A SHORT GUIDE TO GROUP FACILITATION

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WHAT IS FACILITATION?

Any kind of community project, from a food bank to a litter-pick, requires **bringing people together** in the same space and listening to each other's voices. Together, a group of people will need to discuss **what the issues are that they want to address, how they want to address them, and what steps they will need to take to do that.**

In this context, a facilitator is the person who helps that group come together, discuss things in **an open and constructive way**, and **find their own solutions** to the issues they raise. The word "facilitate" means "to make things easy", and the group facilitator's role is generally to make it "easier" for a group to find and meet their goals.

A facilitator **is not a leader** – their role is to serve the group and bring out the group's own views, not to command authority. At the same time, a facilitator **must provide some structure so that everyone's voices are heard equally.** A facilitator sometimes also helps make sure that **what is discussed can be and will be acted upon.**

Write down some ideas for what the facilitator could do differently in these two realistic scenarios, to make sure they are facilitating **open discussion** and helping the group to **identify and solve their problems**.

Scenario 1: Although plenty of people have come to this community meeting, nobody seems to want to contribute, and they are politely listening to the facilitator. The facilitator ends up dominating the conversation, providing their own guidance but not finding out many ideas from the community.

Scenario 2: At this meeting for project volunteers, there is a lively discussion between two or three senior volunteers who have been working on the project for a long time, so the facilitator lets them lead the conversation. However, a small group of junior volunteers at the back look increasingly uncomfortable, and leave the project, feeling that their voices had not been heard.

THINKING ABOUT CONTEXT

Before you start planning your group session, it's important to think about who your group is.

- What brings them together? Is it living in the same neighbourhood, or being part of the same project? What else do they have in common?
- What differences might there be in the room? Are there any historical divisions that might need to be overcome (e.g. between migrant and resident communities, between men and women within a community)?
- What access needs might be present? How can we accommodate disabled or neurodivergent members of the group (and it's important to remember that many disabilities are hidden)? What languages are spoken by the group?

These factors all need to be carefully considered in how you plan and promote your group session. For instance, if you're only notifying people about the session online, you might be excluding people without computer/internet access or with lower skill in written English. Planning to have the session in a church or another place of worship might alienate those of other faiths or backgrounds.

PLANNING YOUR SESSION – 1

Once you have considered the dynamics of your group, it's time to start planning when, where and how to bring them together.

When

Are there already established group meetings you could fit your session into?

Consider what time of day is best. Evenings and weekends might be best for those working during daytime hours, but might be more difficult for elderly people or those with children.

Where

Some members of your group are likely to not have access to a car. Try to ensure your venue is accessible through public transport.

Are there already established community venues you could use? Do people feel comfortable going there?

How can you ensure everyone feels welcome and confident from the outside of the building right through to where the session takes place? Consider:

- Is the meeting signposted from the street?
- Is it on the ground floor?
- Is it accessible to those who can't use stairs?
- Is there someone welcoming people at the door to ensure they know they're in the right place?

PLANNING YOUR SESSION – 2

Where? (cont.)

The space where you hold the meeting is very important. A room that is too large for the group might feel too imposing to speak in; a room that is too small might feel uncomfortably intimate. Find the right sized room for the size of your group.

Avoid empty seats, since these create the impression that not enough people wanted to come. Put out slightly fewer seats than are needed for your expected attendees, and ensure there is a reserve stack nearby in case your expectations are met or exceeded.

Think about the layout of your space.

- Theatre-style rows of seating can discourage participation and create an impression that the speaker at the front has greater authority.
- Groups set around tables (café-style seating) might make it easier for people to speak, but might also be uncomfortably intimate. They might also make it harder to see the flipchart, whiteboard or facilitator.
- Loose semicircle groupings, with tables for putting down activity materials, can be a good compromise between these extremes.

Ensure that the room feels friendly and inviting as far as possible, with sufficient light and air. Inexpensive decorations such as paper ribbons and balloons can help create a positive and celebratory atmosphere.

