Facilitating meetings

A guide to making your meetings effective, inclusive and enjoyable.

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Introduction

Meetings have the potential to be inspiring! They provide a space where people come together for a common purpose – whether that's making decisions, exploring a shared problem or providing mutual support. Ideally, everyone leaves a meeting feeling heard, understood and positive about the group and any plans or decisions you have made.

However, most of us have experienced meetings that are less than ideal! They drag on and on, with tempers running high, people talking over each other and no decisions being made... Or maybe one person dominates the meeting, leaving everyone else to wonder why they even turned up...

Facilitation is about taking responsibility for making meetings as easy and effective as possible. This guide explores the concept of facilitation and how it can help in creating positive and successful meetings.

We have particularly focused on facilitation of consensus decision making. Consensus a process that involves everyone who is fundamentally affected by a decision. The aim is to reach an agreement they can all support. However, the facilitation tips in this guide apply to any meeting that you want to be inclusive and effective.

You can find out more about consensus decision making from our various consensus guides. For a discussion of techniques used in facilitation see our guide *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops*.

What is facilitation?

Meeting facilitation combines a series of roles and tasks. For example: keeping people on topic; listening carefully to what everyone is saying so no-one's points get lost; suggesting techniques for creative problem-solving; and supporting the group to address a conflict if it arises.

Sometimes facilitation is mainly done by one person (the facilitator) who guides the discussion to help the group meet its goals. It's also useful to think in terms of shared facilitation, with everyone sharing the responsibility for ensuring a meeting is productive and participatory.

A facilitator needs to be aware of both the content of the meeting (what people are talking about) and the process (*how* the conversations are happening). This awareness helps a facilitator come up with effective ideas for how to help the discussion move forward.

Was the meeting successful?

Meetings are often the space in which the members of a group get tasks done: sharing information, reaching decisions and getting on with jobs. But a good meeting doesn't only get work done. Another important function of meetings is maintaining the group by involving, supporting and empowering the participants. This can help build a sense of community and connection to fellow group members, resulting in a strong group with high levels of enthusiasm for achieving your shared aims.

It is common for groups to over-focus on tasks, at the expense of maintaining the group community. This can be especially the case if the group is facing an urgent situation, or they have a heavy workload. However, groups usually get more done in the long run when they pay attention to people, relationships and group dynamics as well.

Some questions to ask yourselves

Tasks – What got done? What will change as a result of the meeting (e.g. what action points were taken on, what decisions were made, what problems were solved?)

Maintenance – *How* did it get done? How did people feel and how will this affect how they feel about the group? (E.g.: Did the meeting make good use of the pooled talents? Did everyone feel able to share their views? Was it enjoyable? Were conflicts addressed?)

Core facilitation tasks

Facilitation can involve a long list of possible tasks, depending on the situation. This list of core tasks will be relevant to most meetings:

- ✔ Helping the group decide on a realistic agenda and time-frame for the meeting.

- ✔ Keeping the meeting focussed on one item at a time until the issue is resolved.

- ✔ Regulating the flow of discussion, e.g. drawing out quiet people, or those with the most relevant experience.

- ✔ Clarifying and summarising points, checking for agreement in order to make clear decisions.

- ✔ Helping the group address conflict when it arises, and to explore different needs in order to come up with a well-supported decision.

- ✔ Introducing facilitation tools, if appropriate. E.g. ideastorms to help people come up with creative ideas, small group conversations to increase participation.

- ✔ Keeping the meeting to time.

- ✔ Ensuring that a written record is made of any action points and decisions agreed at the meeting.

Facilitating or chairing?

Superficially a facilitator fills a role similar to that of the traditional chairperson. There are, however, important differences:

- ✗ A facilitator never "directs" the group without its consent.

- ✗ At no time does the facilitator make decisions for the group or take on functions which are the responsibility of the group as a whole;

- ✗ A good facilitator stays neutral and helps the members of the meeting be aware that it is their business that is being conducted. The success of the meeting is the shared responsibility of the whole group. The facilitator needs to be aware of this and always get the group's agreement before using facilitation techniques or activities.

Learning to facilitate?

Facilitation doesn't have to be done by experts! It is a skill that can be learnt by reflecting on your own experience of meetings and observing other facilitators. Learn from mistakes, from bad meetings as well as good ones. If the role of facilitator is rotated amongst group members, several people can develop these skills. It is well worth running some training, aside from normal meeting times, to practice facilitation skills. These skills are not only useful in group meetings but also in informal settings, at work and at home.

You can learn a lot by reflecting on what happens in different meetings. You'll get the most accurate information on this if you evaluate together regularly. Noticing people's behaviour also gives you some clues. When do people look animated and engaged? When do lots of people participate, and when do you hear the same voices a lot? If a lot of comments are not related to the agenda item, why might that be?

Reflection should give you a great starting point for understanding how facilitation can help your meetings . It is also important to just try things out! Start by facilitating smaller meetings with less challenging topics. Be ready to ask for feedback about different people's experience.

Helpful skills and qualities

There are a number of skills and qualities that people commonly look for in their meeting facilitators. This isn't to say that you have to have all of these skills to be able to facilitate – every facilitator brings their own unique mix to the meeting, and rotating facilitators helps bring some balance to your meetings.

Respect for all participants and genuine interest in what each individual has to offer.

Good listening skills, including using questions to be able to understand everyone's viewpoint clearly.

Confidence in the ability of the group to work together and find solutions.

Assertiveness: knowing when to intervene decisively and give some direction to the meeting.

Paying attention: paying attention to both the content of the discussion and the process. How are people feeling? What exactly are the issues?

Neutrality on the issues discussed. Trust in the facilitators is dependent on the group being sure that they are not deliberately or unconsciously manipulating the meeting towards a particular outcome.

Options for staying neutral in facilitator role

- Make it clear when you're expressing your own opinion and when you're intervening as the facilitator.
- Trust that someone else will express your thoughts or feelings on the issue. Or even explain your views to someone in advance of the meeting, and ask them to represent you.
- Step out of role and let someone else facilitate.

