

Facilitating Meetings



Have you ever sat through a meeting that has dragged on and on, with tempers running high, people talking over each other and no decisions being made? Or maybe one person dominates the whole meeting and makes all the decisions, leaving you to wonder why you bothered turning up? Most of us can manage sitting through such a meeting a couple of times, but then we start finding excuses not to go any more, or at least wish we didn't have to.

Unfortunately this pattern is very common in groups of all kinds. It leads to frustration, inefficiency and eventually loss of group members. However with the goodwill of the group it is quite easy to turn around the style of meetings and actually make them an enjoyable and inspiring experience for everyone.



This briefing explores the concept of facilitation and how it can help in creating successful and positive meetings. It is primarily aimed at groups using consensus decision making, a process that



involves all members of the group in reaching an agreement that is acceptable to everyone.

However, facilitation can help any meeting work more effectively.

To find out more about consensus decision making please have a look at our

various *consensus briefings*. For a discussion of tools used in facilitation see our briefing *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops* (available from our website: www.seedsforchange.org.uk). Underlined terms are explained in the glossary at the end.

The role of meetings in group work

Meetings are a necessary part of working in any group – they give us the chance to share information, to reach decisions and to get jobs done. But meetings have another important function, which is often forgotten about – **group maintenance** (see box right). A good meeting not only gets work done, but also involves, supports and empowers the participants, creating a high level of energy and enthusiasm. A sense of community and connection to fellow group members is the basis for successful group work and social change. Good facilitation will help you to achieve all of this.

Was the meeting successful?

Tasks – what got done? Did you get the necessary results? Were problems solved, and were the objectives of the group met?

Maintenance – How did it get done? How did people feel and how will this affect morale and group cohesion? Did the meeting make good use of the pooled talents? Was it enjoyable?

What the dictionary says:

Facilitation – Fa-sill-i-tay-shun noun. *making easy, the act of assisting or making easier the progress or improvement of something.*

What is facilitation?

Facilitation is about helping the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. It combines a series of roles and tasks. These are often embodied in one person – the facilitator – but we encourage groups to think in terms of shared facilitation, with everyone sharing the responsibility for ensuring a meeting is well run, productive and participative.

Facilitation tasks include:

- ✓ helping the group decide on a structure and process for the meeting and keeping to it;
- ✓ keeping the meeting focussed on one item at a time until decisions are reached;
- ✓ regulating the flow of discussion – drawing out quiet people, or those with the most relevant expertise, and limiting those who tend to do a lot of the talking;
- ✓ clarifying and summarising points, testing for consensus and formalising decisions;

- ✓ helping the group deal with conflicts;
- ✓ keeping the meeting to time;
- ✓ ensuring that a written record is made of any action points and decisions agreed at the meeting.

To ensure that the group is using the most effective means of working through topics the facilitator might introduce tools such as ideastorming, go-rounds or small group discussions. See the Glossary of Tools below, and our Briefing on *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops* for more information.

Learn to facilitate



Facilitation is a vital role that needs to be filled at every meeting. In small groups this function may be shared or rotated informally while difficult meetings or meetings with a larger number of participants (more than 8 or 10 people) should always have a clearly designated and experienced facilitator. However, all members of any meeting should feel responsible for the progress of the meeting, and help the facilitator if necessary.

Facilitating or chairing?

Superficially a facilitator fills a role similar to that of the traditional chairperson. There are however important differences:

- ✗ a facilitator never “directs” the group without its consent;
- ✗ at no time does the facilitator make decisions for the group or take on functions which are the responsibility of the group as a whole;
- ✓ a good facilitator stays neutral and helps the members of the meeting be aware that it is *their* business that's being conducted. The success of the meeting is the mutual responsibility of the whole group. The facilitator needs to be aware of this and always get the group's agreement before using processes or tools.

Who should facilitate?

The role of facilitator can be learnt by everyone – use your own experience of meetings and observe other facilitators. Learn from mistakes, from bad meetings as well as good ones. If the role of facilitator is rotated amongst group members, people can develop these skills. It is well worth running some training, aside from normal meeting times, to practice facilitation skills. These skills are not only useful in group

meetings but also in informal settings, at work and at home.

