Process: The Basics

A Facilitator’s Responsibilities

A facilitator:

* influences what topics will be discussed in a meeting, how these topics will be discussed, and how decisions will be made.
* helps everyone in the group reach the best outcome possible in the time available.
* maintains a positive and constructive meeting environment.

A facilitator (usually) does not:

* make decisions for the group.
* make suggestions or share opinions about an agenda item. For instance, the facilitator does not respond directly to a meeting participant with a comment like “I disagree with your proposal to host a workshop next week.”

If you have a lot to say don’t facilitate. And if you really need to speak then make it clear that you’re speaking as a participant in the meeting and not as the facilitator. It’s usually wise to not take advantage of your power as a facilitator and automatically put yourself at the front of the speaking order or anything like that either. Facilitators lose the trust of the group if they consistently manipulate the meeting to further a personal agenda.

Ingredients of a Good Meeting

Great facilitation is not the magic bullet that will solve all your group’s problems. Nor is the facilitator solely responsible for the success or failure of a meeting.

This is because well-run meetings depend upon many factors, including:

* a facilitator with decent social and emotional intelligence.
* an experienced facilitator;
* a facilitator who understands the group they’re facilitating. The facilitator should know the group’s culture and decision-making process, as well as the personalities of the members (Who are the influential people? Who speaks out of turn? Who analyzes possible proposals to the bitter death but really doesn’t mind what the group decides?)
* helpful participants who assist the facilitator. These helpful participants will typically stick to the topic, abide by the ground rules, and encourage others to do the same. Helpful participants will also suggest proposals when it’s appropriate to do so. Helpful participants usually do not defiantly challenge the facilitator’s decisions during the meeting itself (unless absolutely warranted). Instead, these participants will share their opinions before the meeting, by, for instance, reviewing and giving feedback on any proposed meeting agenda. These kinds of people usually have facilitation experience.
* participants who understand and abide by the group’s culture and decision-making process - which usually means the group has worked together for a while.

Rest assured - if the meeting you facilitate tanks then it’s probably not just your fault.

What is Social and Emotional Intelligence?

Social and emotional intelligence refers to “the ability to monitor one’s own and other’s feelings and emotions, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

There are four main components of social and emotional intelligence.[[2]](#endnote-2) They are:

* Self awareness: the ability to assess your own feelings and determine what is causing those feelings. You are exercising self awareness when you notice you feel anxious while facilitating a conflict within a group.
* Self regulation: the ability to moderate your behavior. You are self-regulating yourself if you consciously mask your strong feelings of anger when a participant criticizes you for cutting off debate on a topic.
* Social awareness: the ability to gauge and understand the causes of other people’s emotions. You are being socially aware if you can tell that the majority of meeting participants are feeling bored and disinterested because the group is spending too long talking about the trivial topic.
* Social influence: the ability to influence the emotions of other people to achieve your goals. You are wielding social influence when you affect how other people are feeling through your own behavior, such as your approach to dealing with conflict.

Social and emotional intelligence can be learned.

Five Steps To Take Before Each Meeting

Successful meetings depend upon preparation. Facilitators are responsible for taking some or all of the following pre-meeting actions – and if the facilitator is not taking these actions then someone in your group should be.

1. Decide if you actually need a meeting.

2. Identify and choose to abide by the group’s decision-making structure.

* Some common decision making structures used by activist and advocacy groups include:
* Consensus. Everyone is comfortable with the decision.
* Modified consensus. The group strives for consensus. If consensus can’t be reached the group drops down to securing a certain percentage of support, like consensus minus 1 or 80%.
* Voting. The percentage of votes needed to approve a decision can vary from 51% and up.
* 1 or 2 people hold the power. This is fairly typical in hierarchical decision-making environments, such as most large non-profit organizations.

Regardless of the decision-making structure, as a facilitator, your job is to a) know the group’s decision making structure, b) make this power arrangement clear to the participants at the start of the meeting (if it’s not obvious) and c) structure the meeting accordingly.

3. Decide who needs to participate in the decision.

* Not only do you need to think through how a decision is made, but you also need to identify who (or what group or committee) needs to make that decision.

4. Know and then try to respect the group’s culture and norms around discussing issues and making decisions.

* There’s more to decision-making than just knowing a group’s official decision-making process. As a facilitator it’s your job to observe meetings carefully and ask people questions in order to help them identify a group’s assumed customs.
* For instance, some groups have an elaborate hand signaling system for making decisions using the consensus model, including twinkling fingers in the air (I’m into it), forming a cross with their forearms (I’m really not into it), or using the “[fist to five](http://www.kipbs.org/new_kipbs/fsi/Files/ActFist5.pdf)” process to register their degree of support for a proposal. Other groups prefer to informally discuss a topic until everyone feels comfortable with the outcome.