Making the meeting work for different people

The way that a meeting is conducted will have a big impact on each person's ability to actually engage and participate. As a facilitator it can be easy to run a meeting for 'people like you' or 'people like the mainstream culture of your group' (especially if those things are the same!) However, we all vary in things like how we like to take in information, what makes it easy for us to voice our views and needs, what will make us comfortable in the space etc.

Accessibility requirements

As a facilitator, it is especially important to find out about, and respect, people's access requirements. These are the things a person needs to have in place in order to participate fully in the meeting. The best way to find out how to make the meeting work for people is to invite everyone to give you information about their accessibility requirements in advance. You may also get feedback during the meeting, or notice that things aren't working for someone. In this instance, give yourself a moment to re-think your activities, and chat to the people concerned where possible!

Preferences

In addition, we all have preferences about how to participate in meetings. Do we prefer small groups or large ones? How much time do we need to reflect before deciding what we think? How many breaks do we need? When something is not our preference, it is possible to stretch ourselves and manage for a while. As a facilitator, building in lots of variety of activities will help balance out who gets to do things in their preferred way. Ideally, everyone gets to find things easy and feel comfortable some of the time!

Power dynamics

Ideally, everyone has a fair say in decisions which fundamentally affect them. However, differences in power mean that, in reality, certain individuals and perspectives get heard more than others. This may be about someone's confidence to voice their opinions in a particular space.

It is important to be aware that it is also about how different people and perspectives are *received* by others.

As a facilitator, you can take some steps towards addressing power dynamics by using exercises that help equalise participation, e.g. reflection time in small groups, go-rounds. Your job does not end here, however! Notice differences in who contributes, and what response different people get. Make extra space for messages that aren't getting through and be assertive if necessary to help people listen.

Different roles to help meetings work

Making a meeting work involves a lot of different tasks, and these can be split up between different people, especially in a large or challenging meeting.

This could involve splitting the main facilitation role between two or more co-facilitators. These people can take turns and support each other. This is useful if one facilitator needs to step out of their role to take part in the discussion, have a break or when back-up is needed in cases of tension, conflict or confusion. Four ears hear better than two, so co-facilitators are also useful to check understanding of what is being said.

In addition, you can create a host of additional roles to ease the pressure on the main facilitators:

Taking hands: one person can take on the job of keeping track of whose turn it is to speak next, and of giving time limits to speakers, if appropriate.

Vibes-watching: someone not actively facilitating can pay more attention to the emotional atmosphere of the meeting and watch out for individual members being affected. In situations of conflict and distress the vibes-watcher will intervene, for example by taking on the role of an intermediary, by taking time out with someone to listen to their concerns or suggesting breaks and tools to improve the atmosphere of the meeting. Good vibes-watchers are able to sense underlying feelings by listening carefully and being aware of body language.

The timekeeper draws attention to the agreed time frame for the meeting and keeps the group to it, negotiating extensions for particular agenda items, or for the meeting as a whole, if needed.

Minute takers play a vital role at meetings: they keep track of decisions, take minutes or notes, collect reports, and also draw attention to incomplete decisions – e.g.: 'Who is going to contact the warden at the community centre, and when?' Minute takers can also provide a summary of the discussion if needed. (For more tips see our guide on *Minutes for Meetings*).

A doorkeeper is useful in public meetings or when some people may be late. The doorkeeper welcomes newcomers or latecomers and brings them up to speed on the meeting – aims, what's been covered so far in the agenda, how decisions are being made, as well as the practical 'housekeeping' information such as tea and toilets. A doorkeeper can prevent the flow of a meeting being interrupted to recap every time someone enters the room.

In very large meetings it is advisable to have a **practical co-ordinator** responsible for the venue, equipment, refreshments and notices. The co-ordinator can also gather people together to start on time.

The meeting agenda

A well structured agenda is vital for a good meeting. The facilitators can help the group draw up agendas that are focussed on the aims of the meeting and are realistic. Remember: if the meeting is only an hour long, there should only be an hour's worth of items on the agenda!

You can either draw up the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, or prepare a proposed agenda in advance. It's important that everyone gets a chance to have an input and that the agenda is agreed by everyone.

How to create an agenda

Agree the aims for the meeting and then collect agenda items from the group, preferably in advance.

Estimate the time needed for each item. If you have more agenda items than fit into the available time, have a think about priorities for this meeting – what could be tackled another time or in separate working groups?

Think about effective facilitation techniques for complex or controversial topics (e.g. starting with paired chats to explore feelings).

Work out what order to tackle agenda items in. Often it's best to deal with difficult items after the group has warmed up but before people get tired. By alternating short and long items you can give the group a sense of progress. A common way of starting a meeting is to recap recent events or the last meeting.

How should the meeting start? Will you have introductions, a check-in or warm-up activity?

How will the meeting end? Can you think of a closing activity? Could you plan in an evaluation of the meeting near the end so you can learn for next time?

Plan in breaks, especially for meetings longer than 1½ hours.

Have a back up plan: ask yourself what you can cut from the agenda, or trim down if anything runs over your proposed time. Have some suggestions up your sleeve.

Write up the proposed agenda where everyone will be able to see it (on a whiteboard or flipchart, for example) or make copies to give to everyone.

Sample meeting agenda

Stop Newton Bypass Campaign

Start 7.00pm

- Introductions and check - in (12 mins)
- How the meeting works (3 mins)
- Review last minutes and action points (5 mins)
- Report back from working groups: media, finance, research, stalls (20 mins)
- Upcoming meeting with Planning Department – agree which issues to raise / questions to ask (30 mins)

Break (20 mins)

- End of year do – when and where (10 mins)
- Organising more stalls/leafleting (30 mins)
- Dates for next meetings and next facilitator (5 mins)
- Any other business (10 mins)
- Evaluation (10 mins)

End 9.30pm

Facilitating a meeting: beginning to end

This chapter gives an overview of the tasks facilitators may need to undertake in a meeting. Every meeting is different. Not all the points mentioned may be appropriate – use your own judgement and innovation. It's important that these tasks happen, but it doesn't have to be the facilitator that does them all! Draw on volunteers in the group to help with the facilitation. Make sure that the goals of the group and expectations on the facilitator are clear to everyone. This helps people understand and get on board with the facilitators' suggestions.