Be aware that people's behaviour in groups is influenced by individual needs and past positive and negative experiences in groups. Try to spot your own negative behaviour patterns and work on identifying your own and other people's needs. For more on this see the section **Disruptive Behaviour** below.

A facilitator's skills and qualities

Good listening skills

including strategic questioning to be able to understand everyone's viewpoint properly.

Confidence

that good solutions will be found and consensus can be achieved.

Assertiveness

– know when to intervene decisively and give some direction to the meeting.

Energy and attention for the job at hand.

Respect for all participants and interest in what each individual has to offer.

Understanding of the aim of the meeting as well as long-term goals of the group.

Neutrality on the issues discussed. Trust in the facilitator is dependent on them avoiding manipulating the meeting towards a particular outcome. If this becomes difficult, or you know in advance that you'll struggle to remain impartial try:

- ◆ stepping out of role and letting someone else facilitate;
- ◆ making it clear when you're expressing your own opinion and when you're intervening as the facilitator;
- ◆ trusting that someone else will express your thoughts or feelings on the issue;
- ◆ asking someone else, in advance, to ensure your opinion is mentioned.

Clear thinking and observation – pay attention both to the content of the discussion and the process. How are people feeling? What is being said?

Co-facilitation roles at a meeting

Instead of just one facilitator you may have two or more **co-facilitators**. You can share out more facilitation tasks amongst the group and make the job of facilitating easier and less intimidating. It is important for co-facilitators to agree before the meeting exactly what the roles in the meeting are and when and why they may change roles.

Co-facilitators can take turns and support each other. This is useful if the facilitator needs to step out of her/his role to take part in the discussion, have a break or when back-up is needed in cases of tension, conflict or confusion. Four ears hear better than two, so co-facilitators are useful to check understanding of what is being said.

Taking hands: One of the co-facilitators can take on the job of keeping track of whose turn it is to speak next, and of giving appropriate time limits to speakers.

Vibes-watching: Someone not actively facilitating can pay more attention to the emotional atmosphere of the meeting and watch out for individual members being affected. In situations of conflict and distress the vibes-watcher will intervene, for example by taking on the role of an intermediary, by taking time out with someone to listen to their concerns or suggest breaks and tools to improve the atmosphere of the meeting. Good vibes-watchers are able to sense underlying feelings by listening carefully and being aware of

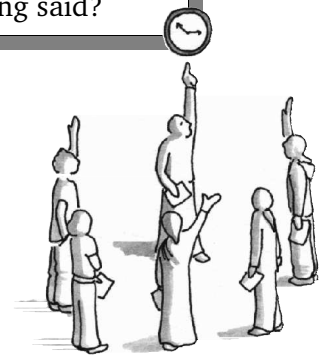
body language.

The timekeeper draws attention to the agreed time frame for the meeting and keeps the group to it, negotiating extensions for particular agenda items, or for the meeting as a whole, if needed.

Notetakers play a vital role at meetings: they keep track of decisions, take minutes or notes, collect reports, and also draw attention to incomplete decisions – e.g.: who is going to contact so and so, and when? Notetakers can also provide a summary of the discussion if needed.

A **doorkeeper** is useful in public meetings or when some people may be late. The doorkeeper welcomes newcomers or latecomers and brings them up to speed on the meeting – aims, what's been covered so far in the agenda, how decisions are being made, as well as the practical 'house-keeping' information such as tea and toilets. A doorkeeper can prevent the flow of a meeting being interrupted to recap every time someone enters the room.

In very large meetings it is advisable to have a **practical co-ordinator** responsible for the venue, equipment, refreshments and notices. The co-ordinator can also gather people together to start on time.



Facilitating a meeting - beginning to end

This section gives an overview of the tasks a facilitator may need to undertake in a meeting. Every meeting is different. Not all the points mentioned may be appropriate – use your own judgement and innovation. Whilst it's important that these tasks happen, it doesn't have to be the facilitator that does them all! Draw on volunteers in the group to help with the facilitation. Make sure that the goals of the group and members' expectations of the facilitator are clear to everyone. This allows the appropriate use of tools and suggestions.

