

BUILDING THE CONTAINER

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EYE CONTACT

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READING SIGNALS

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RECEIVING KICK-BACK

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'Building the container' describes what the facilitator can do that aids participants to step into their discomfort zone where they learn more. It also allows trust and communication to build, so a group thrives and is effective. A level of risk-taking or self-disclosure can help build a safer 'container' for the group, as well as other tools and techniques to build communication and trust.

Eye contact may seem unimportant, but if used adeptly by the facilitator it can help people feel listened to, fairly treated, understood, and noticed. You can use it subtly to support those in the margins of the group to step into their own power and choose to speak up.

In any group there are all sorts of signals to read, going on individually, between people and in the whole group. Laughter can indicate many things, including being close to facing up to a challenge or something new. Everyone gives out double-signals; for example, beyond their confidence or hesitation, what else do you notice, and what might this mean?

Sometimes a group can turn on the facilitator and kick-back, especially when you have taken a position or role that is there in the group but no-one is willing to take on. The art is in not taking it personally and using the feedback to uncover what you believe is going on, and figure out the next steps.

SUPPORTING MAINSTREAM & MARGINS

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DIGGING DEEPER

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SUPPORTING DIVERGENCE & CONVERGENCE OF VIEWS

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SUMMARISING

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Every group has a mainstream and margins: those who set the norms and those who don't. It's key to facilitating that you support both the mainstream who are usually unaware of their role and the margins to step into their own power. Remember that who is in the mainstream or margins can change as the topic or dynamics of the group change.

Digging deeper is a technique to use at a group and an individual level. Below someone's position are their interests and needs; you'll be more likely to find commonality at the level of needs. Most groups and individuals function at the level of widely accepted reality. Sometimes however you may catch the whiff of shared dreams or deeper visions below, and can help the group bring them to life together.

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For a truly participative and creative decision-making process, you need to support a wide divergence of views, particularly in the first part of any meeting. If you don't, you will probably get 'business as usual', and the group will be less effective. This may lead to a lack of energy and follow-through. If you succeed, expect that there'll be a bumpy middle part of the meeting before it's time to help views converge to a fully agreed decision.

Regular summaries ensure everyone shares the same understanding of the situation, and aids the discussion to develop and to stay focused. Sometimes it is useful to use the actual words spoken by participants. Summaries can also be used to help pace a discussion, providing a reflective moment.

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FRAMING

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REFLECTING IN ACTION

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Framing is setting the context, boundaries and direction for a discussion. The wording and tone used influence the way the group develops; asking about concerns rather than fears is one example. Too tight a boundary can limit this growth and thus create conflict as people break out of the framing that was set.

It's a balancing act to be able to observe the holistic picture of what's happening with a group at the same time as focussing on detail - being at a distance and getting stuck in! One model of observation (and listening) is to do so at the levels of head, heart and feet, or thinking (including ideas and principles), feeling (including values & experience), and will (including intentions and energy).

It's a key skill that comes in many forms, with a fundamental starting point that a group can be trusted to have the answers they need. What kinds of questions will help the group and the individuals within it? Non-leading elicitive ones? Follow-up "why..."s? 'Assertive questioning'? You can use it to show curiosity and interest in someone's views, supporting margins e.g. "Ezra, it looks like you might have something to say?"

Reflecting **in** Action is the skill of thinking on your feet as the meeting or workshop is happening, adapting how you frame interventions and changing what you had planned next. It is, in essence, responding to what is happening in the group, at all levels. Reflection **on** Action is what you do after the event through self-evaluation or debriefing.

NAMING ELEPHANTS

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THROWING IT BACK

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WEATHER REPORTING

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ACTIVE LISTENING

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Naming the elephants in the room means naming something that some people or the whole group may be struggling to acknowledge. When done well, this can relieve the pressure that comes from sensing that something is present but unnamed. It can help people who don't feel they can speak up to step into their own power.

As one means of shifting power and ownership to the participants, the facilitator can throw a question back to the group e.g. "That's an interesting question/comment, what does anyone else think?" You can also ask the group for proposals or ideas to help the group move forwards if stuck.

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A vital skill in a facilitator, being able to assess the 'temperature' of a group by actively listening, and then naming it e.g. "I feel there's more agreement at a fundamental level than we're hearing" or "I sense there is a lot of anxiety at this point" and suggesting an appropriate activity in response. Try to avoid interpretation.

