# GROUP FACILITATION PRIMER

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# Introduction

Facilitation is the practice of supporting a group in conducting its meetings and reaching decisions. Because the facilitator's efforts focus on the process (how decisions are reached) rather than the content (what decision is reached), the role is like a midwife, who works to assist the process of creation without themselves being the producer of the end result.

As the role has power in it that can be misused, it is essential that facilitators act with integrity. Elements of the code of ethics developed by the International Association of Facilitators include acknowledging conflicts of interest, involving all relevant stakeholders in the dialogue, and respecting the group's autonomy. As Berit Lakey puts it, "The facilitator . . . works in such a way that the people present at the meeting are aware that they are in charge, that it is their business that is being conducted, and that each person has a role to play."

Group facilitation is an art and a skill, a science and an intuition. Anyone can become better at facilitation through attention and practice. Facilitate means "to make easy," and the more people in a group who have facilitation and other process skills, the more easily the meetings will tend to run. In the most successful groups, all members take responsibility for co-creating a good meeting, bringing facilitative qualities forward even when they are not in the official role of facilitator.

Not all meetings require decisions or actions as the outcome. In some cases, exploratory dialogue is the goal. While the information in this primer is useful for those kinds of group conversations, overall it is designed for groups that are searching to reach decisions together. Furthermore, while much of what is written here is applicable to groups using other decision-making rules (such as majority vote), this guide is oriented toward groups operating by consensus, where every person present needs to give consent before action is taken.

Finally, the many wonderful large-scale or multiple-session processes available for organizations or communities doing visioning, strategic planning, and organizational restructuring (such as Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, and Open Space) are beyond the scope of this document. This primer is simply geared for how to run your regular meetings in a way that is inclusive, respectful, democratic, and effective—how to welcome everyone's input and still stay on task.

# Cast of Characters: Roles in Meetings

## Participants

The participants' job is to show up and be present; bring a cooperative, openminded attitude; and do their best to make good decisions together. Participants need to search out the balance between the group's interests and personal needs, and it's a balance that can shift over time or in different situations. I ask members both to keep the group's purpose clearly in mind, and to take responsibility for their own well-being and participation, including "owning" their independent feelings and experiences.

## Sponsor/Presenter

If each item at the meeting has a sponsor or presenter associated with it who has thought in advance about what exactly needs to happen at that meeting on that item, everyone’s time is saved. Does the group need to receive information, list possibilities, state concerns, appoint a committee, or make a decision? The sponsor may be an expert on that topic or be advocating a particular course of action, or may just be bringing it forward for the group’s consideration because they see a group need or because it falls under their committee’s purview. Presenters are also responsible for providing any necessary background documentation so that everyone can understand the issue, including looking up past minutes to explain the history of this topic in the organization.

## Agenda Planner

In groups that choose to plan their agendas ahead of time, the agenda planner is the gatekeeper of the meeting. It is that person’s responsibility to ensure that the group’s time is well used. People’s time is a precious resource, not to be squandered; i recommend reserving meeting time for things that really require *interaction* among all or most of the group.

Questions to consider in planning an agenda include:

*Who will be present:*

- To participate in making the decision?
- To sponsor or present an item?
- To facilitate the meeting?

*Timing:*

- How long has an item been waiting?
- Are there deadlines for action?
- Where are people at with this issue, are they ready for it?
- What else is going on for individuals and the group?
- Find a balanced mixture of "light" and "heavy" items.
- Consider the length of meeting.

*Whole group:*

- What are the priority issues for the group right now?
- Does this really need everyone's time?
- Should it be handled by a smaller group or a manager either before or instead of going to meeting?
- Would it be addressed better by posting something in writing?

*Preparation:*

- Is there research that needs to be done ahead of time?
- Is there documentation that needs to be posted ahead of time?
- Is the sponsor ready to present the item?

This information is gathered from item sponsors and from the agenda planner’s own knowledge of the group. After all these considerations, as a draft agenda is prepared, the agenda planner should communicate with each presenter to make sure the person is ready and knows what to expect and how much time they have. Most people are very naive about how much time it takes to actually discuss something properly, so part of learning agenda planning is becoming rigorously realistic.

## Facilitator

The facilitator is the process guide of the group. Aspects of their role include:

- holding space for the dialogue so that others can focus on content
- summarizing and integration, stating the "sense of the meeting"
- analyzing, splitting big topics into manageable ones
- holding members accountable to ground rules and other agreements
- suggesting alternative formats
- supporting people in moving through conflicts
- translation (explaining something said by one participant into terms that others can understand)
- "vibeswatching"
- keeping track of the "stack" (speaking order)
- timekeeping
- "scribing": writing information onto flipcharts or whiteboard
- physical preparation (seating, lighting, temperature, supplies)

Groups will benefit from all members taking responsibility for good meetings, including participants using all the skills here nominally assigned to the facilitator. The one aspect of the role that probably should be reserved for the official facilitator is designating speaking turns, in order to avoid chaotic confusion. Two functions that are frequently delegated to others are scribing and timekeeping.

