

10 Tips for Effective Small Group Facilitation

Facilitating well can make all the difference for the participants to feel safe enough in an event or not. Facilitation means to make “easier” the tasks of group. It is a skill and an art.

Here are 10 tips to help:

1. **Ask open questions to engage the participants to draw from their own experiences and to examine new ideas..** Open questions encourage dialogue and invite ideas, opinions and discussion. Since open questions have no ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, learners are invited to engage with the content and each other, explore and make sense of the topic for themselves.
2. **Wait at least 8 seconds for an answer after asking an open question.** Silence is a difficult thing when we are facilitating. However, people need time to think of what they want to say, whether they want to share and what questions they have.
3. **Listen carefully to all responses and ask for further clarification or even an example.** Your role is to assure that all, which is said, is heard as it was offered. Also it is the role of facilitator to assure that you and the group understands each idea as it adds to the completion of the work of the group.
2. **Affirm all answers.** Learners need to know that every answer, regardless of how strange or different, is heard and even appreciated for what it is. When learners know that all answers are useful answers (although not always correct), they will be encouraged to share.
4. **Encourage Cross-Group-Talk.** Traditionally a facilitator may take the focus of a room and all discussion. Leading rather than facilitating the dialogue. Since leading is less engaging for the participants, the facilitator needs to encourage participants to answer and respond to each other’s ideas and questions. Of course the facilitator ensures that the group is on-task and on-time, but dialogue between learners (rather than between facilitator and participants) can help learning.
5. **Weaving.** Weaving past and future information and stories into what the group is doing will help participants see connections and hook personal ideas into new thoughts and actions.

6. **Talk less, listen more.** The more participants discuss, debate, and assess new ideas, the more they learn and discover new ways of thinking. This means: less of you, more of them.
7. **Use invitational language.** Invitational language is respectful and inviting. Try phrases like: “I want to invite you to think quietly about how this idea may work and what challenges does it suggest before we hear from individuals ...” or “Who would like to share their story with us?” or “Who has a question?” “Please partner with one other and talk this through first, and then we will hear new ideas.”
8. **Sample to keep energy up.** When debriefing table or group work, it is often not necessary to hear from everyone. It is important to honor the work that was completed *and* invite questions. This can be done by sampling: “Let’s hear from 2 groups” or “Let’s hear 1 of your stories” or “Who else haven’t we heard from so far?” Avoid sampling, however, when it is important that the group together make a decision that affects everyone – all voices and ideas may need to be heard in order to make a decision.
9. **Use your co-facilitator.** If you are lucky enough to have someone you are co-facilitating with, use that person. Discuss how you can best support each other and work as a team. Check in with each other if either of you get unsure what to do with a comment or the direction the group seems to be going. Call a break!
10. **Be flexible.** The most critical thing to remember about facilitating is to be flexible. Because we never know exactly how a meeting may go, who may definitely be there, and what unexpected events may arise, you need to be able to shorten an activity, add some important language to a definition and change the format of the dialogue. Maybe you discover there is a very different questions to explore in order to move forward.