Chapter 1

The Basics of Facilitation

A Brief History and Introduction

The concept of group discussion and citizen dialogue is as old as modern civilization. Native Alaskan tribes write about the use of these methods in ancient times. However, the early roots of the Cooperative Extension Service hosting discussion groups to foster deliberate conversations and civic education about important agricultural issues of the times date back to the 1930s.

In the winter of 1934 and spring of 1935 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) created the Program Study and Discussion unit. The initiative was composed of two related parts: first, discussion groups that were organized and facilitated by local Cooperative Extension agents from land-grant colleges and universities with rural men and women; and second, Schools of Philosophy for Extension workers that were organized and facilitated by USDA staff and prominent university faculty and intellectuals.¹

Fast forward to the 1960s and meeting facilitation as a formal process started to appear more in the mainstream and then became widespread by the 1980s and was promoted as a tool to assist people to become architects of their own future.²

While many issues are still decided by powerful forces and financially strong networks, the ability of the average citizen to collect relevant information, address issues with intelligence, and initiate public meetings has made the public much more influential and important in today’s world.

Those who work on public issues have learned over the years the need for effective facilitation skills. In the Foreword to Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision Making by Sam Kaner, Michael Doyle presents two important lessons learned. “Lesson one: If people don’t participate in and ‘own’ the solution to the problems or agree to the decision, implementation will be half-hearted at best, probably misunderstood, and, more likely than not, fail.

The second lesson is that the key differentiating factor in the success of an organization is not just the products and services, not just its technology or market share, but the organization’s ability to elicit, harness, and focus the vast intellectual capital and goodwill in their members, employees, and stakeholders. When these get energized and focused, the organization becomes a powerful force for positive change in today’s business and societal environments.”³

¹ Shaffer, Timothy. “Looking Beyond Our Recent Past” National Civic Review, Fall 2016 pg. 4
³ Kaner, Sam Et El. Pg. XV
Facilitator Defined

A facilitator is an individual who enables groups and organizations to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy to create the positive change described above. A facilitator is a “content-neutral” party who by not taking sides or expressing or advocating a point of view during the process, can advocate for fair, open, and inclusive procedures to accomplish the group’s work. A facilitator can also be a learning or a dialogue guide to assist a group in thinking deeply about its assumptions, beliefs, and values and about its systemic processes and context.

Clarifying the Role of Facilitator

As a facilitator, it is very important to clarify your role within the group. At times a group may request that you serve a number of different roles. This can become very confusing not only for you but for all involved.

Possible roles you may be asked to fill:

• **Leader** – Directing the decision making. Leadership has different meanings for every individual. However, a leader is usually tasked with developing a vision and the means by which to achieve the mission of the group or the organization. It is difficult for leaders to act as facilitators as they may not be content neutral or process neutral given their vested interest in the outcome.

• **Manager** – Providing logistical support. It is an important role of a manager to tend to all of the aspects of a group meeting to ensure a positive outcome or experience. It is difficult, particularly in large groups, to attend to logistical concerns such as lunch arrangements, emergencies, and other matters while also facilitating the group process.

• **Educator/Technical Advisor** – Providing information. Educators or Technical Advisors are those who provide expert knowledge to improve decisions made by a group. It is difficult for an educator to also manage the group process and not show bias to the information they have provided to the group.

• **Secretary or Recorder** – Recording meeting events and outputs. The role of the secretary or recorder is to capture the meeting notes. It is difficult for the facilitator to act as such while maintaining interactive control of the group. If possible, utilize a co-facilitator for this role, or if the meeting size and formality allows, ask one of the group participants to act in this capacity.

• **Community Organizer** – Providing organization and leading the effort. A person whose job it is to coordinate the cooperative efforts and lead the campaign to improve the quality of life for all citizens of a community.

• **Community Coach** – Primary role is to listen, observe, and ask questions. A community coach is an observer, reflector, and nudge who guides the community group to discover and develop their own solutions. The coach works closely alongside the community group, usually on a specific project. A coach helps a community identify and achieve its goals and build capacity to do even greater work.

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4 Kaner, Sam et al. Pg. XX
Facilitating a meeting is different from leading a monthly organizational meeting using parliamentary procedure. Clarifying your role is very important. The facilitator is a neutral guide who takes an active role in guiding the process while adhering to principles of effective facilitation. Such a neutral person is usually someone from outside the group and may show no vested interest in the outcome. A good facilitator simply guides the process.

**Facilitator – A Position Description**

The role of the facilitator includes focusing on the following four areas:

**Focus**
- Help the group identify the need for the work, scope of the work, and deliverables as a result of the work.
- Ensure that all participants understand the goals of the group. And work to maintain group focus through the utilized process to achieve the agreed-upon goals.

**Process**
- Meet with representatives of the group to determine the needs of the group, expectations, and desired goals and outcomes from the activity.
- Develop an effective process that will allow the group to achieve the desired goals and outcomes. There are a number of different structures or group processes to choose from.
- Establish an environment at the meeting that will provide order to the process and create an environment that is open, honest, and safe for all participants to be part of and participate in.

**Relationships**
- Involve all appropriate stakeholders in the process and the discussion.
- Assure that all participants are heard and that all decisions are the responsibility of the participants.
- Provide clarity about the process and decisions to all participants. Make sure they understand what the group decided and what are the future steps or activities if any.
- Address conflict and behavior problems within the group.
- Maintain a sense of humor and enjoyment.