## Notetaker

Formal groups with ongoing agreements usually require a written record of past decisions. The notetaker's goal is not to record who said what when. Rather, the information readers will likely want to know is:

- Date of the meeting
- Who was present
- Title of each item clearly labeled
- Main points of discussion
    - Questions answered
    - Range of opinion
    - Concerns raised, and whether each concern was resolved or not
    - "Sense of the meeting"
    - New ideas
- Decisions
    - Reasons and intentions for a decision
- Name and reason of anyone standing aside (in a meeting run by consensus)
- Next steps
    - Tasks (who will do what, and by when)
    - Future agenda items

If that's all too much to cover, then just go for the core: If there is a proposal, and especially if there is a consensus decision, that needs to be stated clearly and explicitly. During the meeting, if the group is nearing consensus, it's good if after stating the sense of the meeting, the facilitator asks the notetaker to read out the proposed minute, because it's the minute that will actually serve as the record of what was agreed to.

### Timekeeper, Vibeswatcher, Doorkeeper, et al.

There are various other roles that groups sometimes designate.

The ***Timekeeper*** keeps an eye on the clock, and should warn the group well before the time allotted for each item runs out (for instance, if you have 40 minutes allocated for a topic, the timekeeper should alert the group when there are 10 minutes remaining).

The ***Doorkeeper*** sits near the door to welcome latecomers, take them aside, and orient them as to what's happening in the meeting so that they are up to speed and can participate without disruption.

In theory, the role of the ***Vibeswatcher*** is to keep an eye on group energy and dynamics, intervening when emotions run high, the group needs a break, and so on. In practice, i have yet to see a group use this role effectively—usually the designated person just ends up sitting there quietly throughout the meeting—and i suggest that vibeswatching is actually a core function of the facilitator and should therefore be folded into that role instead.

## Principles

### *1. You are the servant of the group, the steward of the process.*

As facilitator, your role is one of servant-leadership; it is "power with" rather than "power over."

Different from a chairperson or president of an organization, you are only "in charge" in specific ways, for a limited time (usually the duration of one meeting). The group cedes you temporary authority in order to help it accomplish its collective aims, but in the end power resides in the group.

To work on the group's behalf, you will need to stay centered yourself, even in the face of fierce energies and complex challenges. For most people, the more work you've previously done on your own personal issues, the more likely you'll be able to stay clear. Set your intention before you start, and help the group to set theirs. Remember you can ask for a moment of silence if you need to get grounded again or consider your options (but be careful not to use this as a tactic to squelch people's anger or upset). Trust the process and keep faith in the group's wisdom, that people are holding the solutions to their problems and are capable of figuring it all out—all you need to do is support the process.

Particularly when we are called upon to facilitate groups we are also members of, it can be hard to avoid putting our personal feelings into the issue under discussion. As facilitator, you should not be contributing opinions, ideas, feelings, answers to questions, input on a proposal, or solutions to dilemmas. You give up your power to influence content, in order to hold an impartial space for group discussion. If you are yearning to add a comment, usually if you wait a little while someone else will say what you were thinking of. If you are in a situation where you really do need to contribute content (such as a decision to admit a new member to the group), then it's important to clearly label that you are stepping outside of the facilitator role to do so, and then to make sure it's clear when you are back in the facilitator role. If you need to do this for more than one or two comments, consider having someone else take over facilitating.

It *is* appropriate to suggest solutions to process dilemmas, such as, "We have five minutes left on this item, can we send it to a committee to work out the details?" Or "Hey Pat and Shawanda, i notice you two are having trouble hearing each other, would you be willing to take a minute to each repeat what it is that you think the other person is saying?"

If you explain what you are doing and why as you go along, offering a clear rationale, that helps people trust you. For example, "I see that there are several hands up, and I'm going to call on Maria next because she hasn't spoken yet tonight." Realistically no one is perfect, so admitting it if you make a mistake also helps maintain the group's trust that you are aware and care more about the group's purpose than protecting your own ego.

## *2. Plan ahead and work outside the meeting.*

In order to be effective, your job as facilitator starts long before you walk in the door of the meeting.

While some groups operate just fine without planning agendas in advance, most organizations function much more efficiently when there is a system in place for figuring out beforehand what topics will be dealt with, for how long, in what order, what the goal of each item is (dissemination of information, discussion, decision, etc.), and who will be sponsoring each item. While facilitation is a separate role from agenda planning, it's important for the facilitator and agenda planner to communicate closely with each other.

As facilitator, communicating ahead with every presenter ensures you are both on the same page about what they'll be doing, what the goal is, and how much time they have. If you expect substantial controversy at the meeting, i recommend interviewing participants ahead of time to give you a fuller sense of the situation and build trust by coming to an understanding of their concerns.

You should also think ahead with the agenda planner about what format to use for each item. While meetings tend to default to full group discussion (also called plenary discussion), there are many reasons and good times to use alternate methods, such as simultaneous small group discussions, go-rounds (each person has a turn to speak), fishbowls (small group talks together in the middle while the rest of the group witnesses and holds space in an outer circle), guided visualizations, and more. See more on Formats later in this Primer.

Familiarize yourself with the group's history, procedures, and any ground rules that are in place. Consider how to help people transition into being fully present at the start of the meeting, and what you will say about your role when you begin. Also think about how to close the meeting at the end—depending on the group's culture, this might be a moment of silence, a song, appreciations and acknowledgements, or other possibilities. If minutes need to be taken for a formal record, you should know who is going to do that.

There is also physical preparation involved. Do you know who will unlock the door of the meeting space? Where the bathrooms are? Do you need to bring an easel, flip chart, markers, scrap paper?

Overall, on average you can expect to spend one to two hours outside the meeting getting ready for every hour you will spend in the meeting.

