

Facilitating

Groups / Writing / Words / Support

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The following pages highlight some basic / core facilitation skills that can be adapted to different sorts of groups. Remember that group facilitation is fluid and flexible depending on purpose and process, the group participants, time of day, the venue and room set-up, number of participants and more. So, try to avoid a one size fits all facilitation approach.

Add pages to this facilitation section that reflect that best ways of working with groups. Draw on other resources as well. The editors hope is that you can turn to this facilitation section of the tool-kit and find it organized and accessible for ease of use. Hence, feel free to mark or separate pages as fits your facilitation.

Brief Overview of Groups: Implications for Group Facilitation

Why Groups?

Given the choice of one-to-one or group models, why groups? When asked this question, here are common responses. What would you add to the list?

1. Many voices and ideas
2. Shared responsibilities
3. Modeling
4. Multiplier effect – one thought / prompt leads to another thought / prompt
5. Some people learn by listening and observing; others by talking or writing
6. Less threatening for participants – focus on group, not individuals
7. Support from others
8. Reminder that you are not the only one facing a condition or circumstance
9. Written poems, other literary sources or discussions of books will prompt varied responses, sometimes widely varied, thereby enriching everyone's reading and reactions
10. Groups are representative of the community
11. Instillation of hope, catharsis, interpersonal learning, feelings of trust and belonging, enhanced self awareness and learning to accept personal responsibility for life choices.
12. Knowing that you have been a help and encouragement to others (altruism) is one of the keys to happiness and improved wellbeing.

Signs of a Healthy / Alive Group

When a group is facilitated effectively, the things on the list above occur. In other words, many persons prefer groups to one-to-one support or coaching because they get ideas, support, and modeling from many people. But, for that to happen, groups must be facilitated effectively. What, you might ask, would that look like?

1. Everyone can participate in their own way
2. Conversation moves – the floor is shared
3. Encouragement and support is evident
4. People validate each other
5. A range of emotions is allowed and encouraged
6. Participants take risks, meaning they are willing to talk/write about tough stuff
7. Quiet ones are invited to speak; talkative ones are asked to give others space
8. Direct and indirect methods are utilized
9. Responsibilities for personal/family decisions are left to participants; giving advice or “rescuing” someone else is avoided
10. Leadership is shared
11. You or your group might add to this list

Things to Be Aware of When You Facilitate a Group

Even when a group is facilitated effectively some challenging and surprising things can happen and it is best to be prepared and realistic about the role of facilitator.

1. The group may go through the stages of forming, norming, storming (Tuckman 1965) and ultimately performing. However it is possible to get stuck at storming!
2. Participants can bring their unconscious feelings and projections to the group and begin to relate to you as their father or mother and the other members as siblings, then unconsciously act out the family or primary school dynamics.
3. Not everyone will like you.
4. Few will actually express any gratitude to you.
5. Some individuals will bring the damage from their past to the group and this can express itself in hostility, seductiveness, victim-stance thinking, and who knows what else range of adaptive behaviours.
6. As group facilitator avoid 'the expert trap'. Your strength lies in not knowing and not doing and being honest about that. Avoiding the expert role allows for collaboration and elicits the expert knowledge of the group. The group always knows more than any one individual.

7. Groups have a beginning, a middle and an ending. There is less sharing and openness at the beginning and a great need for clear boundaries and perhaps more involvement from the facilitator. Middle is the working phase where the group have settled down to work on their writing and express themselves. Endings can bring up feelings of loss and separation. The facilitator must be prepared for questions of extending the groups life, meeting informally or indeed people dropping out simply to avoid the ending. Sadness anxiety and anger may manifest towards the ending of a group.
8. One of the unspoken features of a group is the question of power. Rarely explicitly mention but often manifesting in terms of who gets to speak the most, or who gets the most praise or criticism.
9. If you do succeed in facilitating a group sensitively, empathically and with good boundaries there is a real possibility that a group member will 'fall in love' with you. This will feel very exciting and intoxicating. Be aware that reciprocating this imagined love will be incredibly damaging for all concerned. Maintain clear boundaries at all times.
10. Use self disclosure judiciously. It can be helpful but equally it can be unhelpful to the group process.
11. Have a sound understanding of ethics, professional boundaries and know what to do if a group member discloses information that puts themselves or others at risk.
12. The ending of the group can involve rituals and presentations on what has been learned or achieved.

Thoughts for Facilitators

About Welcome and Beginnings

Welcome
Come as you are
Be at home here
Feel free to pass
Feel even freer to share yourself and your wisdom
It's impossible to not communicate

Introductions should invite connection rather than separation. Find ways to connect each other that avoid "boxing" others: avoid occupations (white/blue collar), educational level, etc. The common experiences may be: cancer, parenting, uncertainty, interest in writing, a particular book...

