

Facilitation/Leadership Suggestions

The following are suggestions on ways to facilitate a discussion and how to handle some of the common problems of groups.

How do I facilitate during the discussion?

There are many things that a facilitator can do to help along a discussion depending on the situation and his or her ability and style. The following are some examples:

Equalizing participation.

It is not realistic to assume that each person will participate equally in the discussion. Some will want to participate more or less than the others. The task of the facilitator is to keep one or two persons from dominating the discussion and to provide opportunities for silent members to contribute. "I noticed that Marie and Carl have done most of the talking on this issue. I suggest we go around the group to see how others feel." "Before we go on, I'd like to hear from some of you who haven't spoken yet."

Keeping on the subject.

The facilitator needs to remind the group when the discussion is straying off the subject or when the meeting is not following the agenda. "Are we asking the right questions?" "Are these the most important parts of the issue?" "Are we following our agenda?"

Clarifying and interpreting.

At times you may rephrase something that has been said to make it clearer. Or you may ask another participant to give feedback on something that was said to check on clarity. You might say, for example: "Let me see if I understand your position..." "Before we go on, do you mean that...?" "Mary, would you please restate Luis' last point to see if we all understand?"

Keeping the discussion going.

If the group has run out of steam early, explore some of the ideas raised in greater detail, ask for examples, or probe some unspoken assumptions: "Are there other things we should consider?" "Jeanette, what would you add to what has been said?" "Gerry, will you give some examples of what you meant when you said...?" "Rosa, I get the impression that you are not satisfied with the way the discussion is going. Is that correct?"

Setting the pace.

The facilitator must keep the group aware of how it is proceeding and when it may be time to move on. This includes saying things like: "Has this subject been thoroughly covered? Perhaps we should move on." "Are there other points that haven't been covered yet?"

Summarizing.

Sometimes the facilitator needs to pull together various parts of the discussion and then sum them up or ask someone in the group to do so. Part of this task includes stating what progress you think has been made and where the group is going. "A lot of good recommendations and amendments have been presented in the last few minutes. Will someone please summarize the major points before we go on?" "It's clear that Stephanie does not agree. Stephanie, will you summarize your major objections?" "Before we go on to the next issue, let me check to make sure that all have agreed to..."

How to I handle problems in the group?

Some problems which typically emerge in group discussion situations include:

Someone is not participating.

Reason: When people do not participate in a small group, it is often the result of shyness, anxiety or a lack of confidence in their opinions. Sometimes, however, a person may feel a lack of acceptance by the group or may feel paralyzed by a lack of status.

Solution: Ask questions to draw him or her out, questions which are open-ended and cannot be answered easily by "yes" or "no": "Scott, what is your opinion of..." If there is an area where the person has expertise, ask a specific question in that area: As a Religious Education Coordinator, Julia, what is your view of..." When he or she does take part, make a special note of it: "That's a good point, Felicia. I appreciate hearing your point of view."

Sometimes it is helpful to wait for an opening and then ask a direct question: "Alex, you seem to be holding back on this. Is there something you disagree with?"

Someone is monopolizing the discussion.

Reason: Sometimes a participant is simply passionate about a particular topic and has much to say. More often a monopolizer is someone who, consciously or unconsciously, is involved in a struggle for control of the group. He or she may have an excessive need to impress, to achieve status, or to take on leadership.

Solution: Gently, without embarrassing the monopolizer, interrupt him or her and move on to another participant: "Excuse me, Jack. You've made some excellent points but our timeline is very tight. We've all got to keep our remarks quite brief. May we hear from someone now who hasn't yet expressed an opinion?"

A more direct intervention might say: "Paula, you've had your say. Now it's Joan's turn. Give her a chance to explain."

In addition, avoid making eye contact with the monopolizer when asking the group open-ended questions so as to discourage his or her jumping immediately into the discussion.

Someone is argumentative.

Reason: Sometimes a participant has strong personal convictions which are expressed too forcefully in the group. Or the person may be involved in a leadership struggle within the group. Other times there may be fear that the group is moving toward advocating uncomfortable, unwanted change.