Furthermore, some of the most important work of a meeting sometimes takes place outside the formal sessions. If someone is in a blocking position, they may need time to cool down, a conversation with a supportive friend, or a private reminder of the group's purpose that doesn't cause them to lose face.

If a conflict emerges during a session that is more about unresolved interpersonal issues than about the group's business, both parties may need to be checked in with afterward to offer support, and perhaps help in arranging mediation.

## *Facilitator's Checklist*

**Process Preparation**

- ❑ Background info on group's history and current issues
- ❑ Ground rules & procedures
- ❑ Talk with each presenter ahead
- ❑ Interview participants as needed
- ❑ Agenda planned
- ❑ Formats chosen
- ❑ Documentation available (e.g. text of proposals)
- ❑ Facilitator's introduction planned
- ❑ Minute-taker designated
- ❑ Assistance for set-up and clean-up

**Physical Preparation**

- ❑ Location known (and directions, if needed)
- ❑ Room access confirmed (and bathrooms)
- ❑ Number of chairs, appropriately arranged
- ❑ Wall space for hanging flipcharts
- ❑ Easel & flipchart or chalkboard/whiteboard
- ❑ Markers/chalk
- ❑ Masking tape
- ❑ Office supplies (paper, post-it notes, scissors, pens, pencils)
- ❑ Bell
- ❑ Clock
- ❑ Nametags
- ❑ Food & drink

## *3. Help each person feel heard.*

Group wisdom emerges through contributions of individuals present. In order for each person's "piece of the truth" to be integrated into the whole tapestry, people need to have a sense that their piece has been received and understood.

This can happen through reflective listening (paraphrasing, saying back to someone what you heard them say), incorporation into a general summary, scribing ideas onto a flip chart list at the front of the room, or other methods. Different methods will be appropriate at different moments, but the essential need must be addressed.

If someone does not feel heard, they often repeat their statement . . . which gives you another opportunity to include them. Most people who repeat are attempting to be helpful rather than troubling. If you believe someone has been heard and is having trouble distinguishing between being heard and being agreed with, you can state this directly: "Alex, it is my sense that the group does understand your idea, but is leaning toward a different course of action due to [X]. If you think there is something in what you're saying that actually has not been heard, can you say what that piece is?" Or you could even try asking them, "Short of the entire group agreeing with you, what would let you know that you've been heard?" It is crucial that these interventions be offered with a respectful, even-handed tone, otherwise you will put the person on the defensive, which doesn't help them or the group.

If there is tension in the room, try slowing down to do more reflecting—it is a key tool to use especially during conflicts. Reflective listening doesn't have to (and probably shouldn't) mean repeating back every detail; rather, you want to go for the essence of what the person is expressing, and if that expression includes any emotions, then be particularly sure to acknowledge that. Because people feel vulnerable about expressing feelings directly, feelings are often expressed indirectly, through tone or charged language. Go ahead and guess what the underlying feelings are; if you guess wrong, it's okay, the speaker will usually correct you and appreciate your good intent. It's the intent to genuinely understand someone with compassion that helps build bridges during conflicts. It's not your job to pass judgment or establish which of the parties is right.

Human creativity is infinite. But when people start feeling tense, angry, or scared, rigidity tends to set in, and then it's hard to access that natural creativity. Once people feel heard, the energy frees up and starts moving again, thus allowing all kinds of creative solutions to emerge. Remember, as facilitator you don't need to come up with the answer. If you help people feel heard, they'll be able to generate their own solutions.

Most disagreements happen at the level of positions: "I think we should install lights in the parking lot" vs. "I think we should not." So helping people feel heard can also mean digging deeper, down to the level of interests and needs: "Why do you want to install lights? Is it because you are having trouble finding your car, or because you don't feel safe there?" And for the person who doesn't want lights, is that because they are concerned about spending the money, or using natural resources for electricity, or they want to be able to see the stars at night? Once you get to the next level down, there are usually many options available in response to any given problem.

While you want to do your best to take care of everyone present, that is different from letting individuals bully others into doing things their way. Buried within apparently dysfunctional behaviors there is often precious insight for the group—when people lack skills to articulate those concerns, they may express themselves in unskilled ways. When such situations arise, strive to find out the information contained there, but in the end if you can't figure it out and there is still a conflict, ultimately you need to do whatever you think best serves the group's goals. As Berit Lakey puts it, "The responsibility of the facilitator is to the group and its work rather than to the individuals within the group."

## *4. Work with all of what's in the room.*

When you think of a meeting, what do you think of?

The cultural expectations of what we call "meetings" are that we bring only our rational, analytical selves into the room. People who are successful in that environment are people who can explain points A, B, and C, and argue cogently on their behalf. We bring our logic inside, pretending all the other parts of ourselves are checked at the door.

In reality, our full selves are there whether we want them or not, so it's better to acknowledge this and learn skills for working with it. When a meeting gets stuck, it's almost never stuck at the rational level, so you need to be able to work with people's feelings, bodies, and spirits. You've gotta be able to move with the energy.

Furthermore, it's a *good* thing that people do bring their full selves, because full selves contain a lot more wisdom than any one part could ever offer. Making wise decisions together calls us to honor our feelings and more.