Toilets should be clearly signposted and available throughout the session. Water should also be provided, as a bare minimum; further refreshments like tea, coffee and biscuits can help create a more hospitable and relaxed atmosphere.

PLANNING YOUR SESSION – 3

How

Is this going to be a one-off session or will there be more? How will you keep people engaged between sessions and after sessions? Will you collect contact details?

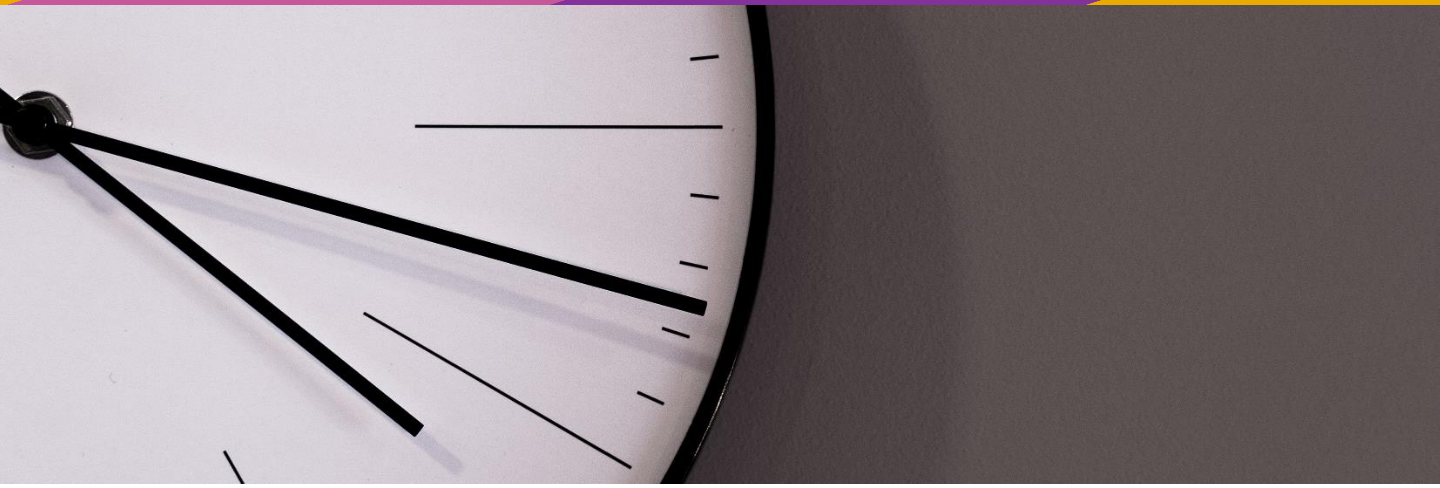
How will you promote the session to the group and ensure that key stakeholders are invited? Will you use:

- Social media marketing?
- Local bulletin boards?
- Email and text reminders?
- Phone calls?
- Personal contacts?

What are the downsides of each of these methods of getting in touch?

What resources do you have to help the group follow up on any commitments made during the session?

Tip from a Coordinator!
Consider asking your personal contacts in the group to be responsible for inviting 3-5 more people each and bringing them to the meeting. This helps to share the responsibility and means that key stakeholders are engaged as more than passive participants.



STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: TIMING

Regular timekeeping in the session helps group members to fit such commitments into their plans for the week, and also helps to manage their expectations for the session.

Always anticipate that planned activities might overrun if not carefully scheduled. Add an extra (approximate) **10 minutes per hour** to your schedule – in other words, if the session is an hour and a half (90 minutes), plan only 75 minutes of activities.

Plan additional "contingency" activities so that if one doesn't seem to work well, another can be substituted.

If there is time left over, you can add extra discussion time or allow the group to go early.

A community group session will normally have at least these four elements, although there is room for infinite flexibility in how they are implemented:

- An "icebreaker" (this should be short)
- An exploration of the issues the group wishes to consider
- A discussion of how to face those issues
- A resolution for future action

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: THE ICEBREAKER

It’s best to begin the session with an “icebreaker” activity – that is, something that will help the group feel comfortable to speak and share, and introduce themselves.