Preparing the meeting

These tasks help the meeting get off to a good start. In an informal meeting where you know each other well, you may do these tasks together at the beginning - e.g. whoever arrives first arranges the chairs and puts the kettle on. Sometimes it will be better to make someone responsible for arranging all this in advance. For example, if you are hosting a public meeting, or you have very limited face to face time and need to get straight into discussion.

Find a time that most people are able to make. Think about patterns of daily activity, such as parenting, work, dinner time.

Find a venue that is big enough to accommodate everyone comfortably. Ensure the venue is accessible and welcoming (e.g. pubs and venues with

religious affiliations could put some people off). Finally, have you put clear access information on your publicity? Our guide on *Venues and Accessibility* has more information on this topic.

Ask about and plan for any specific requirements for people attending the meeting. This is not just about physical access requirements such as lighting, seating, moving around, but also facilitation techniques that will make the meeting more accessible to them. Prepare your facilitation accordingly: even small changes in styles of facilitation and careful choice of exercises can make the difference between people finding it hard to participate and everyone being able to take a full and active part in meetings. The most important step is to ask people about their access requirements in advance of the meeting and their specific suggestions for how to enable their full participation.

Prepare an effective agenda (see previous chapter).

Ensure everyone is informed about time, place and content of the meeting. Send out pre-meeting materials if necessary. Check how people want to be communicated with and be prepared to use a variety of methods, e.g. social media, email and post.

Consider physical arrangements such as temperature, air quality, ability to hear and see. Think about requirements different people have and how to cater for them. Arrange the seating in an inclusive way – some groups find circles are best because they allow everyone to see each other, while other groups prefer rows so that people can seat themselves according to how committed they feel to the group. In the case of rows, many groups find a V formation useful, like sergeant's stripes with the point away from the front.

Gather materials needed for the meeting, e.g. watch, pens, marker pens, flipcharts, written presentations and proposals.

Find co-facilitators who can take over in an emergency, if the main facilitator tires or wants to participate more actively in the discussion.

For more tips on preparing meetings have a look at our guides on *Organising Successful Meetings* and *Venues and Accessibility.*

Preparing yourself

Even if you don't have a detailed plan for how the meeting will go, it can help to give a bit of time getting yourself in the right headspace.

Remind yourself of key information about the group and the agenda. What decision making process does the group use (e.g. consensus or voting)? What's on the agenda and why? What access requirements will you need to bear in mind throughout? Are you aware of particular dynamics or issues that will impact on how people participate? (For example, items on the agenda may be very straightforward, but if the group is in a state of crisis for other reasons, then tensions may still run high.)

Also take time to notice how *you* are on the day of the meeting. Do you have the necessary physical and mental energy to facilitate effectively? How are you feeling, and how might that impact on how you behave? Is there anything that could help you focus more on the group (e.g. take a short nap, or a have phone chat with a friend to talk through personal issues that are distracting you)? Is there anything you need to ask the group for in order to make it easier for you to fulfil your role (e.g. "I need to leave exactly on time to catch my train, are people up for trying to keep focused, and coming back on time from the break?" or "I've got strong feelings of my own on some of the agenda items. I've spent some time processing them and I think I will be able to listen and facilitate. But if you feel like I am showing biases please feel able to say.")

Getting the meeting off to a good start

Make sure everyone is welcomed as they arrive. Some groups designate a welcomer or 'doorkeeper' for newcomers, whose job it is to point people towards refreshments, explain where the toilets and fire exits are, and bring late arrivals up to speed with the meeting progress.

Introduce yourself and explain the role of the facilitator(s).

Follow this up with an introductory activity. What you do really depends on the group. It might be a formal icebreaker or a few minutes chat. If people don't know each other or there are newcomers to the group, get everyone to introduce themselves.

Set an inclusive and welcoming tone for the meeting. Think what information participants might need from each other. You could ask participants to explain what they require from each other in order to join in effectively ("My ears are blocked today, can everyone speak up, please.")

Many groups start with a 'pronoun round' where people say whether they'd like others to refer to them as she, he, they or another personal pronoun. (This question is because we can't assume a person's gender based on how they look). Many people will also be more relaxed if they know a bit more about everyone else in the room, e.g. you could ask each person to explain in one sentence why they've come to the meeting.

Make sure people know how the meeting works: explain the time frame, subject, aims of meeting, the process for making decisions, the responsibilities of the facilitator. Agree with the group what behaviour is acceptable/not acceptable in the meeting (e.g. avoiding jargon, asking questions if you don't understand, trying to understand someone's views even when you disagree with them). This may be agreed for a series of meetings, or unique to a particular meeting. It can be useful to have the group agreement, as it's sometimes called, on display to remind people of what the group agreed on.

Explain the proposed agenda, then ask for comments and make necessary changes. Be conscious of how long the agenda-checking

process is taking. It is often better to be firm and go ahead with *a* plan for the meeting than to spend half the time talking about what to talk about! Allocate time for each item and set a realistic finishing time. Keep to this. If using consensus decision making allow for extra time to go deeper into the issue if necessary.

Ensure roles such as minute-taker, timekeeper and vibes-watcher are covered if needed.

During the meeting

Make sure everyone can see the agenda – display it on a large sheet of paper or screen and have printed copies for those who want them. Projectors, flipchart paper or the back of a roll of wallpaper work well for large displays. You can cross off points from the agenda once they are dealt with as a visual reminder that the meeting is getting things done.