So pay close attention to tone, body language, eye contact, pacing, sensations in your body, intuition, and gut instincts. Note the patterns of when you or others start to space out or lose attention. If there is tension in the room (or an issue hiding under the rug), try to bring out the underlying dynamics to work with them constructively; and if you can't do that, at least acknowledge what's there. That acknowledgement can release people's attention from that issue and restore their energy to the group.

## *5. Listen for common ground and reflect it back to the group, as often as necessary.*

If your image of a facilitator is someone who just calls on people in the order in which they raised their hands (the traffic cop model), chances are you need to increase your activity level a lot to really serve the groups you are part of. The role of facilitator outlined here is an active, dynamic part of the meeting. If the group is going along just fine, you may hardly need to step in at all, but most groups need help staying on track.

A major tool in the facilitator's toolbox is summarizing. Summarizing means stating your sense of where the group is at, weaving together the diverse viewpoints that have been expressed into a sense of the whole. Summarizing after every few members have spoken helps people feel heard and keeps things focused. With practice your summaries can be crisp and complete.

Often a topic will contain multiple subtopics within it. In that case it's your job to list out the subtopics as they are raised (either verbally or by writing them onto a flipchart or chalkboard) and help the group keep track of each thread. Once the subtopics are known, go with the thread that has the most energy.

Over time you will discern a rhythm for how long to stay with a thread. A thread may come to a natural conclusion when a problem is solved, a concern is addressed, implementation tasks have been allocated, or it has been handed to a committee to address outside of plenary.

If conflict emerges, listen for where the conflicted parties have shared territory. What parts do they agree on? What goals do they have in common? Don't gloss over differences, name them clearly—and then focus on how to build up from whatever common ground exists. If you tune your ears to the frequency of common ground and good intent, you will find it in the group.

It's important to honor progress made in each session. Without reflection back of progress made, members may feel they've been spinning their wheels and wasting their time. Progress tends to be invisible outside of obvious milestones such as reaching a decision or settling a major conflict. As facilitator, if you point out to the group the intervening small mile markers, you help them celebrate their productivity and the usefulness of the meeting. Typical small mile markers include listing out subtopics, resolving a subtopic, registering concerns on a proposal, brainstorming a list of solutions to a problem, and most commonly, learning new information on an issue or how people relate with that issue.

# Methods

## Ground Rules

Putting ground rules in place is akin to choosing preventive healthcare over curing an illness. Preventive care also comes in a spectrum, and in a holistic healthcare approach, one might choose eating a healthy diet over taking vitamin pills. In my opinion, the best preventive care for group dynamics is the creation of a positive culture, a culture of respect, honesty, caring, appreciation, and connection. However, i recognize that ground rules can help reinforce that culture, and that groups operating in a more formal context are often well-served by adopting a coherent, ongoing set of agreements about how people will interact with each other during the meetings.

If ground rules are needed, the group is probably quite capable of brainstorming its own. However, if you want ideas, here is one possible “starter set”:

1. All focus on one conversation. Stacking: If there are multiple people wanting to speak at the same time, then raise hands and wait to be called on. If you need to have a side conversation, first step out of the room.
2. Fairness: No one will be called on twice on a particular topic until all those who want to have spoken once. Step up, then step back—share the available time with others.
3. Be constructive. Create a positive context and supportive framework. Acknowledge the past fully, yet focus on the future. Make good-faith efforts.
4. Test assumptions and inferences. Ask for more information.
5. Be specific. Use examples if needed so people know what you're talking about.
6. Take responsibility for your own feelings and experiences. Use “I” statements (for example, “I felt so angry when I saw that,” instead of “You made me so angry when you did that”).
7. Keep it real, keep it relevant. Be honest. Be direct, yet kind. Discuss undiscussable issues. Center on what most needs to be talked about.

Once the group adopts a set of ground rules, then one of the responsibilities of the facilitator is to hold members accountable to them. Other group members should help with this as well, and not expect the facilitator to do all the heavy lifting, especially if the facilitator is a novice.

## Formats

As mentioned above, while most meetings default to whole group discussion (also called plenary), there are many other formats available. Reasons for choosing other formats include but are not limited to:

1. Allowing multiple people to speak at the same time.
2. Providing safer space for people who are not comfortable speaking in front of the whole group.
3. Providing an opportunity for people to contribute in diverse ways (e.g., drawing or moving instead of speaking).
4. Shifting the energy.

5. Using time efficiently.
6. Gathering information.
7. Exploring an issue in depth.

Following are some sample formats and suggestions on when they are appropriate. Remember that whatever format you choose, it's important to think through beforehand how each step of the process will work in practice, and have any necessary materials ready.

## *1. Go-Round*

A go-round is where every person gets a turn to speak in order, without interruption or direct response ("cross-talk") by others. Aspects to get clear on before you start include: whether or not everyone is expected to speak; whether it's ok for anyone to speak a second time once all have spoken a first time; and whether the amount of time per person is limited. Sometimes the facilitator reserves the right to ask clarifying questions.

It's nice if there is time for the group to talk afterward about what came up, and/or the facilitator may offer closing remarks.

Go-rounds are useful when you want to hear from every person present, when some members are reluctant to jump into a fast-paced discussion, and/or when you feel that a slower, more deliberate method is appropriate to the subject under consideration, perhaps because it is a particularly weighty decision.

