



Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

Considerations for Responsive Facilitation

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Facilitation is a crucial part of any kind of collaborative work. A responsive facilitator has to keep many things in mind as she/he supports the work of a collaborative group. The following list is intended as both a general reminder of important skills, and a checklist of areas one might want to focus on for personal growth.

A responsive facilitator has to:

1. Pay attention to group dynamics all the time — body language, who's speaking and who's not, voice tone, reactions between group members, secondary agendas, and judgmental comments;
2. Pay attention to inclusion of all members;
3. Attend to agreed-upon group norms, adding new norms as needed for productive group work;
4. Be able to help a group figure out what it needs, or
5. Figure out what a group needs if it can't — give guidance, and then...
6. Be able to change the agenda to meet the group needs, without losing sight of the purpose/goals of the activity, workshop, or work session;
7. Be able to distinguish between one's own agenda and the agenda of the group;
8. Have a way to identify oneself in the role of facilitator, teacher, and person, when the roles change, and let the group you are facilitating know (One facilitator friend actually has 3 hats and puts them on when his role changes);
9. Know when you are stumped and get help from a colleague or ask the group where to go now — transparent facilitation often works well. It is important not to appear to be an expert when stuck;
10. Recognize when the whole group, sometimes the facilitator too, is “stuck” and put the issue/dilemma, in the “parking lot” for later when there's been time for reflection and distance, and move on;
11. Be able to step back — get some distance — when you feel yourself being emotionally drawn into difficult group dynamics;

12. Own up to goofs and misperceptions — they are usually great opportunities for learning, and you provide modeling;
13. Resist taking things personally. Groups or individuals sometimes vent their frustration, anger, fears, on the facilitators. That can actually be a sign of dissonance and means progress and change — usually. Take several deep breaths;
14. Work for balance between process and content, but give precedence to process over content when you have to choose. Safe, bonded communities of learners have a higher learning curve;
15. Celebrate when groups move from pseudo-community to the beginnings of real community in a longer workshop. Little of substance can happen in pseudo-community when everyone is being “nice.” This change often occurs on the third day people are together for some reason. The passage is often stormy, comes at unexpected moments over surprising issues, and sometimes involves tears, anger, fear, guilt, and any other emotion. Facilitating a group through this passage can be tricky work. It is here that a facilitator has to distinguish between the growth of a community through the intended goals and purpose — and therapy. Facilitators are not therapists and it is vital not to cross that line, however fuzzy it seems at times;
16. Keep a sense of humor!!! Everyone is human and can make any number of amazing mistakes as well as bring memorable insight and wisdom. Laughing together is a gift and helps keep perspective.