Use of a popcorn method allows participants to speak at their initiative and their timing rather than going around the circle. Circle sharing often results in more preparation as the circle gets closer than listening to what is being said.

Facilitators have two "participants" to keep in their awareness: each individual member and the group as a whole. If the group tilts too far in either direction, the group synergy may be compromised.

When there is a need to interrupt, do so gently but for reasons of the two "participants" above. For long-winded senders, interrupt and say something like: "You are giving us a lot of details. If we need the details in order to respond, let us ask questions of you. Behind those details lies a question or situation about which the group might be a resource. How can we be helpful to you right now?"

Personal sharing of self or writing by the facilitator is done in the interest of the group process: to give permission, to model, to provoke, to normalize, etc. If the facilitator needs to work on their own matters, they should find a group in which to be a member.

Core Skills for Effective Facilitators: Active Listening, Understanding and Clarity of Communication

Listening is a difficult skill to master. It is human nature to want to talk. Even when listening to others, many people are formulating a response rather than really listening. Group facilitators, particularly because of their responsibilities to the whole group, can also do more talking than truly listening. They can also overlook their facilitator responsibility to help group members listen to each other. Listening well is a key skill for effective facilitators.

Think of a time when you felt that were truly listened to by someone else. What happened? What did the listener do that made you believe that they were paying attention to you? What did that feel like?

Active Listening

The following is a short list of things that you can do to become a better listener and to help group members become supportive listeners.

1. The same letters are in the words silent and listen.
2. Practice turn-taking.
3. Remind yourself and the group to be comfortable with silence. Sometimes the best response is to be silent and let something sink in. Or silence may give people time to formulate thoughts or comments. Writing can be a tool for group democracy, meaning that all use a shared period of writing to prepare for a discussion or a sharing of written material.
4. Use supportive body language. Lean forward, look at the speaker, nod, lay distractions aside, and otherwise indicate with your posture and actions that you are interested in what the person has to say.
5. When appropriate use leading questions to encourage the person to give more detail. Examples are questions that begin with what, when, where, how. Be cautious about overuse of why questions. Why questions invite someone to justify and defend, not elaborate and expand.
6. Use your memory – perhaps aided by written notes after a session. To remember something someone said earlier in a group session or in a previous meeting is one of the clearest indicators that someone was really listening.

Reflective Listening – Seeking Understanding and Clarity

In some conversations, seeking understanding and gaining clarity is important, perhaps crucial. Truly listening is not enough; essential, yes, but not enough. Many people yearn for validation that what they have said is understood. At times like those, summarization or paraphrasing is required.

ATTEND

(Keep Quiet, Look, Listen, Be Present)

ACKNOWLEDGE

(Ted Has The Floor; Let's Listen)

INVITE

**(More Information Or Sharing,
Use Some Open Questions)**

SUMMARIZE

**(Ensure Accuracy And Shared Meaning,
In Other Words,
Paraphrase What Was Said)**

CHECK AND CONFIRM

**(Only The Speaker Knows If They Have
Been Understood. Ask Them?)**

ASK

**(More Open Questions
Invite Further Elaboration/Expansion)**

Understanding is, in most cases, more important than agreement. So, for the effective facilitator to seek and gain clarity / shared meaning does not mean that she or he agrees with the speaker. Rather, you show understanding of the point of view, perspective or feelings of the group member.

Beginning A Group - First Sessions

Beginning All Sessions

If not careful, facilitators get focused on the “work” stage of the group and jump over or hurry through beginnings. Try to avoid doing this. Rather, a strong beginning makes what follows flow easier and with greater involvement of group members.

Important Tasks

1. Creation of a welcoming environment - clear directions, lighted facility, room location is obvious, room is set-up, facilitator ready
2. Greeting as people arrive
3. Opening words - sets tone, first impression
 - a. group welcome
 - b. clarity of purpose
 - c. comfort concerns addressed - times, toilets, payment, etc.
4. Involvement of group - early involvement of group is part of setting tone and indicating how sessions will proceed
5. Introductions - choose introductions that connect rather than separate
6. Group Procedures - Guidelines - Ground-Rules - - clarity about how things will happen makes it easier for participation
7. "Work" - it is important that some work occur in first session/half hour. At a minimum, clarity about purpose and agenda should be discussed.
8. Closure and looking forward - homework, next session, what to expect (It is important to think about closure even as you are beginning. Every session has a time limit. Not everyone will return to another session. Therefore, give attention to the ending as part of beginning.)

While the above is a typical order or flow, it should not be seen as rigid. Some group leaders start with a combination of welcome and closure: *Welcome everyone, glad you are here. This is our first session AND it points us toward our last session, just six weeks from now. The time will flow quickly. Be thinking about what you want us to cover before the group ends. Of all the topics of interest to you, what is most important?*

Tools For Connecting Group Members With Each Other

There are many ways to aid group participants in connecting. Here are a few examples.