This format is rarely appropriate in a group of more than 15 people. When planning a go-round, think ahead about how much time it will realistically take, and consider whether there needs to be a time limit per person. (If there is a time limit, either sending a wristwatch around the circle so that whoever just spoke keeps time for the next speaker, or having a gentle chime ready for the facilitator to ring as a signal, are graceful ways to keep to the limit.)

## *2. Small Groups*

Concurrent small groups are an obvious method that should probably be used far more frequently than they are. By simple math, breaking into small groups during part of an agenda item allows a lot more people to have air time. And people who will never speak in front of a large group due to shyness may have wonderful ideas to share.

The breakout groups may be anywhere from two to five people. I tend toward smaller groups (two to three people) for increased safety when the topic has a lot of emotion associated with it. Whereas groups of four to five may be good for more energy when you want people to share opinions or generate ideas. Once you get six or more people, participants have to wait longer to get a speaking turn and you start losing the benefits of small groups.

At the end of the small group time, bring the full group back together by inviting people to share insights and highlights in the full group. Sharing new learnings is more useful than getting full "report-backs," which tend to be boring and decrease the energy. Spending even ten minutes in small groups enables people to express their first responses to an issue very efficiently, thus deepening the level of consideration when the group starts plenary discussion. A term for short small groups in the midst of a larger plenary session is "zoom groups."

## *3. Brainstorming*

Brainstorming is a well-known technique for eliciting as many ideas as possible in the shortest amount of time. It usually consists of having people call out ideas which are then scribed up front onto a flipchart. If people are really popping you may even need two separate charts with scribes who alternate. The basic rule of brainstorming is that no evaluative comments are allowed; that is, no one can say of another idea that it's good or bad. The point is to open up to the fullest possible creativity.

At least that's the theory. Brainstorming has been studied extensively by researchers, and the results show that people do in fact tend to feel inhibited about sharing. Saying that ideas will not be judged doesn't in itself keep it from happening (even if it's in people's heads rather than out loud), and participants know this. Also not everyone can think creatively in an environment with others shouting out their ideas. So an alternate technique is to have people write ideas down anonymously onto half-sheets of paper, which are collected by the facilitator and posted at the front. An added advantage of that approach is that the ideas can then be moved around and grouped into categories.

## *4. Fishbowl*

A fishbowl consists of a subset of the whole group gathering together in one place (usually in the middle of the room) to discuss a topic while the rest of the group witnesses silently from the outer circle.

While fishbowls are most often used to bring together representatives of the main divergent points of view on a topic in order to engage in deeper exploration (a heterogeneous fishbowl), they are also sometimes used to explore categorical differences in the group, for example having all the wimmin sitting in the middle talking about what it's like to be a womyn, followed by all the men sitting in the middle talking about what it's like being a man, in order to improve everyone's education on gender issues (homogeneous fishbowl). When doing a homogeneous fishbowl, including at least two rounds by each group will help deepen the conversation.

For a heterogeneous fishbowl, the key is to get all the important viewpoints represented in the subgroup. As facilitator Laird Schaub explains it, this can be usefully employed to sharpen the focus of a conversation when it is clear that a small number of people carry the strongest views or have thought most deeply about a topic—the idea being that any agreement among that subgroup on the topic will likely be amenable to the whole. This prevents diffusion and keeps the conversation very focused. However, bringing together protagonists on a topic can heighten tensions and you may need a facilitator who can handle the strong feelings and expressions that may result. You should also keep an eye on the observers to see if they are having trouble (either by losing interest or by getting riled up); occasionally a fishbowl may need to be interrupted to check in with the outer circle.

Another variation on the heterogeneous fishbowl is to include an empty chair in the subgroup that anyone from the outer circle who wishes to participate can come up to occupy. When that person is done they can return to their outer ring seat, or if a second person from the outer circle wishes to join the discussion, they can come stand behind that chair and that's a signal to the first occupant to vacate the spot.

I normally invite comments by the outer circle at the end of the session, if not before. It's important to honor the role of the outer ring in witnessing and holding space for the conversation to happen in the middle.

## *5. Kinetic Mapping*

Kinetic mapping is a physical expression of where people "stand" on a topic. It is useful in gathering a large survey of information quickly, and raising energy by getting people out of their chairs. It is particularly appropriate on issues where opinion naturally falls into a spectrum.

To set this up, designate one spot in the room as one end of the opinion spectrum, and an opposite spot as the other pole, and ask the group to envision a line running between them. (You might even illustrate this by putting a line of masking tape along the floor.) For example, you might designate one corner as, "I think our work guideline should be 40 hours per person per month," and the opposite corner as, "I think it should be 3 hours a month or less." Then the intervening space is arranged for 5 hours, 10 hours, 20 hours, etc. Next you ask people to line up according to their opinions. This provides an immediate visual snapshot of how people feel about the issue.

At this point you might have one person from each area of the line talk about how they feel and why. Another creative variation is to find the halfway point in the line of people, and fold the line around in two to create a series of pairs, so that the 40-hour person and the 3-hour person are paired up, the 38-hour person is with the 4-hour person, and so on, and then give the pairs 5-10 minutes to converse, before reporting back to the full group what they learned and what new insights emerged.

## *6. Council*

The term Council refers here to a special time, one set aside from regular discourse, where the members of a group gather to speak what is in their hearts. You may choose to undertake this when facing a major decision (such as whether or not to continue the group or dissolve it), after a tragic event, or when other methods haven't worked.

