Facilitation: Engaging Others in Meaningful Dialogue

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™ TOOLKIT

Facilitation is one of the most important skills for individuals who lead teams, manage projects, head up committees, or run departments. It supports others to reach decisions and discuss challenges in ways that are inclusive, empowering, and transparent. Facilitation requires us to abandon the "expert" model, and instead seek knowledge and expertise from others in the room.

This toolkit is a resource for any leaders planning to facilitate meetings, trainings, and project development or planning. It explores the values and mindset important for facilitating and offers practical tools and techniques to encourage collaboration.

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BELIEFS & VALUES

Facilitation is a process by which a "facilitator" provides **guidance and holds space for others to learn and communicate in order to reach a common understanding or agreement.** It is a practical technique to structure and improve how we collaborate.

Ingrid Bens, a leading expert in the field, argues the process of facilitation requires the following **intrinsic beliefs**:

- Groups make better decisions than any individual alone.

- Every participants' opinion is of equal value, regardless of rank or position.

- People are more committed to ideas and plans they have had a hand in creating.

- Team members can build relationships even in conflict and disagreement if given the right tools and support.

- In order to learn and engage, participants need to be addressed seriously and play a part in whatever they are doing.

These beliefs may not be universally held across organizations or teams, and a lack of clarity, particularly around the notions of equality and decision-making, can set facilitations up for failure. Teams should openly discuss and align on these concepts or any other values held regarding how they wish to work together before engaging in a facilitated meeting.

WHEN TO USE

Facilitation may not be applicable to every meeting or discussion. It is important to think about whether facilitation is called for in the situation and why you may or may not need this process in every context.

It is best used:

- When collaborative decision-making is required

- When team members need to inform one another

- When teams must come together to address challenges and obstacles.

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UNDERSTANDING POWER DYNAMICS

In every organization, team, or meeting, people hold different levels of formal power and informal power. **Formal power** is related to an individual's profession or title. **Informal power** is held by those who have levels of influence over others for a variety of reasons: their experience, force of personality or persuasion, unearned privilege from social identities like race, gender, age, or sexual orientation, or because they have strong relationships with decision-makers and peers. These two categories of power dynamics are at play during any meeting, both between participants and between the facilitator and participants.

WHO IS IN THE ROOM > Participant Dynamics

All participants walk into a training with individual identities that impact how they interact with each other and how they perceive their role or power in a group or situation. Trainers should be aware of how these identities may shift power and safety in a group, making some individuals less likely to share their opinions openly or more likely to talk over others. Using facilitation tools and techniques discussed in this toolkit help to address some of these dynamics, but you may also need to openly discuss power dynamics with the group and how it might impact the group's ability to collaborate effectively.

YOUR POSITION > The Role of a Facilitator

Whether a facilitator occupies a traditional or formal leadership position, their acting role guiding discussion does give contextual power, and how you position yourself (seated in the circle vs. standing in front of the room) may increase or decrease that power. We also bring individual social and cultural identities with into a room, some which may intensify the perceived power we hold and some which may diminish it. Professional qualifications and positions matter, but so do social identities like age, race, gender, and so on.

"Power — the capacity to get things done — is neither positive nor negative in and of itself. It's all about how we construct, reconstruct, and practice power."

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It's important to be aware of how your role impacts the group discussion, and if it interferes with your ability to intervene and guide the conversation when conflicts or challenges arise.

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ROLE OF FACILITATOR

A facilitator, unlike a presenter, is not delivering content. They are not subject matter experts, focusing on the "what". Rather, their focus is on the process, the "how" of the meeting, how issues are being discussed, decisions made, and tools used. Facilitator is a role that can be shared among team members or can be assigned to someone who specializes in these skills.

When facilitating, your role is to:

Help everyone get acquainted and feel welcome
Help build rapport and trust in the group; make time for introductions or sharing, even if it is simply a check in. Make sure to connect to each person individually.

Clarify purpose and desired outcomes of discussion
Explain the objectives of any session, whether a meeting or workshop. Allow participants to ask questions to make sure group is clear about where the discussion should go.

Help establish and maintain ground rules
Assist participants in creating norms for how they will work together and make decisions, and remind them stick to these throughout the facilitation if needed.

