

Introduction to Meeting Facilitation



Facilitating – making things easier – is a function that everyone in a group can contribute to, and a well facilitated meeting will be appreciated by everyone as it uses their time well.

For comparison, chairing a meeting is usually more formal than facilitation. A chair is considered to have power over other members of the group, and meetings often follow a number of conventions. Of course, it is possible to chair in a facilitative way and use aspects of a facilitation process, and even some of the facilitation tools; indeed, many guides to chairing suggest doing this. Even so, a chair retains control of a meeting.

Facilitation uses a range of participatory attitudes and behaviours that are intended to bring people together to collaborate in a supportive environment and make good decisions. Often groups will choose to have a designated facilitator who may use appropriate facilitation tools, particularly when there are controversial issues to discuss or big decisions to be made.

A facilitator also has the consent of the whole group to support them through any agreement the group makes on behaviour, and help it use an agreed process to move through successful decision-making. The practical stages and behaviours we describe below are ones that come from an attitude of respect for everyone in the group.

Below is a simple core process that Rhizome have developed that identifies some of the practical stages and behaviours for relatively straightforward decision-making. These can be adapted to suit different situations whether you are an external facilitator, a designated facilitator or another member of the group. More complex decisions may need a project or programme management approach, more contentious issues may need some conflict management techniques.

Running the meeting: a sample agenda

1: Introductions:

If you are the facilitator, explain:

- Who you are and your role as facilitator
- Who everyone else is in the room and, if appropriate, their role, and any absences
- The process for developing, agreeing and changing the agenda for the meeting
- The details and processes for making decisions e.g. Consensus, Voting. If you are using consensus decision-making, explain the values and state of mind that it involves
- Agreements about the behaviour in the meeting and any changes that may be needed to them.

2: Clarify the Issues

- Use an ideastorm or other method for this. Splitting the group into sub-groups may help.

- Clarify any issues that any of the participants do not understand
- Check that all the issues have been raised
- Group the issues into manageable sections
- Prioritise the issues and ensure that there is a process for dealing with outstanding issues that cannot be dealt with in the meeting.

3: Explore each item

- Either in the large group or in small groups, take the first set of issues and explore their context. If this is relevant, you could start by asking participants to explain how the issues affect them – what is the impact on their work/lives?
- Confirm that all the necessary information and points of view about this item are available; if that's not the case, agree the process for getting them.
- Clarify misunderstandings but avoid problem solving at this stage.

4: Ways forward

- In the large group or small groups, ask the participants for ideas to resolve the first item
- Ask the group(s) to report back on their ideas for resolution
- Explore each idea
- Record any emerging agreement of the whole group
- Focus on any unresolved issues to see if agreement can be obtained on them, using the agreed processes for making decisions.

5: Review

- Examine the agreements to check they can be implemented. Identify the timescale for implementation, who will be active in implementing them, whether the resources are available and any monitoring arrangements. Revise decisions where necessary.
- Check that the participants are happy with the agreements
- Repeat for the subsequent item(s), building on successes and making the best use of small and large group discussions. Check decisions work well together and implementation is feasible, and revise decisions where necessary.

6. Next steps

- Agree how, where and when to deal with any outstanding issues.
- Review and evaluate the meeting.

In Rhizome's view, meetings are not only a way of making decisions, they also fulfil a range of other functions including providing a social space, developing or cementing good relationships and marking progress in a group's development. All of these need support and facilitation, so arriving early and staying on to talk or help clear up creates flexible time that can contribute to this and be helpful in making any meeting a success.