1) Preparing the meeting

1. Prepare an effective agenda (*see box below*).
2. Ensure everyone is informed about time, place and content of the meeting. Send out pre-meeting materials if necessary. Don't just rely on email, unless you know everyone has internet access and uses it regularly.
3. Consider physical arrangements such as temperature, air quality, ability to hear and see. Think about any special needs people might have and how to cater for them. Arrange the seating in an inclusive way – some groups find circles are best because they allow everyone to see each other, while other groups prefer rows so that people can seat themselves according to how committed they feel to the group. In the case of rows, many groups find a V formation useful, like sergeant's stripes with the point away from the front.
4. Gather materials needed for the meeting, e.g. watch, pens, marker pens, flipcharts, written presentations and proposals.
5. Find a co-facilitator who can take over in an emergency, if the main facilitator tires or wants to participate more actively in the discussion.

To find out more have a look at our briefings *Organising Successful Meetings* and *Access Issues*.

The meeting agenda

A well structured agenda is vital for a good meeting. The facilitator can help the group draw up agendas that are focussed on the aims of the meeting and are realistic. Remember: if the meeting is only an hour long, there should only be an hour's worth of items on the agenda!

You can either draw up the agenda at the beginning of the meeting, or better still prepare a proposed agenda in advance. It's important that everyone gets a chance to have an input and that the agenda is agreed by everyone.

To create an agenda first agree the aims for the meeting and then collect agenda items from the group, preferably in advance. Estimate the time needed for each item. Think about priorities for this meeting – what could be tackled another time or in separate working groups? Think about effective tools for controversial topics. Deal with difficult items after the group has warmed up but before it is tired. Alternate short and long items. How should the meeting start and end? Plan in breaks, especially for meetings longer than 1½ hours. Plan in an evaluation of the meeting near the end so you can learn for next time.

Sample meeting agenda for the Stop Newton Bypass Campaign

Start 7.00pm

- ★ Introductions (10min)
- ★ Short summary of the campaign (5min)
- ★ Report back from working groups: media, finance, research, stalls (20min)
- ★ Should we meet with the planners? Questions to ask (30min)
- ★ **Break** (20min)
- ★ Xmas do – when and where (10min)
- ★ Organising more stalls/leafleting (30min)
- ★ Next meetings (5min)
- ★ Any other business (10min)
- ★ Evaluation (10min)

End 9.30pm

Write up the proposed agenda where everyone will be able to see it (on a whiteboard or flipchart, for example) or make copies to give to everyone. This will be helpful during the meeting as well as democratising the process of agenda formation.

Ask yourself what you can cut from the agenda, or trim down if anything runs over your proposed time. Have some suggestions up your sleeve.

2) Getting the meeting off to a good start

A good start is to introduce yourself and explain the role of the facilitator(s).

Have an **introductory activity**. What you do really depends on the group. It might be a formal icebreaker or a few minutes chat – whatever you do make sure you don't alienate anyone, especially newcomers to the meeting. If people don't know each other or there are newcomers to the group, get everyone to introduce themselves – really important for welcoming new people. Encourage people to share more than just their names. You could ask everyone to state in a couple of sentences why they are here, or to share an interesting skill they have (e.g. "I can compose poetry in Mongolian"). Or ask for their favourite colour, food etc. If there are too many people this could be done in smaller groups.

Set the boundaries of the meeting: explain the time frame, subject, aims of meeting, the process for making decisions, the responsibilities of the facilitator and what you aim to do. Agree with the group what behaviour is acceptable/not acceptable in the meeting (e.g. one person speaking at a time, non-sexist and non-racist language, no dominating or threatening behaviour). This may be agreed for a series of meetings, or unique to a particular meeting. It can be useful to have the group agreement, as it's sometimes called, on display to remind people of what the group agreed on.