Draw out engagement from all participants
Make sure that every participant is contributing in some way, and change your methods as needed (written vs. oral responses, for example) in order to get more involvement.

Clarify communication between participants
Observe the dialogue between participants and if needed step in to clarify if there seems to be misunderstanding, or offer participants space to further clarify for themselves.

Keep meeting on task and within time limits
Act as timekeeper and keep to a schedule, respecting others' time and outside commitments. May require pausing or redirecting conversations to keep on track.

Manage difficult behaviors or high emotions
Respond appropriately to conflict or disagreement in discussion, helping prevent, diffuse, or acknowledge tensions and emotional reactions.

Provide safe space for creative ideas
Purposefully encourage a wide array of ideas and perspectives to open the dialogue in new paths or directions.

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CORE PRACTICES OF FACILITATING

Regardless of the design of the facilitation, all facilitators follow the same standard practices. These are the practical actions that facilitators take during a session in order to fulfill their role:

Stay Neutral on Content

As a facilitator, your job is to focus on the process and avoid the temptation of offering opinions about the topic under discussion. This does not mean neutral to shared values, particularly those relating to how we speak to and hold space for one another.

Observe

Focus on what you are hearing to make sure you understand what each participant is trying to get across and that they feel heard. This includes not only verbal cues, but unspoken signals as well. You also need to be aware of how your body language or voice may be perceived. Stay curious and alert.

Collect Ideas/Scribe

Keep track of both emerging ideas and final decisions, through scribing or assigning someone to take notes. Make clear and accurate summaries on a flipchart or electronic board so everyone can see the notes.

Stay Goal/Task Oriented

Help participants set time guidelines and objectives for each discussion and accomplish them. "Park" off-topic comments and suggestions on a separate "parking lot" sheet of paper to be dealt with later in order to dig into and prioritize the most important matters at hand.

Ask Effective Questions

This is essential part of good facilitation. The right questions engage participants in reflection, invite participation, clarify information, and probe for hidden points. This kind of strategic questioning allows you to delve past the symptoms to get at root causes.

Give and Receive Feedback

Periodically "hold up a mirror" to help the group make corrections. Also ask for and accept feedback about the facilitation you are providing. Take a gauge of energy levels, check in, and ask how the session could be more effective.

Paraphrase

Paraphrasing involves repeating or condensing what people say to make sure they know they are being heard, to let others hear their points a second time, and to identify key ideas. Always confirm that you accurately captured the idea.

Summarize

A great facilitator listens attentively to everything that is said, and then offers a concise and timely recap. Summarize when you want to revive a discussion that has ground to a halt, or to end a discussion. Similar to paraphrasing, summarizing pulls together long periods of discussion from multiple speakers. Make sure to pause and check that this accurately summed up the discussion before moving forward.

Synthesize Ideas

Part of facilitating group discussion is getting people to comment and build on each other's thoughts to ensure that the ideas recorded represent collective thinking. This builds consensus and commitment. Offer insights of areas of commonality, or ask individuals to add to other's ideas with the concept of "Yes, and."

Test Assumptions

It is important to bring the assumptions people are operating under out into the open, so that they are clearly understood by everyone. These assumptions may need to be challenged before a group can explore new ground.

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FACILITATION TECHNIQUES TO INVITE PARTICIPATION

Probably the most important aspect of facilitation is encouraging everyone to participate. This can be complicated by power dynamics, and also by personality and learning styles. Having a variety of tools and techniques to get responses and feedback is important so that those who don't feel comfortable speaking up in one way can contribute in another. Below are some of the most common facilitation techniques to increase participation. Each requires a substantial amount of time, so leave a minimum of 15-20 min for each.

ROUND ROBIN | If you want to hear from every participant, let them know that everyone will be speaking and have people go around in a circle. The prompt should be brief to ensure that everyone has time to answer.

PARTNER EXERCISES | If content is particularly sensitive or you have introverted/ quiet participants, you can help encourage vulnerability and openness by asking participants to split into pairs to share, and then come back and reflect on the process (rather than what they said) with the entire group. For a series of prompts, you can even organize it like speed-dating, with pairs rotating to share.

GROUP BREAKOUTS & HUDDLES | With groups of more than 6 people, it can be helpful to break participants into groups of 3-5 people and have them discuss a topic more deeply. Asking them to write their notes on a flipchart and share back with the large group can be a great way to check in on their learning if there aren't enough facilitators to join each group.