Go through the agenda item by item. Keep the group focussed on one item at a time until you've reached a decision (or made a conscious choice to deal with the matter another time). If new items come up in the discussion make sure they get noted down to be dealt with later.

Vary the pace of the meeting: use short items, fun items, announcements and breaks throughout the agenda to provide rest and relief from the more taxing items.

Make sure that decisions on action points include what, how, who, when and where. Ensure any action points are noted down along with who will do them and any deadline. Encourage everyone to feel able to volunteer for tasks and roles. If the same people take on all the work it can lead to tension and informal hierarchies within the group. It can help if the more experienced members of the group offer to share skills and experience.

Invite and move forward discussion. Clarify proposals that are put forward. Use short summaries of where the conversation is at to keep yourselves on track. ("We seem to be agreed on x and y, concerns have been raised about z. Shall we explore z some more?")

Introduce techniques such as ideastorming options, forming small groups for discussion, delegating to working groups, and go-rounds, to make the meeting more efficient and participatory. Some exercises may not be suitable for everyone – consider what role hearing, sight and mobility might play in activities. For a short explanation of these techniques see the chapter on *Facilitation techniques (page 28).*

Regulate the flow of discussion by calling on speakers in an appropriate order. Often this will be as they indicate they want to speak. Sometimes you may ask more vocal people to hold back from speaking in order to open up space for others have their say. If an idea is receiving lots of support, you might create space for people to raise concerns they may be holding back.

Help everyone to participate: draw out quiet people, limit over-talking, don't let anyone dominate the discussion. Use techniques such as breaking into small groups to equalise participation and to create a safe atmosphere for expressing opinions and feelings. Make sure the discussion is not moving too fast and that everyone is able to actively take part. Bear in mind any specific requirements that people have told you about.

Check on the overall feeling of the group throughout the meeting: energy levels, interest in the subject, whether the aims are being fulfilled, whether the structure is appropriate (e.g. large or small groups) and time.

Be positive: be appreciative of everyone's contribution and draw out points of agreement and common ground.

In tense or tiring situations try humour, affirmation, games, changing seats, silence, taking a break etc. Some groups might rebel at the suggestion of "wasting time" on a game, but will welcome a stretch break or informal hilarity.

Challenge put-downs and discriminatory remarks. The facilitator has extra responsibility for making sure that the meeting is a safe space. If one participant says or does things that are offensive or hurtful, it is important that this is challenged - even if you don't think the comment applies to anyone in the room. At the same time, remember that people often cause offence without meaning to. As a facilitator, it is usually most effective to show respect for everyone concerned. A guideline is to address someone's behaviour, or the words they said, without passing judgement on them as a person. (E.g.: "You may not know this, but the word you just used has racist origins." or "Sorry Jo, you didn't let Sia finish making their point. Sia, are you up for carrying on with what you saying?")

Ending the meeting

Make sure the meeting finishes on time, or get everyone's agreement to continue.

Ensure someone has taken on writing up and circulating the minutes or notes in the next few days.

Make sure a time and place for the next meeting has been agreed and that people leave their contact details if they want to be updated or receive minutes for the meeting. Do this before people start leaving.

Provide some satisfying closure to the meeting: sum up, remind people of what they're committed to doing before the next meeting and remember to thank everyone for turning up and contributing.

Evaluating your meetings can help to constantly improve them. It's a good idea to leave a few minutes at the end of every agenda and ask the group what went well and what needs to be improved. You could also get together afterwards with the other organisers to evaluate the meeting. Remember to celebrate what you have achieved!

It can be nice to follow the meeting with an informal social activity like sharing a meal or going to a café. Think about any special needs – not everyone drinks alcohol, you might have vegetarians or vegans in your group and so on, so try to choose an inclusive venue or activity.

Key facilitation skills

Good listening and communication skills are at the core of good facilitation. This helps us build trust and openness in the group, understand each other, and ultimately, come up with better decisions. It is important for a facilitator to develop these skills - but everyone can help the meeting along by practising them too.

Put simply:

- **Active listening** enables us to hear what others are saying;

- **Questioning** helps clarify what people are saying, or supports people to explore their needs and come up with new possibilities;

- **Summarising** helps remind us of the key points in the discussion and check we have the same understanding;

- **Synthesising** is the skill that allows us to draw together different views and ideas to form one proposal that works for everyone.

Active listening

Listening is a skill that is often under-estimated and under-valued. However, it is an essential part of effective communication, and requires an active effort to do well. When we really listen, we communicate that what someone is saying is important to us, and we try to get an accurate understanding of what they are actually saying.

To really listen, try to set aside your own interpretations and opinions about what someone is saying. Instead focus on trying to really get where someone is coming from

One objective is making sure that points don't get lost, especially when they are put forward by someone who lacks confidence, or who is representing a minority viewpoint.

Careful listening also builds trust – it is much easier to be open when we feel heard and understood. Combined with supportive questioning, this can help people explore what core needs they are trying to meet. This opens the door to finding new and creative solutions that work for everyone – instead of everyone simply fighting their own corner.

Often in a meeting setting, listening is about focusing on all the different opinions and needs being put forward. In a situation where a group is having difficulty in hearing a particular perspective, you might choose to give one or two people focused attention to help them express it.

Questioning

Asking good questions is part of the process of active listening. This can help the facilitator and the rest of the meeting get a good understanding of what someone is trying to put across. It can also support people to explore their reasoning or come up with new options - which can both help to find ways forward when the group is stuck.

You could support them with **clarifying questions**, e.g. "What I think you're saying is... Am I right?" or "When you say that we 'aren't pulling our weight', can you say more about what you'd like us to do?"

Be wary of interrogating someone, or asking them to prove themselves - the aim is to support them to put their message across, not to pull it to pieces!