Explain the proposed agenda, then ask for comments and make necessary changes. Be careful not to spend half the meeting discussing which item should go where – if necessary be firm. Allocate time for each item and set a realistic finishing time. Keep to this. If using consensus decision making make allowance for extra time to go deeper into the issue if necessary.

Ensure **roles** such as notetaker, timekeeper and vibes-watcher are covered.

3) During the meeting

Go through the agenda item by item. Keep the group focussed on one item at a time until a decision has been reached, even if that decision is to shelve it for some other time.

Use short items, fun items, announcements and breaks throughout the agenda to provide rest and relief from the more taxing items.

Make sure that decisions on action steps include **what, how, who, when** and **where**. Ensure any action points are noted down along with who will do them and any deadline.

If new items come up in the discussion make sure they get noted down to be dealt with later. You could choose to use a 'parking space' (see the glossary at end).

Invite and move forward discussion. Clarify proposals that are put forward. State and restate the position of the meeting as it appears to be emerging until agreement is reached.

Introduce tools such as ideastorming options, forming small groups for discussion, delegating to working groups, and go-rounds, to make the meeting more efficient and participatory.

Regulate the flow of discussion by calling on speakers in an appropriate order. Often this will be as they indicate they want to speak (see hand-

signals). Sometimes you may ask more vocal people to hold back from speaking in order to let others have their say.



Help everyone to participate: draw out quiet people, limit over-talking, don't let anyone dominate the discussion. Use tools such as talking sticks or breaking into small groups to equalise participation and to create a safe atmosphere for expressing opinions and feelings.

Check on the overall feeling of the group throughout the meeting: check energy levels, interest in the subject, whether the aims are being fulfilled, whether the structure is appropriate (large or small groups) and time.

Be positive: use affirmation and appreciation; comment on special contributions of members and accomplishments of the group. Be even-handed and don't just affirm a few individuals.

In tense or tiring situations try humour, affirmation, games, changing seats, silence, taking a break etc. Some groups might rebel at the suggestion of "wasting time" on a game, but will welcome a stretch break or informal hilarity.

Challenge put-downs and discriminatory remarks.

4) Ending the meeting

Make sure a **time and place for the next meeting** has been agreed and that people leave their contact details if they want to be updated or receive minutes for the meeting. Do this before people start leaving.

Sum up, remind people of what they're committed to doing before the next meeting, and provide some satisfying closure to the meeting.

Check that someone has taken responsibility for **writing up and circulating the minutes or notes** in the next few days.

Facilitating Consensus

The key to helping a group towards consensus is to help all members of the group *express their needs and viewpoints clearly, map out common ground and find solutions to any areas of disagreement*. Active listening, summarising and synthesis are three skills that help the facilitator with this.



1) Active listening

Active listening is a key facilitation skill – without it a facilitator simply can't do his or her job. When we **actively listen** we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand another person's position and their underlying needs. We simply listen, and we don't just listen with our ears. We also use our body language, eye contact and where appropriate verbal cues – short questions or comments – to help the speaker formulate their thoughts and let them know that they are being listened to.

Active listening helps facilitators in several ways. It helps us to *understand how the speaker feels* about a subject or situation and the *underlying emotions, concerns, and tensions*. It allows us to focus on the *core issues* of a speaker's message. It enables us to *hear what the speaker is actually saying to us*, and not what we want to hear. It also shows the speaker that we are interested in what they have to say.

2) Summarising

Listening on its own is a great tool for diagnosing problems and hearing underlying issues. There's a second stage to active listening that can help a group move forwards – succinctly summarising what's been said. Summarising reassures speakers they are being heard, and it can also help to focus meetings. Examples include: summarising after a period of discussion to clarify where you think the meeting has got to; or summarising after a particularly rambling speaker to ensure that everyone understood the essence of the point that they made.

Some people find it helpful to take notes or write up key issues on a flipchart as the discussion happens. This makes a succinct and accurate summary much easier.