This could be as simple as asking each person in turn to introduce themselves with their name and (1) an “interesting fact” about themselves, or (2) what they would be doing if they weren’t at the group session today.

More elaborate activities might involve dividing people into pairs or small groups and asking them to interview each other or find out more specific information. For instance, you could divide them into groups of 5 and ask them to find out 3 things each small group has in common.

There are a wide variety of icebreaker activities that can be found online by searching the internet. These can be adapted to meet the needs of your group. Just remember that **the key goals of an icebreaker are**:

- To increase people’s comfort with speaking in this space
- To establish that this is a place for honesty and sharing personal stories
- To humanise each other – this is especially important when bringing together people from historically divided communities.

Be sensitive in terms of what you are asking people to share in an icebreaker. For instance, **avoid asking about:**

- Family – many people have lost their family or members of their family, and being asked about it might cause distress
- Career – this can exacerbate class divisions in the group
- Culturally specific experiences – for instance, asking about Christmas celebrations might alienate people from non-European cultural backgrounds

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: EXPLORING THE ISSUES – 1

In this part of the session, it is the role of the facilitator to create a space where people feel **safe** to express their concerns.

This requires the facilitator to create a structure where **everyone gets a chance to speak** and a context where people are **encouraged to do so**. Unfortunately, this sometimes means that the facilitator needs to limit the amount that some especially forceful or confident people say!

Small group exploration

Breaking into small groups, and then having the small groups feed back to the whole group, can be very helpful. It means that people will only initially have to talk to two or three people, rather than dozens or hundreds, making it much easier to speak up. It can also make it easier to prevent a few people from dominating the session, since each small group will be asked to feed back to the whole group, whether they have a lot to say or not.

Depending on the context, it might be best to allocate groups randomly rather than letting people form a group with their friends and whoever they're already familiar with. Although being in a small group with friends and family can help reassure those who are shy to speak, it can also entrench divisions between different demographics within the group and also replicate existing power dynamics. For example, the head of a family might dominate the conversation within a group of relatives, even if other members of the family had quite different ideas. You can use a lottery method or allocate each person a number arbitrarily to divide people up into small groups.

Tip from a Coordinator!

If time permits, you can use either a "speed-dating" model, where one member from a small group leaves and joins another each time to compare their findings, or an "unfolding" model where two small groups join together to discuss their findings, and then that group and another two groups do the same, and so on, until the whole group is included.

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: EXPLORING THE ISSUES – 2

Prompts

Whether they choose to divide the group or not, the facilitator will need to provide some kind of prompt or question for the group to consider. These should be phrased so that they are entirely open and do not presuppose what the issues the group is likely to come up with. Some examples might be:

- What are the best things about living in this area? What are the difficulties?
- If you had one wish for your community in this next year, what would it be?

Feeding back

Whether you are soliciting opinions from a set of small groups, or from the group as a whole, you need to consider how to note down and organise what is being said. **This will normally involve a flipchart, a whiteboard, a digital whiteboard or a display wall.** Here are some tactics to consider:

- If time is short, group members could write their answers on post-it notes which can then be put up on the wall. This has the added advantage that people who are shy to speak in public do not have to do so to get their voices heard.
- Ensure that the group is consulted around any organising the facilitator does. For instance, if one person commented "anti-social behaviour" and another cited "vandalism" as the big challenges in their community, you could ask: "Do you think we could link these two together?" This helps the group feel included and gives them an opportunity to discuss these two issues.
- Where it's appropriate, you might like to identify assets and emphasise these in a separate list. For example, if there is a problem with anti-social behaviour in a local park, the park could be considered a potential asset to the community. This will help the group identify opportunities for action later on – for instance, cutting back hedges to make the park safer and more visible.
- Consider asking people to rejoin their small groups to discuss what they think the main findings are, instead of summing up by yourself what the principal issues seem to be.