Sometimes, it is more helpful if you ask **open questions** which don't have yes/no answers. E.g. "How are you feeling about that?", "Can you explain more about the reasons you are worried?" or "What are other possible options in this situation?" etc. Open questions give people more choice over what they want to put across, and create space for the group to generate new ideas.

Summarising

Offering a summary of the discussion can help reassure speakers they are being heard, and help to focus meetings. Usually this will involve

pulling out key points of a discussion to help people think about ways forward. Occasionally, summarising an individual contribution can help - for example, if someone spoke a long time, and you want to check you all had an accurate understanding of what they were trying to say.

Think about when it is helpful to use your own words in a summary, or to use the words of the speaker. Using your own words may be more effective in showing up misunderstandings, and could make it easier to keep your summary short. Sometimes a person will have chosen a word to put across a specific meaning, and if you use a different word in your summary they may not trust you were really listening. For example, if they said they were "furious" and you described them as "annoyed", they may feel misunderstood, or even judged for the strength of their feelings.

Bear in mind also that a summary carries more weight than an average contribution to a discussion. Especially when you are summarising the views of the whole group. For example, if you say "So we're all agreed that..." it makes it harder for someone to disagree! This makes it very important to give people chance to correct you.

Some people find it helpful to take notes as the discussion happens. This makes a succinct and accurate summary much easier.

Summarising effectively

Wait until the speaker has finished.

Offer the summary tentatively and allow people to correct you if you get it wrong. Use phrases such as: "What I've heard people saying so far is... Did I miss anything out?", "It sounds to me like the main concern you're raising is.... Is that right?"

Keep it short and simple. What you say should be easy to understand and concentrate on - rather than repeating everything that's been said already!

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Synthesis

Bringing together different ideas and trying to find a proposal that is agreeable to everyone is at the core of consensus. We call this process *synthesis*: finding connections between seemingly competing ideas and weaving them together to form proposals.

There are a number of background steps you can take to help people move towards synthesising a proposal.

Summarising areas of agreement and disagreement

Try a summary of where you think the group and its different members are at: "It seems like we've almost reached agreement on that element of the proposal, but that we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." It's important to not only pick up on clear differences, but also on more subtle agreement or disagreement.

It can really help to use a flipchart or something else everyone can see to write up the areas of agreement and issues to be resolved. Having visuals can help more people stay focused on the discussion.

Help people explore reasons for their preferences

It is common for people to enter a discussion with strong views on concrete options they do and don't like. This is particularly the case when the discussion starts with only one option on the table, and the group can get polarised between who wants it and who doesn't. Finding a way forward often involves taking a step backwards and exploring the reasons why people like different options. Once you've identified what people are trying to achieve, you may find new possibilities, where all the needs are met.

Example: A volunteer-run community shop was trying to decide whether to open an extra day at the weekend. Digging deeper into the different concerns revealed that everyone agreed that it would help the shop to thrive if they were open at times when most full time workers were able to go shopping. However, some members were not at all keen to lose their own weekends. Identifying these core issues enabled them to look

for new solutions: opening one weekday evening, and doing a big publicity push for new volunteers who were free to do weekend shifts.

Building a proposal

Start with whatever agreement there is and build the proposal from that. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have. Often people are willing to give way on some things yet not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different suggestions.

People often argue over small details and overlook the fact that they agree on the big picture. Making this obvious to the group can help to provide ways forward.

Even when there is strong disagreement within the group, synthesis can help move the discussion on. Always try and find some common ground, no matter how small: "So we're all agreed that climate change demands urgent action, even if we disagree on whether the solution lies in developing new technologies, or reducing consumption". This can reinforce that we're all on the same side, and remind a group of their overall shared aims – a necessary condition for consensus.

Also synthesising a solution doesn't necessarily mean uniformity or unanimity. Sometimes a solution is staring us in the face, but our desire to get full agreement becomes an obstacle: "So we're all agreed we'd like to go ahead with the protest. However some feel strongly that the target of our protest should be government, and others feel it ought to be corporations – is there any reason why we have to choose between the two? Could we not agree that both can happen?"

Large group meetings

Large group meetings pose particular challenges for facilitators. Any more than 12 people can exhibit all the characteristics of a big group – it doesn't have to be hundreds of participants.

Large groups can:

- Make it more difficult for less assertive people to participate. Not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of a large meeting.
- Be easily dominated by a confident few.
- Have a slower pace and lower energy than smaller groups – taking longer to reach decisions.

This chapter provides some useful tips, for an in-depth discussion of consensus decision-making in large groups see our guide to *Consensus decision-making.*

Preparing meetings for larger groups

Planning: Larger group meetings need more preparation and planning. It may be harder to think on your feet and adjust your plans as you go along. This is partly because you get less immediate feedback from people - it is harder to see faces, and people are less likely to chip in comments and suggestions. At the same time, it is always important to try to respond to what is going on in the room, rather than rigidly delivering your plan. For example, even in a large group, you are likely to notice when levels of energy and attention drop. Try to strike a balance between pre-planning and being responsive.

Agenda items: Which items need to be discussed and agreed by everyone? Which can be delegated to smaller groups? Not everyone needs to discuss the exact wording of the news release, or the order of bands for the benefit gig!

Time: Allow extra time for large group meetings to enable adequate discussion and an opportunity for people to express and hear all the ideas. Cutting off discussion and forcing a decision will leave lots of people feeling disempowered and frustrated.

The facilitation team: You will need a facilitation team who all know exactly what job they are doing – someone to facilitate, someone to take hands, someone to write up notes on a flip chart, maybe a separate timekeeper and a doorkeeper, someone to prepare refreshments.

Clear process: Take time at the beginning of the meeting to explain clearly how the meeting will work, what the agenda is like, how decisions are made, what guidelines there are for behaviour in meetings. Make use of flipcharts to write up the agenda, key points of the discussion, key decisions etc. Try and ensure the flipchart can be seen by everyone in the group.