Summarising effectively

- ◆ Wait until the speaker has finished.
- ◆ Offer the summary tentatively and allow people to correct you if you get it wrong. Use phrases such as: “you seem to feel that...”, “what I hear you saying is.... is that right?” But we need to be careful how we phrase it. If we say something like: “so you feel that...” and the speaker doesn't agree 100% then we may risk offending our speaker by misrepresenting them.
- ◆ Summarise succinctly – try to boil things down into one or two short sentences.
- ◆ Rephrase rather than parrot – this shows we've understood the key issues and feelings that were expressed. “What I hear you saying is that you feel we need to restrict noise after 10pm because you need a good night's sleep to be able to function in the meeting tomorrow”.

3) Synthesis

When working to reach consensus we bring together different ideas and try to find a proposal that is agreeable to everyone. We call this process *synthesis*: it maps out the common ground, finds connections between seemingly competing ideas and weaves them together to form proposals.

Synthesis is based on active listening, which allows us to hear the emerging common ground as well as unresolved differences.

Start with a summary of where you think the group and its different members are at: “it seems like we've almost reached agreement on that element of the proposal, but that we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns.” It's important to not only pick up on clear differences, but also on more subtle agreement or disagreement.

Start with whatever agreement there is and build the proposal from that. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have. Often people are willing to give way on some things yet not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different proposals.

As with summarising it can really help to use a flipchart to write up the areas of agreement and issues to be resolved. This means everyone can see what's happening and focus the discussion.

People often argue over small details and overlook the fact that they agree on the big picture. Making this obvious to the group can help to provide ways forward.

Even when there is strong disagreement within the group, synthesis can help move the discussion on. Always try and find some common ground, no matter how small: “so we're all agreed that climate change demands urgent action, even if we disagree on whether the solution lies in developing new technologies, or reducing consumption”. This can reinforce that we're all on the same side, and remind a group of their overall shared aims – a necessary condition for consensus.

Also synthesising a solution doesn't necessarily mean uniformity or unanimity. Sometimes a solution is staring us in the face, but our desire to get full agreement becomes an obstacle: “so we're all agreed we'd like to go ahead with the protest. However some feel strongly that the target of our protest should be government, and others feel it ought to be corporations – is there any reason why we have to choose between the two? Could we not agree that both can happen?”

Dealing with problems in meetings

There are two types of problem that facilitators often face: disruptive behaviour and blocks in the process of the meetings, for example when the group simply can't seem to reach a decision or lacks focus during the meeting.

In all cases it's important to get to the bottom of the underlying issues. Develop your ability to spot problems and try to work out why they are happening. Don't just ask “what is happening?” Also ask “why is it happening?”

Disruptive behaviour

This type of problem revolves around individuals in the group and is sometimes called problem behaviour. Examples include dominating individuals who talk at the expense of others, or the cynic that shoots down every idea that's raised in the meeting.

Whenever you're dealing with a 'difficult' participant, it's vital that you remember that the problem is their *behaviour* and not them as a *person*. It's also important to realise that they're rarely deliberately making life difficult for you. Chances are, that at some level the meeting isn't addressing their needs. By increasing people's ownership of the meeting you can increase their commitment to the outcomes, as well as improving behaviour in meetings.

Addressing people's needs

We all bring a number of needs with us, whenever we work in a group. Most of them are quite simple, and rather obvious. We need to feel that we are being treated fairly. We need our expertise and experience to be valued and our ideas and opinions to be heard. We need to feel part of a group and we need to feel like we're getting something useful done.

When these needs aren't fulfilled people can easily feel alienated from the meeting. This often expresses itself in disruptive behaviour. For example, they feel they had no say in the choice of agenda, and consequently can't see the relevance to them. Or maybe they feel that the meeting is a waste of time because their opinion won't be considered when it comes to making the final decision.

Planning an interactive meeting agenda, then facilitating it in a way that allows everyone to participate should leave everyone happy from the start, and problems shouldn't arise. But if they do, discover why it's happening – *what are the underlying causes?* That way you can figure out what to do about it. If you're ever unsure ask the group what the problem is and actively listen to the answer!

Dominating behaviour

It's common that groups have a handful of dominant personalities who do most of the groups' talking and organising. Don't tolerate it just because it happens. It can be very destructive for the group in the long-term. See *Example Problem* box below for ideas of how to deal with dominant behaviour.