Some groups like to make decisions in advance. Many community and labor groups make decisions by having staff interview representatives from key groups and craft proposals based upon these interviews. The proposal is usually developed, adapted, and consented upon prior to the meeting. Approval of the decision at the meeting is often just a formality. Many direct action organizing groups would see this process as undemocratic, preferring for decisions to be introduced, debated and decided in a face-to-face setting.

Some groups prefer to have agenda items introduced and approved by a group or committee’s co-chairs prior to the meeting. Other groups are comfortable with new agenda items being introduced at the start of the meeting.

Some groups have a culture where the facilitator had a direct, controlling approach, often informing participants about the path forward. Other groups prefer loose or soft intervention, where the facilitator rarely intervenes and instead suggests ways for the group to move forward. A more directive approach is more often used in scenarios where participants don’t have a common understand of their process and culture, such as in situations where people don’t know each other, have limited experience in facilitator, or haven’t worked together before. Different levels of intervention might be needed for different agenda topics.

The variations on meeting culture are endless. The most important thing to remember is that you, the facilitator, need to know and respect the group’s meeting culture.

5. Build the agenda.

* Here’s a seven-step process for building a meeting agenda.

1. Communicate with members beforehand and have them identify agenda items. For regular meetings, sending around a request for agenda items to participants via email is usually sufficient.

2. Send your proposed agenda around to all members prior to the meeting so they can give feedback.

3. Adjust the agenda based on the feedback you receive from group members.

* + Don’t put too many topics into an agenda; topics usually take longer than you think, and everyone’s happy when you finish early.

4. Prepare people to speak about their topic. Ask them to do their research, prepare for their presentation (if they’re giving one), bring handouts and be ready to answer questions. It sucks to have a decision delayed because people didn’t have the information they needed to make a decision.

5. Do reminder calls and emails. It’s wise to do a final reminder email the day before the meeting.

6. Organize logistics. Choose a quiet room (bars and cafes are not good places for meetings). Collect, order and confirm any AV equipment, laptops, connector cords, PowerPoint presentations (save in different formats and put on a USB stick) extension cords, markers, whiteboards, and flip chart paper.

7. Review who is coming to the meeting and take appropriate action. Are people quiet? Then maybe structure sections of the meeting so people talk to their neighbor or in small groups. Is this a meeting of a supervisor and his or her staff? Is there a way to structure to the meeting to allow for anonymous feedback? Are there disrupters? Perhaps you could bring a backup facilitator. You could also make sure to set ground rules, and two of those ground rules could be a) no interrupting others and b) make sure everyone has a chance to voice their opinion. You could even have a one-on-one conversation with the problem person, so you can hear their viewpoint and ask for commitment to the meeting’s ground rules.

8. Come early to make sure all the technical equipment works, the chairs and tables are in the right place, and you have all the materials you need, such as flip chart paper, pens, and markers. I like to arrive at least 20 minutes before the meeting is about to begin.

A Typical Agenda

* Introductions
* A review of the agenda
* Assign roles (e.g., note taker, stack)
* Establish ground rules
* One or two non-controversial quick and easy topics.
* Start with the most important agenda topic and then move to the next most important agenda topic and so on.
* Review decisions and next steps
* Set next meeting.

Ground Rules

Ground rules are useful for long meetings, like a day-long retreat. Ground rules can also be useful where there is no clear established meeting culture, you anticipate conflict, difficult behavior, or strong emotions, or you’re facilitating meetings where people don’t know each other or haven’t worked together before.

If you’re going to take the time to establish ground rules then make sure to enforce them. For instance, if someone is consistently interrupting other participants you could say, “we agreed we wouldn’t interrupt each other. Remember we wrote that down?” You then point to ground rules written on flip chart paper and posted on a nearby wall. “Can we all try and stick to these rules please?”

Some ground rules include:

* Step up / step back. “People who talk a lot check yourself, people who don’t speak up if you have something to say.”
* Stretch yourself. “Explore new ideas, take risks.”
* Mine for understanding. “Ask questions if you don’t understand or disagree with someone.”
* We are all better than the worst things we say or do. “It is okay to make mistakes, just be ready to hear about it and learn from it.”
* No interrupting other people.
* Commit yourself to learn.
* Start and end on time.
* Don’t disrupt the meeting. “If you have to take a phone call keep your cell on vibrate and walk outside before you answer it.”
* Respect the opinions of others. “It doesn’t mean you have to agree with them, but it does help if you still behave in a respectful manner even if you don’t see eye-to-eye.”
* Listen to your body. “Take breaks when you need them; you don’t have to ask.”
* Expect unfinished business. “We won’t cover everything and we can’t answer all questions completely.”
* Listen carefully.
* Do your part to make this meeting successful for you and others.
* Confidentiality. “You keep names and identifying features within the confines of the meeting space, but you’re encouraged to share the lessons-learned far and wide.”