Weaving - Making Connections

note commonality between group participants in their stories
note common challenges they are facing or the facts about their lives

Invite Connection

the same as above but in this case inviting group members to make the connections: *Is John the only one to have this reaction to the poem? Let's hear another response on this poem.*

Story Building

can take several forms. The collective story: *Wow, we're getting quite a picture of this disease and its impact, aren't we? Then, tell the story.*
Another method is to invite the group to adapt or change the way the story could go.

Memory

similar to weaving or making connections, but involves linkages from one session to another. *Two weeks ago, we talked about...Then, Ted was describing his situation as....That sounds similar, Ruth, to what you were just telling us.*

Problem-Solving / Resources

when group participants request and are given suggestions or resources from other group members

Check-out Perceptions

usually done by the facilitator to comment about tones, moods, affective forces in the group. *It seems that several of you are in a rough place this week. Juan, Steven, Dori, all of you and some others seem a bit down this week. What is affecting your mood today. Maybe we should write for 4 minutes about what's going on...a private account of your mood?* This may include a comment about body language.

Pair and Share

another connecting tool is for group registrants to talk with one or two persons rather than the group

Room Arrangement

does the set-up encourage or discourage connection?

Balancing The Needs Of Group Members

Some Perspectives

1. Balancing needs does not mean equality of participation or use of time. People participate differently in groups. Balancing rather means that each person has the opportunity to participate.
2. Balancing further means that the behavior of one or more does not adversely affect others. Hence, group participation that involves dominating the time, putting others down, or distracting from the group purpose is to be limited.
3. Balancing the needs of members often requires a time perspective. At a given moment it may appear that someone is dominating – telling a story of struggle, expressing grief, asking for help in a crisis. Such behaviors become a group issue that needs addressing when this becomes typical or on-going behavior. At a given moment in a group, balancing may not be required or appropriate. Look at the whole session or the patterns of interaction over time.
4. Include the importance, even the practice of balancing needs, in the group rules or norms for the group. Phrases or words that are often used include: sharing the floor, allow time for each to participate, not your (an individual) group but our group, etc.
5. After ground rules are in place, use them when intervening with behaviors that tilt the balance of participation. “Ted, let me interrupt and remind you and others of our ground rule of full participation by all. I want to get others to share their writing.”
6. Be careful to include “positive” behaviors when considering balance. A nice, thoughtful, caring person can dominate a group. It is not only the opinionated, negative, or aversive person who dominates. Interrupt any member who tilts the balance of participation.

Supportive Responses To Persons Who Are Dealing With Loss

Loss of any kind is personal. People respond to losses in different ways, indeed in every way imaginable. Some cry; others wail. Some ask questions; some want answers. Others scream or yell; many are quieter. There are those who want to be alone; many need and want friends and family close-by. Some want distractions like work or just to be doing things; others find it difficult to be active in the midst of their grieving. Many talk a lot; others write their thoughts and feelings on paper. All these examples and more are indications that people are grieving. The most important response is one of acknowledgement that changes have occurred. Here are some suggestions:

- Listen, follow the cues of the other person
- Ask questions, respectfully
- Give permission to repeat his/her story
- Allow tears or laughter
- Provide a place of safety
- Offer your companionship even if it is declined
- Avoid saying, "I know how you feel."
- Don't try to fix it...acknowledge the loss
- Recognize your own reactions
- Support the use of supportive services
- If you offer help, follow through
- Avoid euphemisms
- If you don't know what to say, say that
- Be aware of ripple effects, how others are reacting to this loss
- Provide continuity and stability
- Don't impose your way of grieving on others
- Remember that grief takes time. Allow for later reactions
- Offer practical support
- Use an "I" message when expressing what you want: be clear what you want or need.

Summarization - Recapitulation - Pulling It Together

Summarization is an essential group facilitation skill! It should be routinely used during and at the end of group sessions.

The purposes and functions of summarization include:

To aid group participants in recalling what has been covered/discussed

To aid group participants in organizing and linking various voices and perspectives

To facilitate group process, especially closure of one segment or transition to another

To affirm persons whose voices were included

To invite other voices to the table

To democratize the points made - during a discussion someone's thought or opinion may dominate for a variety of reasons, summarization levels the impact

To reinforce what has been covered - important points deserve repetition

To name differing topics, issues or perspectives that have been a part of the group process for the purpose of choosing one for focused attention

Here are a few examples of ways to summarize.

"Well, we now have lots on the table. Let me summarize so that we can decide about our next options."

"Before you leave today and get caught up in your next tasks, let's review what we have covered. Let's do it as a group. Each of you think of a summarizing statement or the important points we have made with each other."

"As I conclude this overview, let me summarize." Or "As I conclude, here are key points, a summary of what we covered. Let's review it quickly and then add to this list."

"Many important points have been made and made by many of you. Thanks. Let's review how it went today."