Large plenaries and working in small groups

In large groups it's sensible to consider whether you can delegate any of the issues to a smaller group. However, sometimes the issues will be so important that they have to be discussed and decided by everyone. It can also be very inspiring to have an open discussion with everyone – collectively coming to good decisions and seeing that everyone supports the agreement reached.

You can use a combination of small and large group discussions to deal with some of the drawbacks of large meetings. Large group plenaries can be used to share information, making proposals and final decision-making. Splitting into small groups can speed up some of the discussion phases.

The advantages of breaking into small groups for discussion are that they create safer, more dynamic spaces to work in and include more people in a discussion. Small groups can each discuss different elements of a topic, covering more ground in a shorter time.

There will be some people who would prefer to spend their whole time in

a large group. If they are confident contributing in that setting they may feel that it is more efficient for everyone to be together. Or if you have several topics discussed by different groups at the same time, they may struggle to choose. People may also lack trust in the feedback process. For example, if the person reporting back from a small group discussion doesn't give an accurate summary, then other people in that group may feel they have wasted their time.

As the facilitator, you need to be sensitive to these concerns. Explain your reasons for using small groups, and point out that some of the time will also be used in plenary.

Explain how feedback will happen. One pitfall to avoid is a situation where people in the small group feel misrepresented by the person feeding. You could ask them to agree a summary at the end of their discussion. Alternatively, people could contribute key points to the plenary as themselves, without an attempt to speak for the rest of their group.

Facilitation techniques

This is a short intro to a few common techniques. For more see our guide *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops.*

Go-rounds: everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas as well as slowing down the discussion and improving listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

Check-in: A little bit of time devoted to seeing how people are doing, usually at the beginning of a meeting. Depending on the group and the time available you might share personal things or keep it short and functional. (E.g. "I'm very tired, can we have a short break in the middle?")

Ideastorming gathers a large number of ideas quickly. Start by stating the issue. Ask people to say whatever comes into their heads as fast as possible – without censoring or discussion. This encourages creativity and frees energy. Write down all ideas for later discussion.

Paired listening creates a space where everyone is heard, so participants can explore and formulate their own thoughts and feelings on an issue without interruption. In pairs, one person is the listener, the other speaks about their thoughts and feelings on the issue. The listener gives full attention to their partner. They could also offer a summary at the end, to check they've understood. After a set time swap roles within the pairs.

Small groups: great for changing the dynamics of a meeting, equalising participation or opening up discussion on emotive issues. They can also make meetings more efficient, e.g. groups can each take a different topic so more ground is covered over all. Explain clearly what you want groups to do. Write up the task where people can see it. If you want feedback at the end, you need to say clearly what they need to feed back, and give them time at the end to work out what to say and who will say it.

Prioritisation dots: This helps to whittle down a long list of options into

something more manageable. Everyone in the group is allowed the same number of 'dots', e.g. five (this could simply be dots they draw on with their own pens). They can 'spend' these dots between their five priority options, or choose a different weighting (e.g. three dots on an idea they are very keen on, and then one each on their next two favoured options).

Pros and cons: (or 'Plus/minus/interesting'). Listing the benefits and drawbacks of different ideas can be a good way to explore different viewpoints without people taking it too personally. It can also be a starting point for a deeper exploration of what people really want to achieve and avoid. Some people will find it hard to engage with an abstract question like "What are your core needs?" Listing the reasons why they like or don't like particular ideas may help them notice and explain what they want and don't want.

Energisers: activities that are very different to the rest of the meeting to provide a quick break. That could include a quick game or a physical activity. Make sure it is something everyone can participate in if they want to. And be aware that some people will feel self-conscious about ice-breaker type games. Simply inviting people to swap positions in the circle or have a stretch may help, or even just making a joke.

Temperature check: a non-verbal quick way to gauge different levels of enthusiasm for a topic. For example, "How keen are you on this idea? If you think it is fantastic, raise your hands high. If you feel middling about it, hold your hands in the middle. And hands down low means you're not keen at all." This has the benefit of getting quick and basic input from everyone in the room - including people who don't often speak. A temperature check isn't the same thing as a majority vote. For example, even if only one person really needs a break, it could still be a good time to stop!

Parking space: when something comes up that's not relevant to the discussion at hand 'park' it in the parking space (a large sheet of paper on the wall) and deal with it at an appropriate time later. This allows you to stay focused but reassures participants they will be heard.

Troubleshooting

Meetings don't always go the way you expect! And what is going well for one person will be difficult for someone else. As a facilitator, you will never get things perfectly 'right' for everyone. However, it can help to develop your ability to problem solve. Try different things out, and notice the impacts.

Develop your ability to spot problems and try to work out why they are happening. Don't just ask "What is happening?" Also ask "Why is it happening?" Trying to identify the underlying issues will help you find solutions to try out.

It is easy to jump to conclusions about underlying issues. For example, 'people seem disengaged, that must mean they are bored, let's wrap up this topic quickly.' Instead of running too far with your interpretations of what you can see, try sharing what you've noticed and asking the group what's going on: "I've noticed a lot of people haven't said anything about this agenda item, and I'm not sure how best to help. Is anyone up for saying what's going on for them?"

Remember also that you often get more feedback from confident members of the group. You could be proactive about asking for more input. For example, "A couple of people have said they need more information about the topic before discussing solutions. Does anyone have anything different that would help them?"

We have listed some common issues, and made a few suggestions for how to address them. Hopefully you can use these ideas a springboard for generating more options of your own:

Meetings going on too long

It is very common for meetings to drag on, beyond the point where most people are able to concentrate. You might see that fewer and fewer people are participating as the meeting goes on. Or some people start to slip out before the meeting has finished.

Make sure in advance that you have all the information you need to reach a decision at the meeting. If vital facts are missing, work out what needs to be done to get them for the next meeting and move on.

Prioritise which topics really need to be discussed by the whole group. For example, could some decisions be taken by a working group, or even an individual? (E.g. "All the printers in town have similar prices, can the person who is printing the fliers decide which one to use?")