What were the problems you identified as a group?
• Finding new places/spaces, feeling comfortable there (eg. Notts Women's Centre)
• Translation
• Loneliness, isolation
• Feeling stereotyped, excluded

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: FACING THE ISSUES – 1

Hopefully, following these discussions, the group will have a clear sense of what some of the main issues facing their community or community project are. The next step is to help the group feel **empowered** to act on these issues in a productive way.

This requires the facilitator to help the group **break down the causes** of the issues they're facing, and **identify the community assets** they could use.

Analysing the issues

You could remind the group that most community issues, even the most extreme ones, are exacerbated by a lack of either social or physical infrastructure. For instance, inter-community hate flourishes in environments where there are insufficient opportunities for people either side of the social divide to meet in a friendly and purposeful manner; knife crime might be worse due to a lack of after-school youth activities or even poor street lighting. This perspective can help the group to see that action on these issues is possible – that these evils are not intractable facts of human nature.

The same discussion techniques as were used for initially exploring the issues are useful, such as dividing people into small groups. However, ensure that these are different groups to the ones people were in earlier, to ensure that people are hearing different perspectives.

You could use prompts such as:

- "Do you think there's something you don't have yet in your community that would help with these issues? It could be something physical or something social."
- "Why do you think these issues are so severe in this community? Are there any ideas you've seen in other places that have helped?"

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: FACING THE ISSUES – 2

Identifying assets

Near Neighbours believes in Asset-Based Community Development, where the emphasis is on what communities already have and their capabilities, rather than what they lack. This helps communities to feel that social change is within their power, and means that there is less reliance on authority figures.

Encourage the group to think about:

- Community spaces. This includes outdoor spaces like parks, pedestrianised streets, churchyards, allotments and public gardens; it also includes indoor spaces that are free to enter, such as community centres, community cafés, places of worship, cafés and shops that have community initiatives, Places of Welcome, social clubs, youth clubs, and more.
- Community groups. This might include religious congregations, community centre management, local councillors, local library staff, nursing home staff, school and college staff, and more. Include informal groups such as groups of parents who meet at the school gate and lunch clubs.
- Potential community finances. This might include grant applications to Near Neighbours, the National Lottery community fund, Co-operative community grants, and more. However, encourage the group to think of existing sources of finance in the community, such as wealthy individuals, legacies, community funds from local developers, Rotary Clubs, Masonic lodges and local council resources.
- Potential sources of volunteers. This might include the group's friends and relations, religious congregations, local voluntary councils and so on.

Again, these can be discussed in small groups and/or contributed on Post-It notes.

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: RESOLVING ON A COURSE OF ACTION – 1

In this part of the session, the role of the facilitator is to help the group feel **committed** to the course of action they decide on together.

This means encouraging **as much consensus as possible** and helping the group to **be creative and constructive** in their discussions. The beginning of this section of the session would be a good place for a break, or a free small group discussion period.

"Motions"

Borrowing from "Roberts's Rules of Order", designed for local councils and town meetings, one possible way to organise this part of the session is to ask people to propose "motions", that is, statements of belief or action that they would like the group to accept. People could create these in small groups, or write them on post-it notes; either is preferable to asking people to speak a motion to the entire group, since this will discourage those who lack confidence or social status from contributing.

Each motion should be discussed in turn, with supporters of the motion speaking first. Only discussions about that particular motion should be allowed – anything else can be part of a separate discussion.

At the end of a period of discussion a vote on the motion can be held.

This is a good way of keeping the group focused on distinct courses of action, rather than becoming lost in details or having only a vague sense of what is being proposed.

If the proposal is particularly contentious, voting should be done confidentially using a mobile phone app or with paper ballots. These should be prepared in advance just in case.

STRUCTURING YOUR SESSION: RESOLVING ON A COURSE OF ACTION – 2

Action planning

Once the basic outline of a proposal is agreed, the group should be encouraged to break the proposal into steps. Much can be finalised after the meeting, but the following should be agreed while the whole group is together:

- **Who** is delegated to do which aspects of the plan – for instance, one person could fill out a grant application, and another person draw up a risk assessment. Groups could volunteer in advance for any labour-intensive tasks, such as serving food or running a youth group.
- **When** each step of the plan should be finished, bearing in mind any external deadlines.
- **How** those delegated to do tasks can be held accountable – will the group reconvene to discuss progress? Will a committee be appointed to chase up volunteers and retain contact details for the group?

