



Common Facilitation Challenges

Common Facilitation Challenges are based on the collective knowledge and experience of Advocacy & Communication Solutions staff. It includes challenges that may arise during facilitation, including common personalities that a facilitator might face. Provided with each challenge is a description and a suggested solution.

Challenge	Description	Solution
Avoiding groupthink	Individuals place views of the group ahead of their own thoughts or suggestions to preserve unity. Occurs during norming stage of group development.	Dedicate time for individual thought/brainstorming around views/ideas for a specific question/topic.
Wordsmithing	The group gets focused on discussing the wording in a document (such as mission/vision) rather than coming to consensus on the meaning of the words or moving on to other decision points.	<p>Determine if there is an issue in clarity of terms that requires further definition in order to move on with decision-making or conceptual conversation, OR determine if the group can move forward without the discussion.</p> <p>If the group decides to move on from the discussion, admit the final words need to be worked out, identify this task in the “waiting room” (an ongoing list of all of these topics on a white board or poster) and guide the discussion back to the conceptual. Remember to build time into your agenda to address “waiting room” topics.</p> <p>If the group needs additional clarity on meaning, set a bounded time limit to the discussion. Write out the “definition” or ask group members what they think the definition is, and then facilitate a discussion toward consensus. At the end of the set time, if the group has not come to consensus, ask for volunteers for a sub-group to work on the issue at a later date/time. Remember to give them a bounded task and timeframe to hold the discussion.</p>
Moving off topic	A participant brings up unrelated topics for discussion.	<p>If it is easily answered, answer the question.</p> <p>If the topic is related to a later portion of the agenda, recognize the importance of the question, answer it briefly, place it in the “waiting room” and bring it up later.</p> <p>If the topic is not to be addressed in your agenda, identify if the topic might have a related undercurrent or a frustration that is causing the topic to come up. Dedicate time to address that concern individually. If not, remind the group of the appropriate topic/goal of the conversation.</p>

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Managing time and staying flexible	Knowing when to move on to the next topic or allow a group to discuss more fully.	<p>Create and share a timed agenda. Remind people if/when the group is close to running out of time or over time. Ask the room and get agreement before spending more than allotted time. "This seems to be an important conversation. Do we want to spend 15 more minutes on this?"</p> <p>If the discussion is breaking down barriers, or will benefit future activities, it might be worthwhile to continue. When a group is spinning its wheels, bored or rehashing, it is time to move on.</p>
Dealing with disagreement, conflict, anger and personal attacks	<p>Disagreement: Participants do not agree on approach or next steps. Disagreement is confined to content being discussed.</p> <p>Conflict: Deeper than a disagreement about content, conflict may be about organizational differences or a past disagreement.</p> <p>Anger: An individual is raising his/her voice, and displaying other signs of anger.</p> <p>Personal attacks: An individual personally attacks the character of another participant or someone not in the room.</p>	<p>Disagreement: Identify the source of disagreement. Facilitate a discussion about the difference in opinion or schedule a separate time to work through differences. Re-phrase the concern/frustration, ask person to indicate if they you are hearing him/her correctly, provide an alternative or corrected frame of the concern.</p> <p>Conflict: Take a break and ask the affected participants individually about how to handle the conflict in order to move forward with the group discussion. Additional time may be scheduled to facilitate a conflict resolution exercise.</p> <p>Anger/personal attacks: Suggest a break and approach the person individually to address the issue. Remind him/her that personal attacks are breaking the "ground rules" of the group. Schedule a time for conflict resolution. In rare instances ask individuals to remove themselves.</p>
Managing side conversations	Participants are not focused on the discussion at hand. Individual conversations occur that exclude the group.	<p>Stand near the conversing individuals to provide a hint that they are being disruptive.</p> <p>Ask one of the individuals if there is a question or if he/she can share their thoughts because they are probably important to the entire room (even if it is not).</p> <p>Take a 5-minute break and ask everyone to sit in a new seat when they come back (frame it as a getting to know new people exercise).</p> <p>Ask participants to step out if it is highly disruptive.</p>
Knowing when to change directions and throw out your carefully planned agenda	The group is not at the place you thought the members were when you planned your agenda, or an unplanned event altered the overall approach that the group needs to take.	Take a 5-minute break and discuss your change in approach with fellow facilitators. Review the decision points that you had intended on reaching during your agenda and determine which can still be reached. If an unplanned event has altered the group's goals or approach, discuss those changes with the group. You may need to dedicate more time to defining issues, clarifying items or brainstorming.
Lack of engagement/participating in discussion	Few or no volunteers to answer questions, discussions lull. The facilitator is "pulling" information out of participants.	It may be time to take a break. Personalize the material by asking the audience specific questions. Ask for specific examples or experiences that relate to the discussion through open-ended questions.
Spotting harmful non-verbal cues	Crossed arms, attention on the phone/computer, eye rolling, sighs, scowling, etc.	Check in with the individual during a break. Ask if he/she has concerns or questions to identify what the source of the cues are.