Solution: Using sensitivity and tact, try to make the individual feel there is a genuine interest in what he or she has to say. Good will and objectivity must be readily evident. However, keeping the group from getting dragged into the argument, the facilitator must move the discussion on: "We don't seem able to solve this issue tonight. Since our time is limited, may we move onto another point? Perhaps prayer, more reflection, or something in our later discussion will help us to resolve this issue."

The Brainstorming Process

Brainstorming is a process which aims at collecting as many ideas as possible from a group of informed participants.

Two members need to serve the group in this process. The *facilitator* provides structure, states the question or issue, keeps track of time, ensures that all participate, and makes judicious interventions to keep work on track. The *recorder* writes down the ideas expressed by each person in large and legible print. While the facilitator and recorder can still participate in the process, they must focus on serving the group so that all members contribute their best and most creative ideas.

The process begins with the leader reading a statement describing the kind of decision the group is going to address. As group members generate ideas, the recorder writes them down on a flip chart.

For brainstorming to be effective, the following rules must be observed:

Criticism is not allowed. All evaluation of ideas, whether positive or negative, must be withheld until later.

Free expression and wild ideas are welcome. Wild ideas, impractical suggestions, and expansive creativity are welcome. It is easier to tame down than think up later.

Quantity of ideas is encouraged. The more ideas generated, the more likely it is that there will be a number of useful ones.

Combination and improvement are sought. Group members are asked not only to contribute ideas of their own but to suggest how others' ideas might be improved or combined to make yet other ideas.

Once the facilitator is certain that the group has generated as many ideas as it can, he or she should invite them to review the items and identify those which seem to be duplicates or which could be combined into single items. At any time during this part of the process, people might come up with additional ideas. The facilitator should encourage this and invite them to mention their ideas so they can be recorded. Once the facilitator is confident that the group has produced a list which contains no or few duplications, the group is ready to move to prioritizing and working toward consensus.

Materials/equipment needed:

1. Flip chart
2. Large marking pens of more than one color.
3. Masking tape already torn into short pieces so that sheets can be hung as they are filled. It is important to keep all items in front of participants.
4. Tables and chairs arranged in an open U with the facilitator, recorder, and flip chart at the open end.

Prioritizing

There are typically more brainstorming items than can be usefully analyzed. Nominal group voting is one way to reduce the number of items and help a group develop consensus around the vital issues.

The facilitator explains the rules and then monitors the process to keep it on track. If the facilitator is a member of the group, he or she should participate in the voting.

Process

Before the actual rating process, the facilitator leads a discussion on an understanding of the items and on agreement or disagreement. This should be an open process and should not result in the elimination of any item, category, or header. The purpose is to expand participants' knowledge of the items and to ensure that everyone shares a common understanding. There are two options for what follows: voting or rating.

Option One: Voting

The facilitator tells the participants that they have a certain number of votes which they can distribute in any way they like among the items to be evaluated. They can use one vote for each of several items; they can use all their votes on a single item; they can distribute one to some and more than one to others in any combination. The number of votes is generally one more than half of the items to be evaluated. The most interactive method of voting is to give each participant colored sticky dots and have all go to the sheets and distribute their dots on the items. (If you do not have sticky dots, you can give each participant a marker with which to indicate their votes.) This provides a highly visual picture of the overall voting of the participants. Items with no votes are eliminated from further discussion at this point. The remaining are ranked with the highest vote total being first, the next to the highest vote total, second, and so on.

Option Two: Rating

Another approach is to have participants rank the items in order of their importance. Each participant is asked to rank order from one to the rank number equal to half of the total number of items. The number "1" should be assigned to the most important, "2" to the second most important, and so on. Participants should do the rating on their own. The facilitator then polls the participants and writes the appropriate number down next to the item. Totals are calculated for each item. Those with no votes are eliminated from further discussion at this point and the remaining items are ranked with the lowest numerical total being ranked first, the next to the lowest, second, and so on.

