

Facilitating a group

This note offers a repertoire of commonly used interventions. Of course, not all are appropriate in every situation. All should be used with a clear intent and with consideration of the appropriate delivery and timing.

Describe the purpose or desired outcome

Begin the discussion by clearly stating what the purpose is, or what you hope to achieve: to identify the causes of a problem, to seek views on a proposal, to identify the most appropriate course of action, etc.

Ensure the task is clear and acceptable

Discover and write up people's expectations. Check that everybody understands the task and is willing to address it. Make sure everybody is starting from the same level of knowledge. Ensure that the scope and boundaries of the task are clear and that any assumptions you are making are explicit.

Provide information

This may be appropriate in the early stages, and at other key points, but needs to be handled with great care. It is easy to overdo. If challenged, be careful to avoid becoming defensive.

Structure the discussion

This may be no more complicated than identifying the problem before discussing the solutions or generating a set of options before seeking to choose between them. Proposing and then helping people stick to such a structure can be profoundly helpful.

Ask questions

Questions need to be relevant, clear and fairly specific. If you think you already know the answer, beware of getting into the situation where you are playing "guess my list": be open to the possibility of novel points of view.

Clarify individual contributions

Check that you have understood what people are really saying and why. Listen for the real meaning and significance. Be prepared to probe their comments with supplementary questions.

Summarise the discussion

Draw together individual comments: “so, we are saying that the main problem is”. This gives a feeling of progress and achievement and is a very good way of maintaining control.

Manage the interaction

Notice who is not contributing and draw them in - most easily by asking them directly. Notice who is trying to speak but can't get in and help them in : “I think you wanted to say something there, Fred”. Try to contain those who talk too much: “Thank you Jim. Now, what do other people think?”. (Other techniques: direct questions to other members, set a time limit for contributions, establish a rule so that “no one can speak twice until everyone has spoken once” etc.).

Provide direction

Normally this will be at the content rather than process level. Identify key issues and conclusions, propose ways of resolving or taking forward issues, extract actions and decisions.

Provide feedback

It can be helpful to draw attention to patterns of behaviour exhibited by individuals or by the group as a whole. Try to do so in a descriptive rather than judgemental way.

Confront and challenge

This may concern inconsistencies and contradictions e.g. “It seems to me that some of us are saying X and others are saying Y - which is it?” Try to discover the basis for the disagreement. It may also be necessary to confront inappropriate behaviour.

Provide support and affirmation

Show acceptance of people's views and contributions. (This does not necessarily mean agreeing with them of course.) Build on and link what people say. Encourage and support both individuals and the whole group if things get difficult.

Keep a record

Recording points made on a flip chart is one of the easiest ways, but be very careful to use the exact words rather than rewrite it in your jargon or language.