

FACILITATION GUIDELINES

These guidelines are to help you, the workshop facilitator, achieve your own objectives for facilitating discussions and exercises. As a facilitator, you are tasked with monitoring and steering each session's learning process. Unlike a traditional teacher or trainer, you are not responsible for leading the group to any specific conclusions or understandings. Rather, your responsibility is to create a space for workshop participants in which they, and you, can learn from the ideas and experiences of others, disagree within a safe environment, and work together to form consensus. You will create that space through careful pre-planning of room and materials set-up and by engaging in facilitation tactics that promote mutual respect, thoughtful discussion, and an atmosphere of collaboration.

FACILITATION OBJECTIVES

Communication: All facilitation begins with effective communication. Good facilitators are good at observing, listening, articulating, and communicating.

Listening: Workshop sessions are enhanced by the inclusion of multiple perspectives and objectives. Listening involves valuing what others say and giving credit to their suggestions and opinions. An effective listener is one who learns from what she hears.

Building Consensus: Building consensus is an important decision-making process for successful workshops. Through dialogue, individuals within groups, teams, or larger organizations come to understand the points upon which they agree. Decisions are formulated with a mutual understanding of options and possibilities.

Creating Shared Meaning: Small groups and large institutions can benefit from the creation of shared meaning. Through dialogue, consensus building, and shared experience, a core set

of values and principles evolves in which everyone has to some degree participated in formulating and in which everyone has a stake. Shared meaning is an adaptive and flexible approach to goal setting that is influenced by a group's composition and the passage of time. When a group creates shared meaning, each member operates within a framework in which she shares ownership and responsibility.⁷

ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

An effective facilitator listens and learns along with the workshop participants. Your role is to organize the meetings and guide the participants through the workshop exercises. You do not need to be an expert on teaching or know all the answers. Successful discussions will result whenever there is input from many of the participants.

Directing Conversation: Sometimes you may wish to steer the group's conversation in a new direction through thoughtful inquiry. Your job is not to direct the outcome of conversations but merely to steer the direction of the discussion while keeping in mind that there are no "more valid" opinions. In this way, you can ensure that everyone contributes to the learning and knowledge sharing. A good facilitator creates a trusting, neutral environment in which everyone feels safe to express her honest opinion without being judged or attacked. This includes helping participants to feel comfortable enough to disagree with others in a thoughtful and respectful manner. Do not be concerned if there are lengthy silences between comments. These periods are moments when participants can pause for reflection or summon the confidence to speak up.

Stimulating Discussion: Throughout the manual's sessions, questions have been posed to stimulate discussion and debate. The questions are meant only as guidelines to lead the group to explore diverse themes. As long as the group is engaging in relevant and valuable discussions, you should feel free to let conversations deviate from the posed questions. If you have identified individual participants who may be shy or seem to lack the courage to speak up, you can always suggest your own opinion and ask one of them to comment on what you said. As long as you remain sensitive to the needs of the individual participants and to those of the group, are tactful and affirming, and share the responsibility of learning, you are partaking in effective facilitation.

Keeping to the Agenda: At times, a facilitator can best guide a discussion by being an effective timekeeper and reminding the group of the session's agenda. Although workshop group sizes will vary, it is almost always helpful to encourage participants to keep their comments relatively short, not letting one person or a few people monopolize the conversation. This is particularly necessary for those exercises that involve comments from every participant.

7. These facilitation guidelines were adapted from the guidelines in *Leading to Choices: A Leadership Training Handbook for Women*, Women's Learning Partnership, 2001.

A diplomatic way to remind participants to keep their comments relevant to the topic being discussed is to direct your suggestions and instructions to the whole group rather than singling out an individual. Also, consider encouraging participants to listen to what the others are saying and to build upon previous comments.

Sharing Responsibility: Although you are responsible for guiding each workshop session to completion, you do not need to be in charge of every activity or facilitate every discussion. Sharing responsibility can and should be part of organizing the workshop sessions. A simple step is to encourage participants to volunteer to take notes for the group, read aloud instructions or narratives from the manual, and/or to facilitate the discussions. Reassuring a participant that she should not worry about her spelling if she is taking notes, or her pronunciation if she is reading aloud, can go a long way toward making her feel comfortable and inspiring others to volunteer.

Joining In: It is up to you whether you want to join in discussions. However, keep in mind that because you are organizing each session and are to some extent “in control,” participants may give added weight to your opinions and suggestions. Therefore, it is important that you limit your interventions and that when you do express an opinion you qualify it as your own perspective and not the only perspective.