Making this happen requires changing the atmosphere. Think ahead about the group's culture and what it will take to create depth. You may dim the lights and light a candle in the center of the circle or place a "talking stick" there (a rock or other object that people hold when they are speaking), or gather outside around a campfire instead in the regular meeting room. The Council may start with a period of silence, so that members can meditate on their relationship to the issue at hand. The Council is a ritual, so opening and closing the ritual appropriately is important, to mark it off from other activities. The Council is normally held as a stand-alone event, not combined with other meeting agenda.

It is a time for listening deeply, as one person speaks at a time. After setting the stage with a formal introduction, usually the facilitator holds silence, giving only ritual comments if any, unless someone participates in a way that injures the mood or safety of the proceedings that the facilitator needs to address. Typically there is no set time limit for how long someone can speak in Council (though there is often a request that no one speak a second time until all who want to have spoken once); instead the ritual itself creates a container that provides limits.

## *7. Guided Visualization*

Guided visualizations rely on intuitive insight to surface new possibilities. For most groups it's not a format to use often, but when you have tried other avenues and need to change your approach, this method can go beyond rationality into the collective unconscious.

Ask everyone to be seated in a comfortable position, preferably with their eyes closed if they are willing. Next the facilitator leads the group through an initial sequence to help them get present and ready, perhaps a relaxation exercise where people concentrate on each area of their bodies in order. Then as Laird Schaub describes it, "The facilitator leads the group into mindfulness of the issue to be addressed, and allows everyone to sit with it in a wakeful dream state. . . . After a suitable period of time (5-15 minutes), everyone is brought back to the present and given space to share the images that arose for them during the silence. Once everyone has shared, the group is asked to reflect on what they think the stories mean and how that might offer insight into moving past the stuck place on the issue."

The facilitator needs to make sure to use a neutral description when leading people into the issue, one that does not suggest any particular outcome. "The key is to be authentic and to let go of trying to control what happens" (Laird Schaub). Allowing people to share what came up for them before diving into interpretation and analysis helps create safety and depth.

### *8. Silence*

For the Quakers, who have been holding consensus-based meetings for over 300 years, their whole practice of the process relies heavily on the use of silence. While most secular organizations are not so inclined, silence is a tool that is always available to us at any time. Particularly if the situation is a conflicted one, sitting together in reflection for 5-30 minutes can deepen the conversation.

Quakers also create a "frame of silence" around each speaker, waiting a few minutes after one person speaks before the next person talks. Even a pause of 10-60 seconds makes more space for the less assertive members to contribute. This helps equalize power in the group, and can create a more deliberative process.

## Facilitator's Rap

When the meeting starts you have an opportunity to set the tone and explain what the group can expect from you in the facilitator role. This is the time to suggest guidelines if the group doesn't have them already, and to clarify procedures; for example, will consent to a decision be indicated by silence, or will members have to do something active such as holding up a green card to signify agreement?

I ask for the group's permission to make judgment calls and otherwise carry out my role, offering them an opportunity to raise concerns. Once they've signed on, i am officially empowered to hold the group to that contract. (However, the facilitator always serves at the will of the group, and the group can select a new facilitator at any time.)

The opening rap can also be a time to ask for the group's support as you learn these skills. For instance, you might say something like, "I'm fairly new at this and am working on learning how to step in when someone goes on a bit too long. If i step in ungracefully, i hope you will forgive me, and i am open to getting feedback on it at the end of the meeting. Is that okay with folks?" Enrolling their support co-creates a climate of openness and discovery.

## Managing Open Discussions & Equalizing Time

Since most meeting time is spent in plenary discussion, facilitators must develop skills to deal with that effectively. Typical challenges include how to intervene when someone talks too long or too often, keeping people on topic, and how to wrap up discussion on one topic and move to the next. Solutions to these challenges are numerous and varied, and over time and with practice you and your group(s) will find out what works for you. In the meantime, here are some ideas to get you going. As with other facilitative actions, having a positive and respectful tone is crucial to success.

While people who talk a lot are often seen as the problem, their energy and desire to be involved is also very positive. So you may want to emphasize soliciting increased involvement from the quieter people over making big efforts to squelch the contributions of those who are more easily vocal. As the quieter people speak up, the noisier ones will naturally take up less space. Besides using alternate formats outlined previously in this Primer, you can say things like, "Would anyone who has not yet spoken on this like to say anything?" or "Aviva, i notice you have an intent look on your face, do you want to share what you're thinking?" or ask for a moment of silence.

In my experience, most interruptions happen because someone is enthusiastically bubbling over, not because they actually intend to keep a less assertive person from speaking. If you observe that happening, gently but firmly saying something like, "Hey, i want to hear what you have to say, but i also want to hear Casey out first," is usually enough to get their attention and preserve space for the quieter person to finish.

When more than one person has something to say, "stacking" is the term facilitators use for the speaking order. Long stacks or queues are problematic, because they usually contain multiple threads, and speaker #8 will be replying to what speaker #3 said, and meanwhile speaker #5's question hasn't been answered yet, and so on. So i recommend using short stacks of no more than 3-4 people, and telling everyone that's what to expect during your opening facilitator's rap. If 6 hands go up, choose folks that have spoken least, and get permission beforehand to break stack for direct answers to questions. And remember to insert frequent, short summaries in order to maintain group focus.

