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Facilitation Techniques for Group Discussions

Facilitators often seek creative ways to engage people in productive conversations that allow for all group members to express themselves. Facilitators can adapt the techniques outlined here for meetings that are held in-person or online. These techniques can be modified or combined to suit a group's needs.

Brainstorming – A Process for Energizing Creativity <i>In-Person or Online</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
Group members list as many ideas as possible as quickly as possible without stopping to discuss or evaluate the ideas. The point is to get quantity over quality and evaluate ideas later. Write down all ideas, no matter how far-fetched. Encourage group members to build upon one another's ideas. The ideas are captured in a visual manner so that all group members can see them as they are recorded, such as on a flip chart or whiteboard with a marker, or, if online, in a virtual whiteboard or an online document.	Brainstorming is helpful when a group is initiating a planning process for a project or idea. The process generates a lot of ideas and sparks creative thinking. It might also be helpful if a group desires to build some creative energy.	The facilitator should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the concepts of brainstorming to the group • Clearly define why the group is brainstorming; • Capture the ideas as they are being generated (or ask someone else to write down the ideas) • Remind group members not to evaluate if they begin to do so during the brainstorming process

Individual Writing – A Process to Gather Thoughts <i>In-Person or Online</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
Some group members prefer to process thoughts internally before discussing an idea or issue. Providing an opportunity to jot down thoughts on an index card, slip of paper, or post it note allows for this to happen. This technique can happen prior to brainstorming, pairing off, small group discussions, or round robin and is often beneficial for introverts whether in person or online.	Individual writing is helpful when there are quiet people in the group. In addition, if a group has many diverse opinions, a facilitator can have people jot down their thoughts and then randomly pass them for others to read aloud.	The facilitator should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a clear question or direction on the topic to write about; • Provide guidance as group members share what they have written; • Collect and categorize post-it notes if there is a desire to categorize ideas; check with the group.



Pairing Off – A Process for Deeper Discussions <i>In-Person or Online</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
When people need to talk something through, pairing off to take turns listening to each other is a good way to make sure everyone is heard. Either assign or have people choose a talking partner and discuss a question or topic. This can be a useful first step in dealing with a difficult issue, since people are more ready to listen once they have had a chance to speak their mind. For online Zoom meetings, use breakout rooms for this process.	Pairing off is helpful when a group is slow to start a discussion and needs to build some energy or when the group is discussing a difficult issue and the facilitator would like to be sure everyone has a chance to express thoughts and opinions.	The facilitator should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist people with finding a partner; • Provide a clear question or direction on the topic to discuss; • Keep track of time and remind partners when to switch from the first to the second person; • Provide guidance as group members share out from their conversations.

Small Groups – A Process to Discuss More in Less Time <i>In-Person or Online</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
Forming small groups can be good for exploring ideas and discussing them in greater detail. Small groups allow everyone to participate more than would be possible in large group discussions. Small group discussions should have one group member serve as a facilitator to help be sure all people have a chance to speak, and a recorder/reporter to bring information back to the large group. Have someone from each small group give a summary report on the discussion.	Breaking into small groups is helpful when a group has more topics to cover than can be dealt with in the time available or when a topic has many elements to consider. Each small group can produce a report on the discussion. If a group breaks into three small groups for 15 minutes each, it is a way to have 45 minutes of deep discussion on a topic.	The facilitator should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the decision about whether to assign people to small groups or let them choose their small group; • Provide a clear question or direction on the topic to discuss; • Ask the small group to assign someone to help make sure everyone has a chance to speak and someone to take notes and report to the whole group; • Help the small groups keep track of time as they have discussions.

Round Robin – A Process to Hear Every Voice <i>In-Person or Online</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
With round robin, go around the group and provide an opportunity for each person to speak. This can be done in rounds if there are multiple responses to share. People can pass if they have no comment. This process can bog down in large groups, so facilitators can break into small groups with sharing back.	Round robin is helpful if group members are quiet, one person is dominating, or the group needs to check for clear consensus.	The facilitator should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a clear question for response; • Use with individual writing, if appropriate; • Call on each person in an inviting fashion and remain neutral about comments; • Remind people to keep responses brief.