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An important skill for a facilitator, to be always listening to the group and to individuals in it, encouraging, reflecting what is being said, re-stating points being made, clarifying what is happening, checking and focusing.

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DESIGNING A PLAN

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GIVING ATTENTION TO ONE INDIVIDUAL

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TIMING & PACING

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MULTIPARTIALITY

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Advance thought on how you schedule activities for a session always pays off. Reflect on what you know about the group, desired outcomes, power dynamics, and build in the ability to respond and adapt on the fly. The flow or order will depend on the purpose of each section and how the plan builds on itself; how long they need will depend on the design & expected content of each exercise.

There are many reasons to do this, some perhaps counter-intuitive. It could be because they are marginalised in the group, or have disengaged; ask them about themselves in a break. When they are dominating, rambling or repetitive, they may need attention in order to help them move on or it could be that they are trying their best to name elephants in the room or take on an unvoiced role or position for the group that is needed for the overall process.

Timing is the art of both managing the usually limited time available and doing the right thing at the right moment. You need to be able to intervene to help the group stay on time or adapt to the group's changing needs. You always have to be thinking forwards and backwards, to re-plan as a result of what's happening, whilst staying focused on the present! Pacing is the skill of moving the group forwards not too soon and not too late!

There has been the image of a facilitator as a neutral party, but when we are there as part of a group our feelings and thoughts are part of what's happening. It's essential not to abuse the power of our role, so we aim for multipartiality, that is to say, being able to understand and side with everyone's position whilst being aware that power is not balanced equally.

WORKING WITH CONFLICT

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NOTICING & USING YOUR FEELINGS

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ENABLING FULL PARTICIPATION

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HUMOUR & SMILING

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It's easy in mainstream British culture to avoid conflict, seeking to harmonise a group or resolve conflict at the earliest opportunity. But conflict can be a creative and necessary process for a group to fully explore their purpose and make decisions. You can help the group by how you build the container and frame the discussion, aiding individuals not to take it as about them personally.

Self-awareness around your feelings as facilitator can help you discern: how much of what you are noticing is your stuff and how much is connected to what's happening. Working on what might come up for you in advance can help. Notice how your body is feeling, e.g. tense or anxious, or are you feeling e.g. empathy or frustration? What does this mean for what's happening in the group, and could naming it aid the process?

Enabling full participation does not necessarily mean getting everyone to speak in a go-round or starting a meeting by sharing feelings, though it could. Everyone participates in different ways at different points, although for the sake of the group and the task you may encourage people to leave their comfort zone at times. It's your role to enable people to step into their power and for the group's process and decisions to feel owned by all.

Humour is a useful tool for lightening the mood and engaging people; it can be tricky to judge the appropriate moment and kind of humour that matches a group's culture. A 'reverse ideastorm' is a good example and generated by the group. Smiling in many cultures can be used to put people at ease, and show you are listening and interested.

Instructions for using Rhizome's facilitation tools and techniques cards

These are a selection of tools and techniques - both formal and informal - for facilitating meetings, workshops and events. Many can be used in decision-making, problem-solving and when it is opportune to bring a new approach or energy to the proceedings. Most provide ways to ensure everyone has the opportunity to be fully involved and is able to contribute.

Print double-sided on A4 paper and cut them up into separate slips. There are a variety of different ways they can then be used, with some examples for you to mix and match below:

- Distribute the facilitation tools and techniques cards - with the name face-up - round the room either stuck on the walls, or scattered on a table or the floor. Take into account the physical environment, participants' mobility and whether there's the need to get people active.
- In small groups or pairs, ask participants to pick a tool they are slightly less familiar with and would be willing to demonstrate (e.g. if you've done an ideastorm lots yourself, then pick another tool, but if you've seen it used and want to get more confident...).
- In their small group/pair, share why they chose it. Ask them to remember an occasion when they used this tool or saw it being used; briefly talk it through with another person, explaining for example, what the facilitator did, what happened as a result, and what they liked about it.
- Participants can then demonstrate the tool or technique's use to the whole group who will be 'the facilitated'. After each practice, debrief - using questions such as "how was that for you?", "how did it go?"
- Then get small groups to take a set of the cards and do PMI (plus, minus, interesting) sheets for each, and see how many they get through. Focus less on the positive & negative if they are obvious, and instead on the interesting aspects of the tool - e.g. "what likely problems might arise with this tool?", and as the facilitator, "what adaptations could you think of?"

Do please let us know how you get on with them, and any other feedback or suggestions, on [our blog](#) or [get in touch](#).