FOUR CORNERS | To help encourage participation from those who are less likely to speak up in group discussions, or to give people something to work on while others arrive or come back from a break, you can place prompts around the room on flipcharts and ask people to wander to each prompt and write a brief response.

STICKIES & INDEX CARDS | Another way to get feedback or ideas generated in a group without speaking. You can ask participants to write on sticky notes or index cards and shuffle or rearrange them as needed.

PARKING LOT | Having a flipchart "parking lot" is a great way to make sure you acknowledge and capture participants questions and ideas that you either don't have time or information to address, or those that are not completely relevant to the current discussion.

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HOW TO SCRIBE

Scribing is a facilitator's way to keep notes and record ideas that the group is working on. Though this may seem like a straightforward process, there are actually several important best practices to keep in mind:

BEST PRACTICES

DO

Keep a fairly good pace, pause when needed, and ask another prompt or clarification to keep the conversation going.

Use a dark color ink and write large and legibly (capital print letters can help).

Write down exactly what others say and check to clarify that you accurately added it.

Post flipchart pages when they are completed in clearly visible locations, particularly if you want to revisit the ideas generated.

DON'T

Talk and write at the same time. Your back will be to participants, your voice will be muffled.

Worry about spelling or grammar. It can slow the conversation down and intimidate people from speaking freely.

Write your personal interpretation of what participants said. If you aren't sure ask, "How should I write this down?"

Write in run-on sentences or paragraphs. Use bullets or other mapping tools (webs, etc.) to keep organized.

Another great option is to ask a participant to scribe for you. This is best done when the team is familiar with facilitation and participants know these best practices for scribing.

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THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

Effective questioning is a key technique any good facilitator must develop. Strategic questions invite participation, help participants clarify and create new ideas or decisions, and gauge investment or interest from individuals and the group as a whole.

There are many different types of questions. All questions fall into one of 3 main categories:

CLOSED QUESTIONS	OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS	RHETORICAL QUESTIONS
Those which result in a limited yes or no answer	Those which open dialogue and ask for elaboration	Those asked in order to create a dramatic effect or to make a point; have an implied answer
"Did you finish your project work?"	*"How are you feeling about the project?"*	*"You didn't get to finish the project work, did you?"*

Open-ended questions are the primary tools of facilitators because the goal of facilitation is to empower participants to find their own answers and create options or alternatives.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS > VARIATIONS

While closed and rhetorical questions are frequently used in presentation, open-ended questions are predominately used for facilitating because they are the best tool for engaging your participants and inviting a person to say more on a subject. Closed questions often begin with DO or IS/ARE. Open-ended questions, in contrast, often start with WHAT, HOW, WHY or COULD.

What else should I know?   **How would you go about it?**   **Why did you take that approach?**

There are three primary reasons you might ask questions during a training, and each use different types of open-ended questions.

CLARIFY   **GAUGE**   **GUIDE**

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CLARIFY | When you are looking to get more information about the situation:

- **Fact-finding questions** (*What experience have you had like that at work?*)
- **Feeling-finding questions** (*How did that process make you feel?*)
- **Elaborating questions** (*Can you tell me more about that?*)

GAUGE | When you want to get a sense of how strongly people feel about a particular situation or how many people feel similarly:

- **Quantity questions** (*How many people feel that way?*)
- **Scale questions** (*To what degree do you agree with that statement?*)
- **Best/least questions** (*What was the highlight from that session?*)

GUIDE | When you wish to expand the ideas in the room and insert alternatives to the group without offering your own thoughts:

- **Third party questions** (*Does anyone else have an idea about how to solve this?*)
- **Alternative questions** (*Can you think of another way to approach that?*)
- **Visioning questions** (*If time and money were no obstacle, what would you do?*)

DIRECTING QUESTIONS

You should also think about who you are directing questions to, either consciously or unconsciously.

If you want to stimulate the group's thinking as a whole	Allow people to respond voluntarily and avoid putting them on the spot. Ask open-ended questions to the group.
If you are hoping to get more participation from one person or seek an expert opinion	Ask the person a question directly, call on a name, or offer an alternative way to respond. You could also have everyone write on notecards/post-its and pass them in.
If you want to find out everyone's opinion on one question	Use a "round-robin" or ask questions using a technique that invites collective participation (see page 6).