Straw Polls – A Initial Step Toward Consensus Decision-Making | *In-Person or Online*

What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator’s role?
<p>A straw poll provides each person in a group with two to four “votes” to distribute among choices on a list. The process helps get a sense of the group without making a final decision by encouraging people to support more than one idea. The number of votes for each person depends on the size of the group; the larger the group and the longer the list, the more votes per person. After placing the votes, the group can eliminate items with little or no support and focus discussion on the remaining options. Votes are often distributed using color dot stickers or by simply having people in the group raise their hands and the facilitator recording a hatch mark per person by the list items. An option in online Zoom meetings is use the whiteboard to list items, allow meeting participants to annotate, and use the stamp tool to add their votes to items of choice.</p>	<p>A straw poll is useful early in a decision-making process when a group has too many items to consider or discuss and some of them might need to be eliminated. The straw poll provides a good visual representation of where the group stands on a topic. After the straw poll, the group can do further discussion on items that have the most buy-in from group members.</p>	<p>The facilitator should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a clear list of options from which the group can make their choices; • Be certain there is a shared understanding of what the items on the list mean; • Determine how many “votes” each group member will have to distribute among the items; • Check for consensus with the group that is it ok to eliminate items that received few votes; • Check for consensus with the group about the items that rose to the top for further discussion; • Help the group jointly design a process to discuss the items that rose to the top.

Developing Criteria – A Process to Focus on Interests | *In-Person or Online*

What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator’s role?
<p>Developing criteria involves having the group consider interests that inform the choice from a number of options. The facilitator asks the group to consider things like resources and cost, time and capacity, and other specific interests. The group should generate five or six criteria and come to agreement on what they mean and the decision to adopt them for the decision-making. Criteria can be used to immediately eliminate items and then the group can move on to a straw poll, group discussions, or other process for items that do meet criteria.</p>	<p>When a group is trying to make a decision from a number of options with specific objectives or interests in mind, it can be helpful to articulate decision-making criteria. If the group has a structure that uses a voting process rather than consensus decision-making, developing criteria can still be a helpful way to hold a discussion prior to an official vote.</p>	<p>The facilitator should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear directions on developing criteria by suggesting consideration of cost, time required, specific interests; • Write the criteria in a place that all group members can see them; • Work with the group members to create a shared understanding of the criteria; • Check with the group for consensus on the criteria.



Fist-to-Five – A Process to Check for Consensus <i>In-Person</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
<p>Using fist-to-five, the facilitator clearly defines a decision the group is about to make and then asks group members to hold up a hand to indicate how strongly they support the decision. The number of fingers works like a scale as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fist (0) means I cannot support at all and would stand in the way of the decision. • One finger (1) means I VERY weakly support but might be able to live with it. • Two fingers (2) mean I somewhat support and can live with it. • Three fingers (3) mean I support the idea and could move forward either way. • Four fingers (4) mean I strongly support and would support the idea without second thoughts. • Five fingers (5) mean I am all in and completely support. <p>This process works best in person.</p>	<p>Fist-to-five is useful when group members are comfortable being transparent with one another about their opinions and can be used when the group has been discussing ideas and wants to get a visual of where the group stands in moving toward a specific decision. If the result shows more people with fist, one finger or two fingers, the group probably needs further discussion before making a decision. If more people show three, four, or five fingers, no one indicates that they will stand in the way of consensus, the group is closer to making a decision that will have full buy-in.</p>	<p>The facilitator should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a clear statement of what people are using fist-to-five for and then check for shared understanding around that statement; • Clarify understanding of what each hand signal means; • Encourage transparency; • Work with the group to design next steps for the discussion or decision based on the result of the fist-to-five process.

Evaluation – A Process to Improve Meetings <i>In-Person or Online</i>		
What is it?	When to use it?	What is the facilitator's role?
<p>At the conclusion of a meeting, a project, or an event, group members can take a few minutes to list what went well and what they would change in the future. This process can be done with a flip chart and columns with headings “Positive, Negative, and Change.” The facilitator lists comments in the appropriate column without responding to the comments. The group might also create specific questions to address for evaluation.</p>	<p>Evaluation is helpful for all meetings and events, so that group members can share in airing issues and considering ways to resolve them for future meetings and events. Used regularly, the process can result in transparency and a comfort level with discussing group issues.</p>	<p>The facilitator should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage transparency as people evaluate the meeting or event; • Capture feedback using the exact words of the person speaking and in a manner that all can see; • Remain neutral and not respond to feedback whether it is positive or negative; • After capturing, provide guidance to group members on addressing suggestions.