Think carefully about which elements of a topic are really urgent to discuss. For example, if you are talking about a benefit gig that is four months away, you could agree a date, and appoint people to research possible bands and venues, but not discuss any more details.

You could make use of working in small groups to make things more efficient, e.g. parallel groups could deal with several issues at once. Or delegate a small group to synthesise everyone's ideas into a few possible solutions to be discussed later by the whole group.

Time pressure

Time constraints on a meeting can lead to stress, and make it harder to really listen to each other and explore different options.

Prioritisation is key - making sure that the issues which come to the whole group meetings really are important ones for everyone to discuss. Some groups vary their decision making method depending how important the issue is. For example, they might delegate small decisions to individuals, vote on medium-important items, and take the time to reach full consensus on anything that will have a major impact.

Preparation also helps. Background information can be sent round in advance - though that is only useful if people have the time outside the meeting to read it! Alternatively, one person could prepare some visuals and a short, simple information to get key information across in as little time as possible.

If agenda items are actually proposals for ways forward, then spend time beforehand getting people's views and make sure they are taken into account in the proposal you put to the meeting. For example, some large groups use online surveys and shared noticeboards to get initial input before developing an idea. More intensive ways of getting input could include having one-to-one chats with people, or holding a 'workshop' where people can explore different approaches before a small group goes away to draft the proposal.

Be realistic about how much can be covered in one meeting. It may be too much for everyone to get their heads round a new idea and make a decision on it all in one go. A topic could initially go on the agenda for exploration and sharing initial reactions. A small group could then use this as a basis for a proposal which they take back to the next meeting.

Consider having more, and longer, meetings in order to give decision making the time it needs. Look for ways to do this without it impacting too negatively on the people concerned. For example, the group could pay for extra childcare. Or a workers' co-op could re-arrange their workload to make more paid time available for meetings.

Lack of focus

Many informal groups hold meetings which are very unstructured - they jump from topic to topic, and mix up 'business talk' with friendly chat. For some people this makes it hard to concentrate, for others it is a more 'natural' and relaxed way of having a conversation. Limiting the focus to one topic at a time has benefits, and can be worth practising. For example, it can make it easier to explore an issue in depth, really hear everyone's perspectives and reach clear decisions.

Make sure you have a fair system for devising the agenda, that everyone can realistically input to. Check people are happy with it, and happy for you to bring them back on topic if the conversation drifts off. Have it somewhere people can see.

If new topics come up, decide how best to deal with them. Are they social chat best done in the break? An urgent issue that needs to be resolved immediately? Or simply a new agenda item to be dealt with later (e.g. at the end of the current meeting, or in the next one).

Take breaks when needed, and don't try to cover too many agenda items in one meeting. When people are tired, it is much harder to be self-aware about which contributions are relevant. Alcohol at meetings can have a similar effect. Some groups agree to save drinking until after the meeting.

As a group, try to have group socials that are separate from meetings. That way, people can touch base with each other without it getting mixed up in the agenda. A 'social' could could be as simple as a 15 minute break in the middle, or sharing some food before getting started with decision making.

Different levels of power and participation

Even when a group wants to organise non-hierarchically, there are almost always differences in how involved people are, how confident and comfortable they can be in the group, and how much they shape the decisions that happen. Everyone will have different amounts of energy for the group, and face varying barriers to getting involved, because of factors like health and other responsibilities. On top of this, social structures of oppression can have an enormous impact on relationships and dynamics, even in groups that are set up to fight for social justice.

These kinds of differences show up in things like: how much time different people speak in meetings; who feels able to express disagreement; who shows their feelings; who takes on which tasks; who is most likely to take decisions for the group outside of meetings; who feels able to put items on the agenda; who attends meetings regularly; who is aware of other people's feelings; who offers emotional support; who makes comments that are offensive to others.

Facilitation ideas for tackling power dynamics

Tackling power dynamics can be long term work, but these suggestions can help you as a facilitator make the meetings more empowering for everyone:

Try facilitation tools to equalise who is able to speak and get involved. For example, paired chats to help people formulate their thoughts before delving into whole group discussion. Everyone responds to tools differently, so watch people's behaviour and ask questions to work out what is actually helpful for your group.

Check that information is being shared so that everyone can the knowledge they need to participate fully. Make space

for people's different preferences for how to process information and make decisions. For example, can complex information be available in advance, as well as making enough space to talk it through in the meeting?

Pay special attention at the moments when you actually agree a way forward. In informal groups, the views of confident people may be carried forward as decisions, simply because no-one opposes them. Take the time to check everyone's views, and once you have agreement, double-check that the minutes also reflect what everyone thinks they have agreed to!

Use your listening skills when you think that someone is getting misunderstood or not heard at all. That could mean reminding the group of a point someone made that is getting over-looked. Or asking follow on questions to give someone more space to express their views.

Be ready to challenge comments that you think are offensive or dismissive of others. Exactly how you do this requires some judgement of the situation. If someone is making offensive comments because they are simply unaware of the harm they are causing, then a gentle reminder may be more helpful than using an aggressive or judgemental tone! Similarly, the people who are 'offended' may sometimes find it more empowering to speak for themselves. There is no easy formula for getting it right, but by reflecting on your experiences and seeking feedback, you can develop your skills.

The group can't reach agreement

A strong decision that everyone can support only comes only after bringing differences out into the open. Encourage everyone to present their viewpoints, especially when they may be conflicting. This requires broad discussion and enough time.

Listen carefully for agreements and concerns and the underlying issues. What's at the root of people's worries? This helps with drawing up a proposal that takes them into account.

Test for agreement periodically. This helps to clarify disagreements. Be as specific as you can in order to identify sticking points. Make it easy for people to say if they don't agree, e.g. "I'm hearing a lot of support for the idea of... Have I got that right? Does anyone not agree?". You could also ask for help at this stage, e.g.: "Can anyone summarise what things they think we agree on?"