If someone goes off topic, it's your job to bring them back. You can intervene with a gentle reminder, a query such as: "Can you help me see how that relates to our topic of . . . ?" or a statement like, "I notice we are starting to segue into different areas, let's stay with [X] until we get clear on it, okay?" The time to rein in tangents is as soon as one comment happens—don't wait for multiple people to jump on the cross-town bus.

Even doing your best to encourage quieter people to speak up, there will be times when a more "dominant" person goes on and on, and using your best judgment you will see a need to intervene. Because it feels impolite to interrupt someone else, less experienced facilitators are often reluctant to step in, but the group is relying on you! Find a method that works for you: wait until the person takes a breath, then insert a short question or a summing up or simply "Thank you." If you are uncomfortable even thinking about doing this, try practicing with a friend ahead of time. Here are some ideas of ways to interrupt someone who is speaking too long:

- Say "Thank you"
- Go into a summary of the speaker's statement
- Point out that there are others waiting to speak
- Remind them of the time limit on the item
- Visibly but politely tap your wristwatch while making eye contact

- Walk closer to the person speaking
- Give a “wrap up” sign with your hands
- Ask them for the headline version
- Mention your worry that listeners will have trouble staying present
- Say the group is due for a break soon
- Ask, “Are you almost done?” or “Can you finish up?”
- Clear your throat
- Start to speak yourself several times
- Use the speaker’s name in a question
- Write their idea up on the flipchart and ask, “Have i got that right here?”
- Say “Okay Sage, we need to move on, is there anything else?”

If your group is suffering from repeated patterns of unequal participation, you may want to create a feedback loop to help everyone notice what’s happening. For instance, you could have one member record how many times each person speaks in a meeting, and then post it on a chart at the end of that meeting or the beginning of the next one. Or give everyone eight beans at the start of the meeting, and require the deposit of one bean every time someone speaks; when someone has run out of beans, they’ve run out of speaking turns for that meeting. These kinds of artificial structures would feel too heavy-handed to use at every meeting, but can be a useful consciousness raising exercise and are probably enough to get the point across.

Keep in mind that probably everyone at the meetings has good intentions of everyone participating, it’s just that they get forgetful or intimidated in the moment, or want to participate in different ways. If you need to, search out people at either end of the noisy/quiet spectrum for a good one-on-one talk. Many folks will be less scared in private than they would be in front of the group, and therefore less defensive. Work on really understanding where the other person is coming from, and search out how you can be their ally.

For finishing up one topic and moving to the next in a timely way, having a large clock positioned so everyone can easily see it and periodically announcing how much time is remaining will enable members to self-monitor and thereby make your job as facilitator a lot easier. If the item has 60 minutes, then expect to spend the last 15-20 minutes doing wrap-up and next steps—don’t let regular conversation continue up until the last 2 minutes and then expect to be done on time.

## Dealing with Conflicts, Blocks, & Polarization

The Principles discussed earlier in this Primer serve as a guide for dealing with conflicts and other tough situations. Honor them, commit to them, practice them—they can see you through. In addition, here are a few other suggestions.

### *1. Assume good-faith intentions.*

When troubles arise, it’s easy to jump into judgment, to suspect that someone is deliberately being disruptive, manipulative, or difficult. But in that own person’s mind, they are a good person, their cause is just, and they are just trying to find a way to get their needs or the group’s needs met. While i have no way to objectively determine whether or not someone is acting in good faith, i find that if i cultivate an inner attitude of assuming that they are, my facilitation goes much better (and so does the rest of my life!). So i choose to assume positive intent, because on a practical level it works—and it feels nice inside too.

### *2. Act as an ally of the person with the concern (while still holding the needs of the rest of the group). Listen closely for the "piece of the truth" in each person's expression.*

If one or two people hold a minority position on an issue, they will typically feel a lot of pressure from the rest of the group, whether overtly or unintentionally. As facilitator, you need to walk a fine line between supporting the minority and supporting everyone else. It's essential for you to stay neutral and avoid jumping on a bandwagon in this case.

There is almost always an important piece of truth in every person's expression. If you trust that that's present, you'll be a lot more likely to find it. Treat differing opinions as a resource rather than a problem: What's to be learned from them? Diversity is good—if you can learn to hold the ambiguity for a while, the resulting decision will probably be the stronger for it in the end.

### *3. Ask questions.*

Your goal is to understand the concern fully, and to explore possibilities. Crafting excellent questions is a whole skill in itself, one that whole workshops are devoted to studying. According to the article "Strategic Questioning: Engaging People's Best Thinking" (by Brown, Isaacs, Vogt, and Margulies), a powerful question:

- is simple and clear
- is thought-provoking
- generates energy
- focuses inquiry
- surfaces assumptions
- opens new possibilities

Consider questions such as:

- How do you see this idea?
- What are you afraid might happen?
- Have you had previous experiences where that happened? (And if so, how is this current situation similar to and different from those times?)
- What values of yours does this relate to?
- What group values and purposes is this about for you?
- Is there a way we could monitor that problem?
- What parts of the proposal *do* you support?
- If you were czar, what would you do?

*4. Analyze what the origin of the difficulty is.*

If you don't slow down to take a closer look, it's easy to misdiagnose the cause of a problem. For example, if Leslie and Ivan perennially get annoyed at each other during meetings, that might be because:

- they have an unresolved past issue with each other (interpersonal);
- they've taken on upholding certain viewpoints in the group (representative gladiators);
- one of them is the most detail-oriented person in the group and the other is the most "rough-and-ready" (archetypal poles);
- the group's procedures are sufficiently fuzzy that it's not clear when a decision has actually been made, so one person is ready to move on while another is still raising the issue (process unclarity).