Choose ground rules to suit the occasion. Some of these ground rules (such as “confidentiality”, “respect the opinions of others”, and “stretch yourself”) are more for those situations where the tension is sky high, such as interpersonal conflict or tackling organizational racism. Other ground rules are more for meetings that have a heavy focus on learning, such as “commit yourself to learn”, and “make mistakes.” And then there are the ground rules for tackling specific group problems or people, like “step up/step back” which is often used to deal with people who talk too much.

Introductions and Ice-Breakers

There are countless introductions and ice-breakers out there. We will start with the formal ice breakers and move gradually into the more creative exercises.

Some meetings (such as formal meetings with older professionals) necessitate more traditional introductions, where people don’t leave their seats, and introductory questions are explicitly geared to soliciting practical information that serves the purpose of the meeting. Here’s a few:

A Go Around (5 Minutes+)

A go around is where people go around the room and introduce themselves. If often helps for the facilitator to initiate this go around because then you can model what kind of information you want people to share, and how long they should talk. For short meetings with 15 or more people I usually stick to having people say their name and what group they’re with. People usually want to know what other people and/or organizations are in attendance.

Small Groups (5 Minutes +)

The facilitator asks people to break into groups of two (or three) and each spend one or more minutes talking about themselves to their group members. Typically, facilitators will suggest questions that each person should answer, such as what your name is, or why did you come. A variation of this is to have people break into groups of two and have one person interview the other member, and then switch.

Then there are a wide variety of more creative introductions that can yield additional purposes, such as waking people up and creating a tone of fun and openness. Here’s some examples:

Name Game Shuffle (5 Minutes)

Participants walk freely around the room. The facilitator explains that she is going to call out a category and that when she does the group is going to clump into groups based on that category. For instance, if the category is footwear then folks who are wearing socks might choose to clump together and folks in bare feet might choose to clump together. This activity is done silently. It is also done quickly. The facilitator can create urgency by speaking loudly and rapidly. Once people are in their groups, the facilitator asks people to QUICKLY learn each other's names. The facilitator calls out a series of categories. Good categories include "hair style," "height," "what you are wearing on your feet”, “the clothing you are wearing on your legs”, “your tops”, “jewelry”, and "eye color". After a few rounds the facilitator asks everyone to introduce themselves to people whose names they don't know yet. The facilitator then has people form a big circle. Once in that circle, the facilitator asks if anyone thinks they can name everyone else in the group. Someone steps forward. The facilitator asks the rest of the group to be ready to help this person along if they need it by "whispering" the names of people this person can’t remember.

What’s True For Me (5 Minutes+)

Have people walk freely around the room. It’s wise to have the facilitator walk around the room as well. Tell participants that we are going to take turns stopping and calling out statements that are true for us. When we hear a statement then the rest of us of us are going to stand close to this person if that statement is also true for us, and further away if the statement is less true for us or maybe not true at all. Get creative. It’s best to have the facilitator start this exercise off by calling out two or three statements that are true for them. That way the participants get the feel of the exercise by observing you a) stop and then wait for everyone else to stop, b) say your statement, c) wait a few seconds for everyone to get into position, and then d) a few more seconds while everyone looks around and sees where people are standing, and then e) start walking around the room again, thereby giving else permission to walk freely and silently around the room as well. Repeat this process until the energy is high. The kind of statements you – the facilitator – share at the start of this game sets the tone for the rest of the group. If you reveal intimate truths that you typically share with friends (e.g., “I suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome”) then the group might reciprocate - provided the trust level in the room has been established. If you stick to work topics (“I’m overworked”) then the group will follow your lead.

The theater of the oppressed school of facilitation has a huge and wonderful array of introductory exercises. Here are a few:

Magnets (3-5 Minutes)

Participants are asked to walk around room. The facilitator asks them to close their eyes and keep walking. First, participants are asked to act like magnets that repel; whenever they touch another person they move away from them quickly. After a few minutes, participants are asked to be magnets that attract; whenever they touch another person they stick with them. The game continues until everyone is stuck to each other. To ensure safety, the facilitator should pull out enough people from the group so they can act as guides, pulling people away from danger, such as stairs.

Yes Let’s (3-5 Minutes)

Walking around the room, people take turns calling out what they want people to do i.e. “Lets climb a tree” then everyone says “Yes lets climb a tree!” and pretends to climb a tree until another person calls out another invitation. This games works best if it’s done very quickly with no more than 30 seconds dedicated to each action.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)