take them aside in private and talk to them about the issue. You might say something like, "I have just been noticing that sometimes you talk over other people – did you realise you are doing it?". Or using an 'I Statement' such as, "When you spoke over x, I felt like you weren't really listening to her" could be another way to approach it. It's best to assume they haven't realised what they had done and that they will want to change their behaviour once they understand the impact they are having on others. If they do not want to change, then the group as a whole has a problem and must decide what to do if a rule is continually broken. In an extreme situation, they may decide that person can no longer be part of the group - but this is thankfully quite rare.

'The Mirror'

A helpful technique for shifting power away from us as facilitators is to visualise ourselves as a mirror. Anytime the group puts something our way – a request for information, a decision to be made, a task that needs completing – we simply reflect it back to them. This links in strongly with the Iron Rule and our desire to enable the group to function independently without our input. If we can change their perception of us from leader and decision maker to advisor / coach, we can shift the group's focus to meeting their own needs and making their own decisions without external guidance.

In practice, using this tool might look a bit like this:

A member of the group asks the facilitator, "So what should we do next?"

Instead of answering the question, the facilitator reflects it back to them. "I don't know. What do you think we should do?"

Perhaps they genuinely have no idea and reply, "I don't know either – that's why I asked you!"

Then the facilitator can throw the question open to the group, "We don't know what to do next - what does everyone else think?". Or perhaps they can use another question to guide them, "If we aren't sure what to do, how could we find out? Who could we talk to or where could we go for help?"

The key is that you as the facilitator do not become the problem solver for the group. You will find that once you start solving problems that belong to other people, they will keep coming back with more problems! If instead we can help the group make their own decisions and solve their own problems by being a mirror for them, we can reduce their dependence on us and ultimately step away to leave a fully functioning group.

Telling Stories

Crafting and communicating powerful stories is a critical skill for community organisers to have. By listening deeply, we can gather the stories people have to share and use them to connect people together around common concerns and so build power. There is much more to say on storytelling than we will do here, but a technique called Public Narrative can be especially helpful.

For the purposes of group facilitation, having some stories of our own that we can share is an effective method of inspiring and motivating people as well as a useful technique for gently challenging them. As Dolores Heurta said, “When you are organizing a group of people, the first thing that we do is we talk about the history of what other people have been able to accomplish - people that look like them, workers like them, ordinary people, working people - and we give them the list: these are people like yourself; this is what they were able to do in their community”. The first use of our stories therefore can be to show the group what is possible and encourage them to raise their vision for what they could achieve.

There is another use of stories that is equally helpful to us as facilitators – as a method to subtly make a point and challenge the group consensus where we need to. For example, we might be concerned that the group is overly depending on one or two individuals to do most of the work, whilst some others do not contribute at all. We can obviously confront this directly by pointing it out and ensuring actions are shared equally between everyone – and that there are clear consequences for not doing them. There will be times where this is entirely appropriate. However, an alternative approach would be to share a story with the group of another time where something similar happened in a different setting, and what the outcome was. So perhaps you have worked before with a group that depended on one person, and as a result that person burnt out and the group ceased to function. If you can tell that story to the group as a whole, and then provide an opportunity to reflect on it, you can make your point in a less direct manner. They may still need the direct approach later on, but at least you gave them an opportunity to resolve things in a gentler way!

Silence

The strategic use of silence is a final key tool that a facilitator can use to encourage people to speak up and shift the power away from themselves. Simply ask a question to the group, and then shut up! There will inevitably be an awkward silence as people look to each other, but eventually someone will say something. The important thing is not to feel you need to rush in and say something to fill the silence – let it do its work uninterrupted. Depending on your own temperament, this may be a really difficult challenge, especially when everyone is looking at you to speak! But if we want the group to be able to discuss and debate things without our input, they need to become comfortable with speaking up in the group setting. Of course, make sure you combine silence with one of the other tools – for example by using ‘The Mirror’ technique to reflect a problem or decision back to the group first.

Group member – “We need to decide where we are going to meet next week. What should we do?” (question asked directly to facilitator).

Facilitator (using Mirror) – “I don’t know. What does everyone else think?”

Group - Looks nervously at each other

Facilitator – Says nothing

Group member eventually says, “Well I guess if no one else is going to say something – what about the coffee shop on the high street?”

The facilitator can now let the conversation take place without needing to decide on the group’s behalf.