In the individualistic culture of the United States, the tendency is to assume a dispute is interpersonal in nature, when much of the time it is an expression of group archetypes that is likely to continue regardless of changing individuals. If the group can take responsibility for holding those differences in a more conscious way, that lifts the burden off of individual shoulders.

Once you've discerned what the nature of the difficulty is, you are better positioned to figure out a good response.

*5. Engage the people with concerns in helping solve the problem.*

Part of making healthy group is creating an expectation that people with concerns will be actively engaged in helping solve the problem, rather than just announcing their upset and stopping there.

Some groups invent ways to formalize such expectations. For instance, N Street Cohousing in Davis, California insists that anyone blocking a proposal must attend meetings every two weeks for three months with a rotating committee including people who support the proposal, in an effort to work out a common solution.

As facilitator, once you understand the concerns that someone is bringing, you can ask them directly what would work for them that they think would also meet the needs others are expressing.

## Co-Facilitation

Co-facilitation is a good way for new facilitators to learn skills, and for experienced facilitators to share the load (an especially attractive option during multi-day meetings). However, please keep a few things in mind if you go down this path.

1. Only one person should be lead facilitator at a time, to avoid confusing the group and operating at odds with each other. The lead facilitator takes the active verbal role, calling on people and doing the more frequent summarizing.

2. The “sous-facilitator” can assist by scribing, hanging flipcharts, keeping time, or noticing things the lead facilitator is missing (and pointing them out in a low-key way such as passing a note or saying something privately during a break).

3. If the lead facilitator gets caught up in the content then the sous-facilitator can step in, but generally the switching between roles should happen at a natural break between sessions.

# Conclusion

There’s an old joke that circulates around New York City:  A young musician arrives in New York to audition for a place in the orchestra at Carnegie Hall.  Being in the big city for the first time, and feeling thoroughly lost, the musician, violin in hand, sees a taxi driver leaning against a parked cab, and asks him how to get to Carnegie Hall.  The cabbie takes in the musician and the violin case at a glance and declares, “Practice, practice, practice!”

# Further Resources

*Art of Facilitation: How to Create Group Synergy.* (1992) Dale Hunter, Anne Bailey & Bill Taylor. Good, solid nuts and bolts info on facilitation (including the importance of working on yourself and staying clear), though the short section on consensus is ill-informed. Fisher Books.

Co-Intelligence Institute. As just one sample from this wonderful site, the Co-Intelligence Practices page at http://www.co-intelligence.org/CI-Practices.html offers dozens of methods for dialogue and exploration.

*Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making.* (1996) Sam Kaner. Lots of handouts, information presented visually. Community at Work; 415-641-4840; www.communityatwork.com.

*Great Meetings! Great Results.* (2004) Dee Kelsey & Pam Plumb. Nice overview, very accessibly written. Hanson Park Press.

International Association of Facilitators (IAF). Basic Facilitation Skills booklet, available for free download from http://iaf-world.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3387. Comes from a hierarchical organizational paradigm, but nonetheless has useful information. 612-891-3541; iafoffice@igc.apc.org.

*Introduction to Consensus.* (2000) Beatrice Briggs. Pages 26-54 on facilitation. Also available in Spanish. Available from Community Bookshelf at FIC; 660-883-5545; store.ic.org.

*Manual for Group Facilitators.* (1977) Brian Auvine, et al. Clear writing, practical approach, covers many key topics. This book, originally published by the Center for Conflict Resolution, has been reprinted by the Fellowship for Intentional Community; 660-883-5545; fic@ic.org; consensusbooks.ic.org.

*Meeting Facilitation: The No-Magic Method.* Berit Lakey. The classic, excellent short treatment. Available for free download from http://trainingforchange.org/content/view/71/58/.

*Meeting of the Minds.* (2001) Daniel Iacofano. Nice overview of facilitation includes lovely multicultural illustrations, and a chapter on graphic recording (the art of creating great visual supplements to support a meeting). MIG Communications; 800-790-8444; www.meetingoftheminds.com.

Randy Schutt's fabulous website includes a dozen short papers (1-12 pages each) on cooperative decision-making from an activist perspective. See the list at www.vernalproject.org/RPapers.shtml. Contact him at PO Box 608867, Cleveland, OH 44108; rschutt@vernalproject.org.

*Resource Manual for a Living Revolution.* (1985) Coover, et al. from Movement for a New Society. New Society Publishers. Pages 61-79 on facilitation. Currently out of print, but worth tracking down a copy.

*Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups.* (1994) Roger Schwarz. Thorough, well thought out; very useful information if you don't mind the dry analytical style. Jossey-Bass Inc.; 415-433-1740; www.josseybass.com.

*Tree Bressen's website,* www.treegroup.info, has a bunch of free articles and tools, plus links to lots more resources.

## About the Author

Tree Bressen is an experienced facilitator working with cohousing and intentional communities, nonprofits, activists, schools, and a wide variety of other organizations. Her work is centered on helping groups put their ideals into action. Tree teaches lively, practical, informative workshops on consensus decision-making, meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, and related subjects, as well as serving as an outside facilitator for groups facing tough issues. Her website **www.treegroup.info** offers free articles, tools and resources.

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