Example Problem Disruptive Behaviour

Tom is talking all the time and dominating the meeting. Hardly any one else gets a chance to speak.

Underlying causes

- ◆ It may be due to power imbalance. Tom might hold a more senior position in the group hierarchy (formally or informally) – maybe he's a long-standing member of the group.
- ◆ Perhaps there's a deficit of knowledge in the group – only some people know enough about the issue to feel confident in speaking.
- ◆ Perhaps Tom receives all

the group's mail or emails. He naturally feels like he knows the most, and does a lot of talking to keep the rest of the group informed.

- ◆ Maybe Tom's not very sensitive to group dynamics. He's not being deliberately rude, but he simply doesn't realise he's so dominant.

Possible solutions

The facilitator can equalise speaking time by using tools such as the following.

- ◆ Introduce a go-round: each person speaks in turn for a set amount of time, with no interruptions or questions

allowed.

- ◆ Make a group agreement at the start of the meeting to remind participants to let everyone contribute equally.
- ◆ Pro-actively ask other people for their opinion: "Thank you, Tom, for your great ideas. What do other people think?"
- ◆ Share out information before the meeting so everyone is as well informed as Tom. Share out mailings and emails or have a short presentation at the start.

Dealing with blocks in the process

Time pressure

Time constraints on finding a solution to an urgent problem leads to stress. We need to allow enough time in the meeting for issues to be dealt with adequately. Prioritise which decisions need to be taken right then and which ones can wait a while. Some decisions could be delegated to smaller groups.

Lack of focus

Avoid having meetings in which several issues are being discussed at once. State clearly what the issue is and what needs to be decided about it. Explain when the other issues will be discussed and stop people from going off on tangents. Make a note of any new issues that come up and park them for later in the parking space.

The group can't reach a decision

A real consensus comes only after bringing differences out into the open. Encourage everyone to present their viewpoints, especially when they may be conflicting. This requires broad discussion and enough time.

Listen carefully for agreements and concerns and the underlying issues. What's at the root of people's worries? This helps with drawing up a proposal that takes them into account.

Test for agreement periodically. This helps to clarify disagreements. State the tentative consensus in the form of a question and be specific. If you are not sure how to phrase the question ask for help.

When there is time pressure or the group has lapsed into nit-picking, it can help to state the perceived agreement in the negative: "Is there anyone who does not agree that...?"

When no agreement can be reached, try the following:

- ★ ask those disagreeing for alternative proposals;
- ★ propose a break, silent thinking time, or postponing the decision to give people time to cool down and reflect. If the decision is postponed it is often a good idea to engage conflicting parties in conflict resolution before the issue is brought up again;
- ★ agree a process for taking a decision that all parties can sign up to.

When one or two people are blocking consensus, ask if they are prepared to stand aside, to allow the group to proceed with the action (*standing aside = not being involved in implementing a decision or its consequences*). It may help if the group assures them that the lack of unity will be recorded in the minutes, that the decision does not set a precedent and that they won't be expected to implement the decision.

Facilitating problems



Step 1: actively listen for the underlying issue behind the problem.



Step 2: choose an appropriate facilitation tool to deal with the underlying issue.



Step 3: the underlying issue is dealt with and the problem is solved.

Example Problem Problem Process

The group has been talking about the current agenda item for well over an hour and still doesn't seem to be anywhere near a decision. It doesn't feel like any progress is being made.

Underlying causes

- ◆ Maybe the group doesn't have all the information it needs to make a well informed decision.
- ◆ Perhaps the group is tired and unfocused.
- ◆ If it's a complex issue, maybe the range of possibilities is confusing the group.
- ◆ The group may be nearer to a solution than it realises, but isn't hearing its own common ground.