RUNNING YOUR SESSION

Here are some tips for keeping the session running smoothly:

- At the start of the session, outline the structure to the group so that they know what to expect and have a better idea of what each activity entails.
- Don't fear moments of silence. Silence encourages people to talk at greater length and expand on their points – this is a common tactic in talk therapy, for example. Periods of silence feel longer than they are when one is leading a group, but this is simply an illusion. Resist the temptation to fill silence.
- During small group activities, circulate around the room to check that people understand what has been asked of them and that the groups are harmonious. It might help to recruit some additional volunteers in advance to help with this, if the session is for a large number of people.
- If a participant is being difficult, for example, constantly diverting discussion into irrelevant areas, being verbally abusive or monopolising the discussion, it is best to have a range of responses ready to use at your discretion:
    - If someone is being disruptive, you can de-escalate the situation by emphasising that their voice has been heard – and noting down anything relevant to the discussion – and suggesting that it is now someone else's turn to speak.
    - If someone is being extremely disruptive or verbally abusive, consider calling an early break and convening with community leaders to ask what the best approach might be.
    - Don't be afraid to challenge bigotry, but acknowledge their strength of feeling and show their opinion is respected even if it needs to be challenged.
    - You might suggest that someone who is becoming aggressive take some time outside to cool down, or eject them from the space entirely. Maintaining the sense of safety for all participants is paramount.
- If the level of energy in the room seems to be low or fading, build stretching or moving into your activities – e.g. asking people to position themselves physically on a scale.
- Identify people with good pastoral skills who can help support anyone who feels upset or ill during the session.

AFTER THE SESSION: GATHERING FEEDBACK

Gathering feedback not only helps your personal growth as a facilitator but can help participants feel valued and appreciated.

This feedback can take a variety of forms, and it is preferable to use as many of these as possible to get as complete a picture as you can:

- **In person –** Let participants know that you are available during breaks and after the session for any questions, comments, concerns or suggestions. Some people too shy to speak in front of a whole group will be more able to express themselves this way.
- **On paper –** Ensure that paper feedback forms and pens can be distributed during the session. Alternative digital solutions such as tablets, QR codes etc. are not very practical, regardless of how sophisticated they claim to be. Some groups are likely to have some participants who would struggle with digital technologies, and the distribution of feedback forms becomes considerably more complicated.
- **By email** – Following the session, you could send out an email survey to participants, although this is likely to offer the least useful information compared to other sources.

Suggested Questions

- Did you feel your opinions were heard?
- Did you feel respected and included?
- Was there enough time for discussion?
- Do you feel satisfied with the outcome of the session?
- Do you feel prepared to carry out what was agreed?

FURTHER RESOURCES

Free downloads

- NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement – Facilitator's Toolkit
  A comprehensive and practical guide with lots of ideas for activities.
- David Jaques – Small Group Teaching
  Although teaching is not facilitation, this resource covers everything from thinking about the context of your group to practical ways to encourage participation and free thinking.
- KSL Training – Free resource on group facilitation techniques
  Somewhat condensed, but very focused and practical. Helpful to those with less time to prepare.
- Institute of Cultural Affairs – Resources
  Includes video resources and learning activities for things like building consensus and having focused conversations.
- Denis Postle – The Mind Gymnasium
  A collection of ebooks covering the group psychology of facilitation, with ideas for managing conflict, encouraging cooperation and communicating well.
- Bella Mehta et al. – A Cooperative Enquiry into the facilitation of online video calls
  An exploration of the differences between facilitating in person and online. This is one of the free articles available from the Association of Facilitators.

Books

- Creating a Culture of Collaboration : The International Association of Facilitators Handbook
- More resources from the International Association of Facilitators

Courses

- Institute of Cultural Affairs courses – paid and free
- Association of Facilitators – "Facilitator's Toolkit" course – paid

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