

How to Create the Space for Real Dialogue: Some facilitation tips

Pay attention to space. The way the room is set up tells people a lot about how much dialogue can be expected, who is accountable, who is “along for the ride,” and whose viewpoint is considered valuable. Is your room set up so that everyone can see the front of the room and each other? Are people free to move or are they confined to one space or place?



Use partner interactions: Pairs, trios, table groups. These increase engagement, invite in more voices, and create more safety for “rough draft” thinking. Some conversations need to happen in the whole group, but facilitators can move back and forth in ways that keep the energy high, and the dialogue flowing.

Wait at least 5 seconds for an answer after asking a 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.

Encourage crosstalk. People are accustomed to the “teacher” as the focus of a session and all discussion. A facilitator needs to encourage the group to answer and respond to each other’s ideas and questions rather than a back and forth between the participants and the facilitator. A facilitator’s role is to ensure that the group is on-task and on-time.

Affirm all answers. Paraphrase and say, “thank you.” Participants need to know that every answer, regardless of how strange or different, is appreciated and welcomed. When individuals know that all answers are valid, even if they are not universally shared by the group, they will be more open to speaking their minds.

Keep presentations short and focused. Presenters should give people just enough information to make their conversation grounded and meaningful. It is tempting to offer more! Too much information or data crowds out the possibility of dialogue, and quickly sends the message that passive listening is all that will be required here. This is a time for focused dialogue about important data for informed action.