Possible solutions

- ◆ Check with the group whether everyone feels well enough informed. If not, ideastorm a list of questions that need answering and work out who will do the necessary research. Can the meeting be put on hold briefly, whilst someone does research on the web, or do you need to come back to it another time?
- ◆ Take a break or do an energising activity, then try one of the other solutions.
- ◆ Have a go-round to check where each person is in relation to the discussion – what do they think the obstacles are to making a decision? What are their favourite solutions? Then summarise.
- ◆ If the discussion is complex, break it down into its component parts. Maybe use small groups. Each small group can take one component part or possible solution and explore it in more depth before reporting back.
- ◆ Use your active listening skills to summarise the discussion so far – what have been the main concerns? Is there any agreement (no matter how small)? Stating areas of agreement can lift the group's spirits.
- ◆ Restate the aims of the discussion to refocus the group.

Don't mistake silence for consent – insist on a response from every participant. The group should be conscious of making a contract with each other. If an agreement is reached too easily then test to make sure that members really are fully supportive of the decision and do agree on essential points.

If there are limits to the level of participation available to individuals, make these clear right at the start of the meeting. Are people simply being consulted, or asked to make a decision?

Facilitating large group meetings

Large group meetings pose particular challenges for facilitators. Any more than 12 people can exhibit all the characteristics of a big group – it doesn't have to be hundreds of participants.

Large groups can:

- ★ make it more difficult for less assertive people to participate. Not everyone is comfortable speaking in front of a large meeting;
- ★ be easily dominated by a confident few;
- ★ have a slower pace and lower energy than smaller groups – taking longer to reach decisions.

Preparing meetings for larger groups

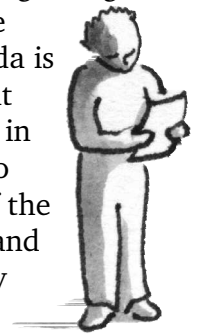
Planning: Larger group meetings need more preparation and planning. Often a tight structure will be useful, however this can also be overly restrictive for the meeting. Try to strike a balance between structure and open flow.

Agenda items: Which items need to be discussed and agreed by everyone? Which can be delegated to smaller groups? Not everyone needs to discuss the exact wording of the news release, or the order of bands for the benefit gig!

Time: Allow extra time for large group meetings so that people feel that there's been adequate discussion and an opportunity for people to express and hear all the ideas. Cutting off discussion and forcing a decision will leave lots of people feeling disempowered and frustrated.

The facilitation team: You will need a facilitation team who all know exactly what job they are doing – someone to facilitate, someone to take hands, someone to write up notes on a flip chart, maybe a separate timekeeper and a doorkeeper, someone to prepare refreshments.

Clear process: Take time at the beginning of the meeting to explain clearly how the meeting will work, what the agenda is like, how decisions are made, what guidelines there are for behaviour in meetings. Make use of flipcharts to write up the agenda, key points of the discussion, key decisions etc. Try and ensure the flipchart can be seen by everyone in the group.



Large plenaries and working in small groups

In large groups it's sensible to consider whether you can delegate any of the issues to a smaller group. However, sometimes the issues will be so important that they have to be discussed and decided by everyone. It can also be very inspiring to have an open discussion with everyone – collectively coming to good decisions and seeing that everyone supports the agreement reached.

Large and small group processes can be combined to deal with some of the drawbacks of large meetings. Large group plenaries can be used to share information, making proposals and final decision-making. Splitting into small groups can speed up some of the discussion phases.

The advantages of breaking into small groups for discussion are that they create safer, more dynamic spaces to work in and include more

people in a discussion. Small groups can each discuss different elements of a topic, covering more ground in a shorter time.

However, some people resist small group work. It requires trust to let other people go away and discuss an issue, and that trust isn't always present, especially in groups that don't know each other well. Some people just like having a larger audience, and feel that their ideas are so important they should be heard by everyone. Sometimes people struggle to choose between working groups.

As the facilitator, you need to offer reassurance. Explain why you want to use small groups and that there will be feedback, so everyone will get to hear and comment on what other groups discussed.

More information

For an in-depth discussion of consensus decision-making in large groups see our *consensus briefings*. Open Space Technology is another tool for large groups (*see Further Reading below*) that allows people to dip in and out of smaller groups as they see fit.