If someone directs a question to you:

- Re-direct the question out to the group members.
- Defer any questions that are not pertinent to the current discussion and write them in a "parking lot."
- If the question is about content that you are not sure about, acknowledge it, write it down, and confirm answer with a subject matter expert at a later date if needed.

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PREVENTIONS & INTERVENTIONS

Facilitators use prevention and intervention techniques to help set participants up for success and navigate through conflicts or barriers that might prevent them from communicating clearly with one another and coming to a common understanding.

PREVENTIONS

You want to first do your best as a facilitator to help set everyone up in the best possible way. Preventions are practices facilitators **take at the beginning of a session to head off potential conflict based on common issues that groups face.**

PREVENTION PRACTICES

SET UP. How you set up the room itself can be very important. In-person trainings ideally have rooms that can easily move and change, so chairs in a circle or semi-circle could be clumped into groups if necessary. If PowerPoints are needed, make sure everyone in the room can also see the screen, and test the technology before the training starts. For virtual meetings, make sure everyone can log in ahead of time and see the screen, and that you have tested out the tools you will be using, particularly breakout tools.

NORMING. Norms are essential because the group as a whole determines what rules they choose to follow. Consensus and self-determination help when problems do occur, because everyone already agreed to certain behaviors (*"We had agreed to no cell phones during this training. Could everyone please put their phones away and on silent?"*).

MODELING. As a facilitator, you are the first example that participants will observe, so modeling things like co-sharing expertise, displaying vulnerability, and demonstrating open-mindedness and curiosity will help create a space for your participants to do the same.

SHARED SPACE. Think carefully about which techniques you want to use so that everyone in the group is able to share and engage with the material. By varying the techniques between written, partner, and group exercises, there is a greater chance that everyone in the group will feel heard since individuals all have different learning styles and levels of comfort sharing.

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INTERVENTIONS

There may be times during any facilitation where a facilitator may need to intervene to improve the functioning of the group. Interventions are **direct requests to alter behavior when it is disrupting the process of facilitation.** It is like holding up a mirror to participants so that they can see what they are doing and take steps to modify the issue.

Be conscious about over-intervening and be patient with the group as some issues naturally correct themselves. That said, if you find yourself in one of these situations, this tool should give some concrete ideas about how best to intervene.

REASONS TO INTERVENE

Some situations require a facilitator to step in. These aren't "good" or "bad" behaviors to discipline. Interventions are used in moments that are deviating from group norms and disruptive to the discussion or process. The five most common occurrences that may require intervening are:

1. Participants not paying attention (side conversation or use of phone)

2. Power dynamics causing participant stress responses (angry outbursts or shutting down)

3. Participants interrupting, ignoring, or talking over one another

4. Participants becoming overly emotional or vulnerable

5. Discussion is off-track or stuck

A NOTE ABOUT EMOTIONAL SHARING

In order to create a psychologically safe space that encourages people to speak up and be vulnerable, it is important to treat emotional moments with special care. If someone shares in such a way that it begins to take the discussion off track, or that you worry about their well-being, you may need to intervene. However, keep in mind:

DO

Validate the person's feeling and thank them for sharing.

"Wow, Trey, it's clear that made a profound impact on you. Thank you for having the courage to share that with us."

Gently redirect the group back to the discussion. Potentially follow up with person afterward.