Useful phrases

This final part of the Guide has some useful phrases that you can use in your role as a group facilitator. These link back to the Principles of Practice we covered earlier and will help you stay as a facilitator who shares power and works to reduce dependence on themselves

“I’m just aware of time...”

Great for moving on to the next thing when time is running short without blaming anyone – i.e. someone who may be talking too much!

“I was just thinking about... / That brings me on to...”

When you need to switch topic or move people on from a discussion that has gone on too long.

“Tell me more about that...”

Useful when someone starts saying something then stops, or gives a really short answer to a question

“I don’t know”

Helps puncture the idea of you being the expert who knows everything and can lead in to throwing the question back to the group with “what do you all think?”.

“So what do you think we should do now?”

For handing over control over the discussion to the group and making clear you are not making decisions for them.

“I can’t hear....”

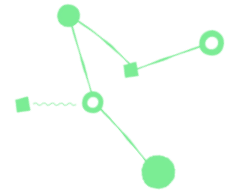
Very useful when people are talking over each other. Speak loudly to say you can’t hear what they are saying and need to listen to them one at a time. Resets the ground rules around respect.

“Let’s just remember the ground rules we agreed...”

For challenging behaviour that goes against the ground rules without making it personal to anyone.



CASE STUDIES



SPACE TO THINK, GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

Supported by the Mayor of London, The Selby Trust, High Trees, Black Thrive, and the Greater London Authority – the London Community Organisers Network has been providing ‘A Space to Think’

‘A Space to Think’ brought together diverse groups of people – social and community activists, community organisers, third sector and civil society organisations, people who aren’t part of any formal group, and policy makers at Borough and London-wide levels – to discuss some of the burning topics and concerns that Londoners face.

Based around key policy areas – such as the environment, mental health and wellbeing, and migration – the events created the space for participants to think big, talk openly, and find common ground; to connect and condense the ideas generated into a series of concrete and practical actions that were taken forward and worked through by new communities of practice.

Click below or scan the QR code to watch a video of one of the Space to Think Sessions and see the facilitation in action
<https://vimeo.com/417976691>



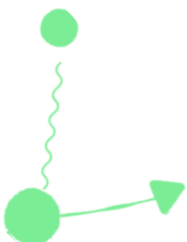
BUILDING TRUST, HAMMERSMITH AND FULHAM

Instigated by Hammersmith and Fulham Council and funded by the Department for Levelling Up, the Building Trust Project brought local people together with the NHS and council who both plan and provide local health and care services.

Working in collaboration with the Council and with Apricot Wellbeing, we supported community leaders from the Borough’s Voluntary and Community Sector to hold a series of listening events for local black residents, with the aim of creating a shared understanding of how structural racism and poverty impacts on residents’ experiences of health and care services.

Moussa Amine Sylla (Senior Associate) delivered listening skills and facilitation training to each of the community leaders involved, and provided support, advice and guidance around the facilitation of the twelve listening events happening across the Borough.

Click below or scan the QR code to read the full story of the work in Hammersmith and Fulham
<https://www.organisers.org.uk/building-trust>



COMMUNITY HOSTING

FACILITATING COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Groups and organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of conversations that can harness the collective wisdom and experiences of people with direct experience of an issue. Community Organisers has been supporting organisations to design processes and systems that can facilitate conversations that can draw on this collective experience and be the building block for building trust between people and institutions.

Drawing on our experiences of hosting and facilitating 1000s of conversations across the UK and internationally, we have been working with organisations (examples below) to support them to design conversations that can draw out the collective experiences of people and that can lead to better and deeper relationships and a shared commitment to work towards a common objective. Some of the conversations we have supported organisations to host include;

- how to better use wetlands to increase health and wellbeing
- structural racism within the health care system
- school exclusions
- regeneration and the decline of green spaces in London
- the underrepresentation of the LatinX community in London's decision making processes



Click below or scan the QR code to get in touch to find out more
www.corganisers.org.uk/contact-us/





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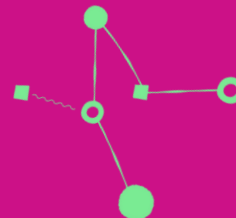
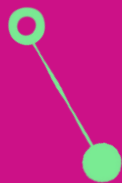
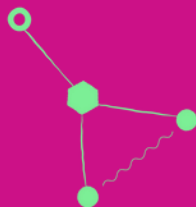
**ACTION FOR
CHANGE THROUGH
COMMUNITY
ORGANISING**

Nationally Recognised Qualifications

**LEVEL 3 AWARD IN
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