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The conversation does not have a natural conclusion/decision	The group goes through brainstorming and discovery, but it is not clear what happens next in order to reach a desired conclusion/decision.	Identify what questions need to be answered in order to get to a conclusion and identify when that conversation can take place.
Making sure that every voice has been heard	Some people process information internally, while others process verbally. It is easy for internal thinkers to get lost in the mix	<p>As you get to know the group and build relationships with participants, begin to identify how they process information.</p> <p>Check in with individuals who have not spoken, or those you know process more internally, to see if they have additional thoughts before moving on to a new topic/agenda item.</p> <p>Always build in a Q&A section into the end of presentations. Distribute a feedback form at the end of sessions and address items at the next meeting or between meetings.</p>
Dealing with negativity or resistance	One or two participants are very negative about the material, direction of the group or approach. They participate through negative statements and do not see how the material/content applies to them. This type of behavior can be toxic to a successful meeting and can prevent group consensus, buy-in and/or decision-making.	<p>Proper meeting preparation will help you deal with this. Working with meeting organizers in advance to understand who is in the audience, their expectations and experiences will help you develop material that is relevant to them.</p> <p>If the negative participants are resistant to change, work with them individually on a break to understand what their challenges are with the material. Engage in a group exercise to brainstorm solutions.</p> <p>If the participant is still negative or resistant, address the issue with the meeting organizer/the participant's manager after the meeting to come up with an alternative approach to dealing with negativity prior to the next meeting.</p>
What to do if you (the facilitator) offends someone or crosses a boundary	Facilitators are not always perfect and it is easy to overstep your boundaries or offend someone in the group. When you do cross a boundary, it is important to address the issue immediately.	Once a boundary has been crossed, it is important to acknowledge the issue and re-build your relationship with the individual. Once you recognized a boundary might have been crossed, reach out and have an individual conversation to understand the issue as soon as possible. Reaching out and acknowledging the issue will help the individual understand that you did not mean to cross the boundary and will work to resolve the issue in the future.
Facilitating a group over the phone	Sometimes it is not possible for the group to meet in person. Other times there might be a few people who have to call in. This presents unique challenges because you cannot read body language. As a facilitator you must control and guide the conversation and also make sure all voices are heard.	<p>Being prepared is critical. Send a reminder with call-in information and time, as well as any meeting materials the day before the scheduled meeting time.</p> <p>Pre-work should also be done with any co-presenters to be clear on which portions of the meeting will be covered by whom. Meet with the co-chairs to determine their objectives and if they want to cover any of the meeting topics. Designate someone to take notes. It is difficult to facilitate and take notes at the same time.</p> <p>When referring to specific documents, describe the document and page number. Ask if everyone has the documents before proceeding.</p> <p>Remember to (and remind others to) state your name when they speak up.</p> <p>Check in often to see if individuals on the phone have questions or concerns. Do not be afraid to call on someone if you have not heard his/her opinion yet.</p>

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Balancing different personalities in the room	Inevitably you will encounter several of the below personalities in the room. They sometimes can lead to conflict, or if not addressed, you could lose the group's trust as a facilitator.	Your job as a facilitator is to know when to address these issues in the room or when to have individual conversations. Building relationships outside of the room can help you better understand where these individuals are coming from, and how best to work with them.
Negative Nancy/Ned	A narrow world view, scared to try new things, it was never done that way and it won't work.	See <i>dealing with negativity or resistance</i> above.
Mr. Popular	Constantly receives phone calls, leaves the meeting or checks email. Not engaged in the conversation.	Keep the conversation moving in this person's absence. One issue that might arise is that when the person re-engages he/she wants to go over material you already covered. Offer to catch this person up after the meeting and get feedback then. Also consider if this person is the right person for the group. If there is an option for an alternative, you might broach this subject.
The interrupter/loud mouth	Won't let anyone else talk, his/her ideas are most important.	This person should be leveraged, but also managed. Know when to move the conversation on to the next topic. Enforce time limits and ground rules. Prevent by meeting with this person before the meeting. Intervene by asking questions of others. Look for a place to break in: thank the person for the contribution and ask the group for additional comments/opinions. (Thank you for your insight. This is really helpful for the conversation. I want to hear from someone else. Does anyone else have a comment?) See <i>making sure every voice is heard</i> above.
The mouse	Does not share an opinion to the group, but has sidebar conversations with others. This can kill momentum and limit conversation if not brought out.	See <i>managing side conversations</i> and <i>making sure every voice is heard</i> above.
The debater	Will debate any reasonably good idea for the fun of it. Since he/she is always looking for alternative solutions, can be valuable if you know how to harness the thoughts.	Pre-meeting discussion: Engage this person individually in meaningful conversation to hear ideas, and then bring the ideas in to the conversation when you are ready. Listen to person's viewpoints but stick to your plan if the debate starts to go off course. Intervene by confronting the argument. Turn it over to the group to judge. Keep it professional, not personal.