Enjoying Yourself: Remember that you are also participating in the workshop to gain knowledge and to have fun. Enjoy yourself!

ROLE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participants come to workshops for a variety of reasons, with a wide spectrum of preconceptions and expectations about what will take place. Regardless of their level of experience or professional status, the participants’ role is to be both student and teacher, to learn as well as to share knowledge. Workshop sessions are most successful when participants listen attentively, ask questions, and challenge assumptions. Participants are responsible for contributing to discussions, working collaboratively in partnerships or as part of a larger team, and evaluating the process and progress of the sessions. Everyone participating in the workshop will benefit by contributing to a respectful and compassionate atmosphere during the workshop.

SETTING UP THE MEETINGS

It is important that you come to the meeting sessions prepared. Review the material to be covered beforehand to make sure that you understand the manual’s intended objectives and your own objectives for the workshop and for each session. Determine what materials you will need and make sure you plan to have enough of everything. Sessions can take place in an office, public facility,

private home, or anywhere there is quiet and privacy, and where participants will feel comfortable.

You may instruct participants to bring their own pens and paper, or you may supply them yourself. Depending on the room and supplies available where the workshops take place, you may wish to bring chalk for a chalkboard or bright marker pens for writing on a flip chart. Alternatively, bring large sheets of paper and tape or tacks to secure them to the walls. The chalk board, flip chart, or sheets of paper are useful for note-taking in front of the group members so that their ideas and concepts can be easily referred to throughout the session. Recording the discussion highlights on paper is particularly helpful because you can keep the written notes for future reference, referring back to the group's ideas in later sessions.

Among the exercises in the manual are some in which the group is asked to break into teams to carry out an activity. If not all participants have a copy of the manual, you may choose to make photocopies of the instructions for each team. Alternatively, you could write out the instructions in large block letters on a piece of paper and tack it to the wall so that everyone will see it.

Most sessions should last approximately two and a half to three hours. You may wish to supply something to drink or a snack to make participants feel more comfortable. Another possibility is to ask the participants themselves to volunteer to bring snacks. It is really up to you and what you think will work best. If you are unsure about what the participants would like or expect, ask them about their preference at the first session. Most importantly, plan ahead so that you know in advance what will be needed and how the sessions will be organized.

THE FIRST WORKSHOP SESSION

When You Arrive

Arrive early for the first session so that you have time to make sure that the room is set up the way you want it. Check whether there is enough light, heat, and/or fresh air. See whether the seats are arranged to your satisfaction. Although it is not required, seating in a circle is often the very best way to organize a session discussion. A circle arrangement allows everyone an equal view of the rest of the group and the best opportunity to be seen and heard by the others.

When the Participants Arrive

When participants begin to arrive, make them feel welcome. This is especially important if the participants are not already known to each other. If they do not already know you, be sure to introduce yourself and explain that you are the workshop coordinator. If there are snacks available, suggest that participants help themselves and then find a seat near someone else and introduce themselves.

Introductions

Once everyone has arrived, it is often a good idea to go around the whole group and have everyone introduce themselves formally. If the participants already know each other, you can ask them instead to state very briefly their reason for attending or their hopes for the workshop. You should participate in these initial introductions as well. The reason for doing them is to help the group members begin to become familiar with one another and comfortable speaking out.

Explanations

Begin the first session by briefing the participants on what will be discussed and learned over the course of the four-session workshop, and the basic framework of each session. You may wish to do the following:

- Note that each workshop session will last approximately two and a half to three hours.
- Describe a typical session format, including when there will be breaks.
- Explain that volunteers will often be sought to assist with note-taking, time-keeping, reading from the manual, and facilitating discussion, among other activities.

Be sure to ask if anyone has any questions.

CONCLUDING THE WORKSHOP

Depending on the group, participants may end the workshop with an informal party or some other group activity. It is important to plan ahead so that participants leave the workshop feeling that their needs and expectations have been addressed. Before the participants leave after the final session, ask them to fill out the Workshop Evaluation Form provided at the end of this manual. This form is very useful for adjusting and improving future workshop programs. It is helpful to remind participants that they can fill out the form anonymously if they choose. Remember to collect the form from all the participants before they disperse.

AND FINALLY

Compassion and forgiveness are lifetime commitments. No doubt, most of the workshop participants who will use this manual are already compassionate and engaged in creating a tolerant and peaceful world. Our hope is that the workshop sessions will refresh and reinvigorate participants to take a more active role in promoting greater compassion in their work and deepening their capacity for forgiveness in their daily lives.

The next steps are up to the participants themselves.