Regardless of the method used, the result typically demonstrates the judgment of the group about those items which are of highest priority and those which are of lesser or

little importance. The voting should not be used to determine the final judgment of the group but only to assist the group in focusing on those items which most people feel are of greatest importance. ***The final conclusion should use the results of the prioritizing but only to reach a consensus of the group which respects the views of all participants.***

Materials/equipment needed

1. Flip chart paper posted so all can see
2. Washable marker pens or colored sticky dots

Consensus Decision Making

Consensus is both a process and an outcome. As an outcome, consensus means that all the members of a group have agreed to support a decision, plan, or process. As a process, consensus is a way of decision making in which all come to a common understanding and agree to support the decision of the whole.

Consensus should not be confused with unanimity. “Unanimity” implies that the decision is the one that each person would have made; “consensus” means that each person can go along with and support the decision. In consensus all members can rephrase the decision to show that they understand it and they have had a chance to tell how they feel about it. Those members who continue to disagree or have doubts will nevertheless publicly state that they are willing to give the decision an experimental try for a period of time.

Consensus

- is of a higher quality when built on prayer
- seeks the will of God as best discerned by the entire group, not one's own will
- is based on mutual trust among persons making the decision
- respects the context within which the decision is sought (e.g. the teachings of the scriptures and the church).

Consensus does not involve

- majority rule (no votes are taken)
- compromise (people don't give in to keep the peace)
- competition (there are no winners and losers)
- quick decisions (working through to consensus takes time)
- dependence on the leader (all engage in the discussion and come to a decision).

There are degrees of consensus, all of which bring about a higher-quality decision than does a majority vote or other methods of decision making.

Benefits of consensus:

- results in greater acceptance, satisfaction, and commitment because each person is valued, respected, and recognized as having some piece of the truth
- builds trust and a bond of mutual interdependence among group members
- gives everyone the opportunity to speak and be heard and, therefore, people do feel heard and understood
- taps into the life experiences of everyone in the group
- produces a level playing field where no one person can control the group or the outcome
- produces better, more creative solutions
- leads to greater satisfaction among participants with both the solution and the process.

Helpful attitudes

- openness
- honesty
- respect for the truth in everyone
- patience
- enthusiastic support for the outcome—often a brand new idea.

Harmful attitudes

- rigidity of opinions
- hostile or suspicious attitude
- determination to win
- sabotaging the process.

Building Consensus

To achieve consensus time must be allowed for all members to state their views and, in particular, their opposition to other members' views. They should get the feeling that others really do understand them. Group members must, therefore, listen carefully and communicate effectively. In reaching consensus, differences of opinion need to be seen as a way of 1) gathering additional information, 2) clarifying issues, and 3) forcing the group to seek better alternatives.

There is no one model for consensus decision making. Here is one example:

- Items on an agenda for a decision should have been thoroughly researched and discussed at a prior meeting or meetings.
- The facilitator introduces the item and opens the floor for input.
- Each member states her or his position and the rationale for the position.
- The facilitator announces the beginning of the discussion phase:
 - Members can ask other members for clarification of a point.
 - Members can state support of another member's position.
 - Members can offer a new position.
 - Members cannot restate or lobby for their position.
- The facilitator listens closely to the discussion for signs of a building consensus.
- When it appears there is consensus, the facilitator asks:
 - Do we have a consensus that.....
 - Is there anyone who cannot live with this decision?
- Members either affirm that there is consensus or the discussion continues as above until there is a new consensus.
- If the group cannot reach consensus, they table the item for decision at a later meeting. Time for individual and shared prayer can allow the group to move forward.

Basic guidelines for consensus decision making:

- Avoid arguing blindly for your own individual judgments.
- Present your position as clearly and logically as possible.
- Listen to other members' reactions and consider them carefully before pressing your point.
- Avoid changing your mind solely to reach agreement and avoid conflict. Support only decisions with which you are at least somewhat able to agree. Yield only to positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.
- Avoid "conflict reducing" procedures such as majority vote, tossing a coin, averaging, or bargaining in reaching decisions.
- Seek out differences of opinion. They are natural and expected. Try to involve everyone in the decision process. Disagreements can help the group's decision because they present a wide range of information and opinions, thereby creating a better chance for the group to hit upon a more adequate solution.
- Discuss underlying assumptions, listen carefully to one another, and encourage the participation of all members.
- Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose when discussion reaches a stalemate. Instead, look for the next most acceptable alternative for all members.