When no agreement can be reached, try the following:

- Ask those disagreeing for alternative proposals.

- Propose a break, silent thinking time, or postponing the decision to give people time to cool down and reflect. If the decision is postponed it is often a good idea to engage conflicting parties in conflict resolution before the issue is brought up again.

- Agree a process for taking a decision that all parties can sign up to.

When one or two people are blocking consensus, ask if they are prepared to stand aside, to allow the group to proceed with the action *(standing aside = not being involved in implementing a decision or its consequences)*. It may help if the group assures them that the lack of unity will be recorded in the minutes, that the decision does not set a precedent and that they won't be expected to implement the decision.

Don't mistake silence for consent – encourage a response from every participant. The group should be conscious of making a contract with each other. If an agreement is reached too easily then test to make sure that members really are fully supportive of the decision and do agree on essential points.

How can we get from lots of ideas to one proposal?

Sometimes an issue brings up a large number of ideas and it can be hard to know how to take it forward. This can be difficult, whether the group is polarised around who favours different options, or whether everyone is simply finding it hard to choose.

Remember, even when you are swamped with options, the best idea may still not be on the table. Good proposals are often made by weaving together elements of different ideas, to form a way forward that combines different strengths and meets everyone's needs.

Simple prioritisation tools can be a quick way to find out which ideas people have energy for, and which can simply be discarded. In a situation where you have the capacity to try out several things, this may be all that is needed. If it is important to decide on a single option, then prioritisation can be a first step to make the list of options more manageable.

Exploring the reasons *why* people like different ideas may open up new ways forward. Having an idea what people are trying to achieve will give you some criteria to guide your decision making. In a strictly linear and rational process, agreeing your aims might come before discussing ideas. However, for many people, talking about concrete suggestions can be a much more real way to become aware of what they want and need.

In order to come up with a final plan, it can help to make a list of the criteria you created through evaluating the different ideas. It may be that an existing idea then shines through as 'the strongest' because it meets all these different criteria. More often, you will build a new suggestion out of the criteria, combining the existing ideas, or simply using them as prompts.

Case study 1

The group has been talking about the current agenda item for well over an hour and still doesn't seem to be anywhere near a decision. It doesn't feel like any progress is being made.

Potential underlying causes

Maybe the group doesn't have all the information it needs to make a well informed decision. Or the group may be tired and unfocussed. If it's a complex issue, the range of possibilities may be confusing the group. The group may also be nearer to a solution than it realises, but isn't hearing its common ground.

Some ways forward

Take a break or do an energising activity.

Focus the group by restating the aims of the discussion.

Use your active listening skills to **summarise the discussion so far** – what have been the main concerns? Is there any agreement (no matter how small)? Stating areas of agreement can lift the group's spirits and provide focus.

Ideastorm a list of questions that need answering and work out who will do the necessary research. Can the meeting be put on hold briefly, whilst someone does research on the web, or do you need to come back to it another time?

Do you need to **go deeper** in your discussion? If the discussion has got polarised and people are trying to convince each other, try to pause and focus instead on understanding each other. Exploring reasons for different preferences can open the door to new solutions you hadn't spotted.

Case study 2

Every meeting, the same people do most of the talking, and volunteer for most of the jobs. Other people show up regularly, but participate very little.

Potential underlying causes

It may be due to power imbalance. The talkers may feel more connected to the group, and more confident that their contributions will be welcomed.

Perhaps there's an imbalance of knowledge in the group – the people who've been doing the tasks for a long time know more about the groups' business and feel more able to speak for it.

Maybe the talkers are not very tuned in to others' experiences. They're focused on the task at hand - and haven't noticed the imbalance in participation.

Some ways forward

Spend more time getting to know each other so more people feel socially comfortable in the meeting. Time for informal chat and sharing food can help, or a personal check-in to start the meeting.

Try using facilitation tools to help **equalise participation**. Or try starting a discussion with: "I'm going to start by making space for anyone who hasn't spoken yet this meeting."

Share out information so everyone has the knowledge they need to contribute. For example, start each agenda item with relevant context.

Evaluate. Ask everyone to share their experience of your meetings and make suggestions about what could improve them. This might include changes that are not just about what you do in meetings - e.g. having more regular group socials.

Further Reading

Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry, Delfina Vannucci and Richard Singer, 2009. ISBN 1849350183

A Consensus Handbook, Seeds for Change, 2013. ISBN: 978-0957587106

Consensus: A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political, and Environmental Groups, Peter Gelderloos, Sharp Press, 2006. ISBN 978-1-884365-39-3

Democracy in Small Groups – Participation, Decision-Making and Communication, John Castill, New Society Publishers, 1993. ISBN: 0 86571 274 3

Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger, New Society Publishers, 1996, ISBN: 0-86571-347-2

From Conflict to Cooperation – How to Mediate A Dispute, Dr Beverly Potter, Ronin Publishing, 1996. ISBN: 0-914171-79-8

The Mediator's Handbook, Jennifer E. Beer with Eileen Stief, New Society Publishers, 3rd edition, 1997. ISBN: 0-86571-359-6, developed by Friends Conflict Resolution Programs

Open Space Technology: A User's Guide, Harrison Owen, Berret-Koehler, 1997. ISBN: 1-57675-024-8

Resource Manual for a Living Revolution, Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, Christopher Moore, New Society Publishers, 1981, ISBN: 0-86571-008-2

Working with Conflict, Fisher et al, Zed Books, 2000. ISBN: 1-85649-837-9

Facilitating Meetings

Meetings can be inspiring spaces where everyone feels empowered and enthusiastic about your group and the plans you make. Sometimes the opposite is true, and people leave feeling frustrated and discouraged! Good facilitation makes a critical difference to how positive our experiences of meetings are - and hence how effective our groups can be.

This guide offers tips, techniques and concepts to help meeting facilitators. If you are facilitating for the first time, or you've been doing it for a while and want chance to reflect - this guide is for you.

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