

Preparing for a Facilitated Discussion

What to expect

We have difficult conversations all the time. Most of the time we handle them well. In some instances, though, experiences, emotions and relationships make conflict resolution feel impossible. This is where an impartial facilitator can help people move forward.

A skilled facilitator provides structure and perspective. A facilitator also helps people jointly develop mutually acceptable options for resolution. A facilitator does *not* serve as a judge or impose any solutions on anyone, however. Every facilitation is different, but there are certain key principles that make a facilitated discussion successful.

Confidentiality

A healthy respect for confidentiality enhances frank communications. Consequently, the facilitator will not voluntarily share anything said by any party during the facilitation or in subsequent or later individual meetings without consent. As a condition of participating, the parties are asked not to share other participants' comments outside the facilitation. The facilitator will shred all notes—including participant notes—afterward. At the conclusion of the facilitation, the parties may agree to share certain information with others.

Fair treatment for all

Heated communications are normal in facilitations. However, certain practices help channel heated communications into productive discussions. First, participants “listen to learn.” Listening to learn is respectful but is not necessarily agreeing. A participant who “listens to

learn” asks questions seeking knowledge rather than questions intended to make a point. Second, participants speak from their own perspective. They avoid assumptions about what someone else intends or feels. Third, participants disagree about ideas and facts. They do not use facilitation to criticize or accuse. Finally, participants avoid side conversations and extended one-on-one dialogues (unless only two people are participating). If communications become disrespectful or unproductive, the facilitator will work to steer the discussion back onto a more productive track.

Participants control the outcome

Participating in a facilitated discussion is not a commitment to compromise, concede or even agree to anything other than the ground rules for participation. The facilitator may ask questions to explore possibilities, but will not pressure participants to accept any position or fact. If participants arrive at an agreement, they also decide what means they will use to memorialize the agreement. To increase the opportunities for constructive resolution, participants should make clear any limits on their authority in advance.

Process

All participants play a role in moving the discussion forward. The facilitator’s job is to establish a framework and encourage all parties to participate equitably while also keeping the parties focused upon goals for the facilitation. If any participant feels the facilitator cannot serve fairly, he or she should address that with the facilitator as soon as possible. The facilitator serves only with the consent of all participants.

Expectation setting

In some cases, the facilitator will have met with each participant before the facilitation takes place. In that case, the facilitator will recap what has been discussed without sharing any confidential information. The facilitator may also summarize his or her assessment about what the overall issues are to be discussed and will seek participants’ clarifications and revisions. The facilitator will also discuss ground rules and seek consent to abide by the ground rules.

Opening comments

After expectation setting, each participant will be invited to make a brief statement addressed to the other participants (not the facilitator) regarding their understanding of what has happened to create the issues and their goals for the discussion. Some participants use the opening comments phase to apologize for previous difficulties. While each participant speaks, the other participants are invited to take notes and consider clarifying questions for the next phase.

Shared discussion

The heart of facilitation is the shared discussion. During the shared discussion, participants provide information, explore perceptions, surface identity issues, consider standards, develop options, clarify alternatives, and specify commitments, among other things. The facilitator will strive to capture what is discussed, restating and reflecting back to the participants. The facilitator will also strive to move the discussion toward joint problem-solving when possible.

Individual meetings (if needed)

In some instances, the facilitator or one of the participants may wish to address something privately. A private meeting sometimes helps a participant discuss issues that are confidential but which might have a bearing on the discussion. In that instance, a facilitator will break from the joint discussion temporarily. Individual meetings can help the participants assess how confidential information might have an impact without making the information more broadly known. If the facilitator meets privately with one participant, all participants will be offered a similar opportunity.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the facilitation—after all participants feel they have had a fair opportunity to contribute—the facilitator will see if the participants feel there has been agreement on any issue or issues. The facilitator will explore next steps and what the participants may want to be released about the facilitation. Finally, the facilitator will remind participants about the ground rules, including confidentiality and notes and will then wrap the session up. If further meetings are needed, the facilitator will schedule them at that time.