Glossary of Tools

(For more tools see our briefing *Facilitation Tools for Meetings and Workshops*)

Excitement sharing: people share something good or exciting that has happened to them recently or since the last meeting. Good at start of meetings as it creates a lot of positive energy and puts people more in touch with each other's lives.

Group Agreement: the group agrees at the beginning of the meeting what behaviour will help make the meeting a safe, respectful place for everyone. May include things like: switch off phones; no smoking; one person speaking at a time; no put-downs; respect etc.

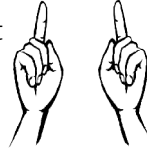
Go-rounds: everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas as well as slowing down the discussion and improving listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.

Handsignals can make meetings run more smoothly and help the facilitator see emerging agreements. Three simple signals should suffice:

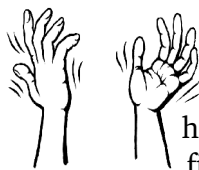


Raise a hand when you wish to contribute to the discussion with a general point.

Raise both hands if your point is a direct response to the current discussion. This allows you to jump to the head of the queue, so use it wisely and discourage overuse!



'Silent applause' – when you hear an opinion that you agree with, wave a hand with your fingers pointing upwards. This saves a lot of time as people don't need to chip in to say "I'd just like to add that I agree with..."



Ideastorming gathers a large number of ideas quickly. Start by stating the issue. Ask people to say whatever comes into their heads as fast as possible – without censoring or discussion. This encourages creativity and frees energy. Write down all ideas for later discussion.

Paired listening creates a space where everyone is heard, so participants can explore and formulate their own thoughts and feelings on an issue without interruption. In pairs, one person is the listener, the other speaks about her thoughts and feelings on the issue. The listener gives full attention to their partner without interrupting. After a set time swap roles within the pairs.



Parking space: when something comes up that's not relevant to the discussion at hand "park" it in the parking space (a large sheet of paper on the wall) and deal with it at an appropriate time later. This allows you to stay focused but reassures participants they will be heard.

Small Groups create safer spaces for people to contribute to the meeting. They can also make meetings more efficient – any topics are discussed more effectively in a smaller task group, and different groups can discuss different topics simultaneously. Explain clearly what you want groups to do. Write up the task where people can see it. If you want feedback at the end, ensure each group appoints a notetaker to report back.

Talking stick: people may speak only when they hold the talking stick. This makes people conscious of when they interrupt others.

Throw back to the group – many facilitators feel they have to deal with all the problems that arise in meetings. Where possible, let the group do the work. If someone asks a question, you don't have to answer it so throw it back to the group. Get them to make the major decisions about things like time, and priorities for the meeting.

Top Tips for Facilitators

- ★ Design a good agenda. Be realistic about what the meeting can achieve. Set time limits and tackle all points.
- ★ Be aware of both content and process.
- ★ Keep the group moving towards its aims.
- ★ Use a variety of facilitation tools to keep everyone interested.
- ★ Create a safe and empowering atmosphere to get the best contribution from everyone.
- ★ Put a stop to domineering, interrupting, put-downs and guilt trips.

Further Reading

- **Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making**, Sam Kaner with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger, New Society Publishers, 1996, ISBN: 0-86571-347-2
- **Democracy in Small Groups – Participation, Decision-Making and Communication**, John Castill, New Society Publishers, 1993. ISBN: 0 86571 274 3
- **Resource Manual for a Living Revolution**, Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, Christopher Moore, New Society Publishers, 1981, ISBN: 0-86571-008-2
- **Working with Conflict**, Fisher et al, Zed Books, 2000. ISBN: 1-85649-837-9
- **The Mediator's Handbook**, Jennifer E. Beer with Eileen Stief, New Society Publishers, 3rd edition, 1997. ISBN: 0-86571-359-6, developed by Friends Conflict Resolution Programs
- **From Conflict to Cooperation – How to Mediate A Dispute**, Dr Beverly Potter, Ronin Publishing, 1996. ISBN: 0-914171-79-8
- **Open Space Technology: A User's Guide**, Harrison Owen, Berret-Koehler, 1997. ISBN: 1-57675-024-8

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