DON'T

Ignore it or talk around it
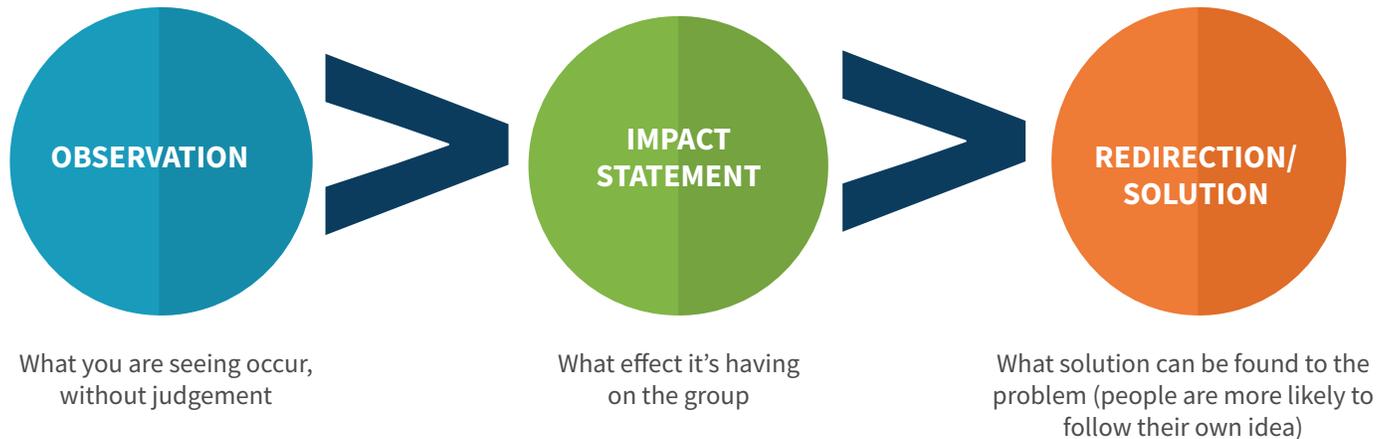
Crack a joke to "lighten the mood"

Offer a solution or advice to fix their situation

Probe into their situation with more questions

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STEPS OF AN INTERVENTION

In order to intervene it is important to carefully word your statements. Do your best to avoid judgement and your interpretations of why you are seeing that behavior. Assume positive intent whenever possible.

Follow this basic structure:

OBSERVATION > **IMPACT STATEMENT** > **REDIRECTION/ SOLUTION**

What you are seeing occur, without judgement | What effect it's having on the group | What solution can be found to the problem (people are more likely to follow their own idea)

EXAMPLES:

"I'm noticing that certain people have already shared a lot of ideas. I'm concerned that we won't have time to hear from everyone else. How could we best address this?"

"Susan, I noticed that you have had to take several calls. I'm concerned that we aren't benefiting from your ideas. Is there something we can do to make sure we get your thoughts on this?"

"It seems like everyone is low on energy and getting distracted from the discussion. Let's take a 5 min break. Does that work for everyone?"

Think about *when* to intervene. Be sensitive to pride and power dynamics that may influence individual's receptivity to feedback. You may want to approach individuals privately during breaks or breakout exercises if the behavior is specific to them. Some situations are universal, in which case you may wish to deliberately keep it general and raise it as a group concern to brainstorm a solution.

Finally, there are some situations when a facilitator may want to resolve an issue quickly and suggest their own solution, as in the third example above. Just make sure to check in that your solution is acceptable to the participants before moving on.

Real conflict and tension is complicated, and interventions take time. They may even require additional follow up. However, taking time to hold a thorough intervention is often more beneficial and productive than ignoring the issue to "get through the discussion."

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REFERENCES

Bens, Ingrid. Facilitating with Ease!, Core Skills for Facilitators, Team Leaders and Members, Managers, Consultants, and Trainers. San Francisco: Jossey Bass; 2012.

Peavey, Fran. Strategic Questioning Manual. The Change Agency online publication: 2009

ADDITIONAL PCP RESOURCES

For more specific process tools on how to help participants make decisions, check out our **Decision Making Toolkit.**

For support with delivering content through trainings or presentations, see our **Training Toolkit.**

Delve into the key skills of active listening, observation, inquiry, and reaction in our **Active Listening Toolkit.**

COMPLETE LIST OF RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP TOOLKITS

Relational Leadership™ Framework	Conflict Transformation Toolkit	Leadership Transitions Toolkit
Team Starter Kit	Teaming Toolkit	Active Listening Toolkit
Team & Project Launch Toolkit	Meeting Management Toolkit	Coaching Toolkit
Narrative Leadership Toolkit	Team Building Toolkit	Training Toolkit
Identity Toolkit	Collaborative Decision Making Toolkit	Change Framework Toolkit
Equity Toolkit	Facilitation Toolkit	Decision Makers Toolkit
Resilience Toolkit	Team Effectiveness Toolkit	

ADVOCACY PROJECT RESOURCES

Communications Strategy	Community Convening	Action Planning
Community Inventory	Project Sustainability	Health Equity & Social Determinants of Health

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