



## **Introduction to Facilitation**

Good facilitation can go a long way towards making meetings successful. Facilitators have a lot of responsibility, but not a lot of actual power. Their role is to guide the group through an effective process, but not to unduly influence what decisions get made. If a facilitator feels strongly about the issue at hand, they may need to step out of their role and speak as a participant.

A facilitator should keep an eye on the big picture. Remind the group of the goal of the current item: is this a brain storming session, or does a final decision need to be reached at the meeting? Does the proposal need to be sent to a committee for further research before a decision can be made?

Restate points of agreement or disagreement. By saying something like “I’m hearing that a lot of people think (such and such) – does anyone have concerns with that?” a facilitator can let people know they’ve been heard keep the same point from being repeated. The same approach can be taken with concerns. Make a list of concerns that have been raised and ask the group to think of ways they could be addressed.

Be aware of the topic at hand, and if the group gets caught in a related but separate conversation, gently refocus the discussion.

Pay attention to the group’s energy level and mood. Don’t forget to schedule breaks for longer meetings. Sometimes a quick energy break – having everyone stand up for two minutes, or make noise all the same time – can help the group refocus.

Be sure to keep track of the time. If you think that a discussion is moving at a speed that will make it difficult to finish in the allotted time, let the group know, and try to refocus the discussion.

If you do run out of time for an item, it is your responsibility to address that. It is possible that someone (perhaps you) will request more time, and you can then propose an extension, which should include from which other agenda item you propose that time be cut. To do this well, you should have a feel for the whole agenda – know what items could afford to lose a few minutes, if necessary. Try to avoid having meetings run overtime.

### **Some Added Techniques for the Discussion**

**Small Groups:** Everyone breaks up into groups of 3-6 for a while, then reports back to the whole about what they discussed. This can encourage participation by those who are less inclined to speak in large groups, but is time consuming and can result in loss of focus.

**Fishbowl:** A small group, chosen at random or by other methods, sits in the center and discusses the issue. This can allow people outside the fishbowl to relax and listen better, because they are not busy formulating what they want to say in response.

**Aggregate rating:** This is a form of straw polling. When trying to reach consensus on several proposals (i.e. several candidates for a position), each person rates the options, and the ratings are added up. Whichever gets the best aggregate rating is the first option considered as the discussion continues. If no consensus can be reached, move on to the next best option.

**Ad-hoc representation:** If no agreement is possible, the conversation can be delegated to a small group that represents the various positions or perspectives expressed in the discussion so far. This group generally won't be empowered to decide; rather, they will do research and further discuss the issue until they reach agreement. They will then bring a recommendation back to the whole group.