**Resources**
- The facilitator does not provide the answers. They come from the group and/or from credible sources.
- Assure that the group decision represents diverse perspectives as appropriate for the group.
- Be aware when more data and information are needed. Seek ways to provide it to the group in a balanced way so that appropriate decisions can be made.
- People in groups contribute in different ways and in different amounts. Capitalize on what people have to contribute, but be sure all have some involvement in the process.
Activity 1: Facilitation Observation Tool

Sometimes learning-by-doing is preceded by learning-by-observing. In this activity you will observe a Facilitator in action. Pay attention to the following nine elements. Rate the facilitator accordingly and write any comments good or bad. What would you do different. How would you improve the interaction? What, if anything, did you learn?

**Facilitation Elements**

**Participation:**
- Poor
- Good
- Excellent

Those with a stake or an interest in the issue are participating.

Comments:

**Facilitator Role:**
- Poor
- Good
- Excellent

Facilitator is a neutral guide and coaches the process of convening people.

Comments:

**Shared Vision:**
- Poor
- Good
- Excellent

The group has clear goals and vision for action.

Comments:

**Effective Processes:**
- Poor
- Good
- Excellent

Effective methods and processes are used to guide/facilitate the group work.

Comments:

**Diversity Utilized:**
- Poor
- Good
- Excellent

Diverse views are honored, recognized, and utilized, bringing experiences and insights for the greater good of the group.

Comments:

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<th>Master Community Facilitator Notebook</th>
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<tr>
<th>Planning and Feedback:</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
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<td>Thorough planning, feedback, and group reflection are used to improve facilitation.</td>
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<td>Comments:</td>
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<th>Supportive Atmosphere:</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<td>The atmosphere assumes mutual respect, trust, and self-confidence.</td>
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<th>Group Progress:</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<td>The group progresses toward the agreed-upon or renegotiated goals.</td>
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<td>Comments:</td>
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<th>Learn from Experiences:</th>
<th>Poor</th>
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<td>Participants and facilitator learn from their experiences to build upon their capacities as productive, contributing citizens.</td>
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<td>Comments:</td>
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| Other comments or observations that you have: |
Fundamental Skills of a Facilitator

Learning how to be a skilled facilitator is similar to learning how to be a skilled athlete. You can quickly learn the rules of the game and begin to play, but to play well you need practice. It is one thing to know about the process of facilitation, but it is quite another thing to be able to successfully apply your understanding in a public setting.

A facilitator supports a group to do its best thinking by encouraging full participation, promoting mutual understanding, fostering inclusive solutions, and teaching new thinking skills. In order to perform these functions effectively, there are a number of basic skills and methods a facilitator should have and continually improve upon. Although some of these skills may be second nature for you, there are likely some areas you are not as strong in. It will be important for you to focus on these particular areas and try to go on the path of mastery that invites you to not only learn, but also practice getting better at what you learn.

Facilitation Skills Used to Encourage Full Participation and Foster Mutual Respect of Participants

Validate Various Communication Styles

- Use paraphrasing to help people summarize their thinking when being repetitious.
- Help slow a person down and draw out their ideas when they are speaking in awkward, broken sentences.
- Validate the central point of an idea that has been exaggerated or distorted without arguing over its accuracy.
- Assure the speaker that when the current discussion ends, they will ask the group what to do with new topics the speaker is interrupting with.
- Acknowledge intense emotions when they are expressed and then make sure the speaker’s point is recorded.

The Art of Paraphrasing – This fundamental listening skill has both a clarifying and calming effect on the speaker. It helps people feel that their ideas are being heard and checks the accuracy of the intended message.

- Use your own words to say what you heard the speaker say.
- Preface the paraphrase with something like: “What I heard you say was…” or “Let me see if I understand what you are saying…” And then you finish with “Is that what you were saying?” or “Did I leave anything out?”

The Use of Courageous Listening to Draw People Out – This is the art of helping a speaker express more clearly what he or she is trying to say.

- Pay respectful attention to the content and feelings being expressed by the speaker.
- Say back what you heard in your own words (Paraphrasing) to reflect their thoughts and feelings — remember to check for accuracy.
- Ask open-ended questions to allow the speaker to elaborate on confusing or ambiguous pieces of information.

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6 Public Issues Facilitation Workshop Training Manual. Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, Kansas State University. Manhattan, KS. March 4-6, 2013. Pg 106-109
“Stacking” Those Wishing to Speak – This skill assures people who want to speak that they will have their turn. It relieves the facilitator of having to privately keep track of who has spoken and who is waiting to speak. It also helps to calm members who are competing for airtime and reduces impatience and disrespectful interrupting.

- First, ask members of the group to raise their hand if they wish to speak.
- Second, create the speaking order by acknowledging the member by name in the order that you see their hand go up.
- Third, call on the speakers in order.
- Fourth, continue to stack speakers as they raise their hand, and remind the speakers the order of their turn by repeating the list as you go.

Balancing Expressed Views – This skill assists members who need support in expressing views they think are minority positions. This technique helps round out a discussion by asking for other views that may be present but have not yet been expressed.

- Sends the message that it is acceptable for people to speak their mind, no matter what opinions they have.
- Examples include: “What do others think?” “Does everyone agree with this?” or “Are there other ways of looking at this topic?”

Making Space for the Quiet – This skill gives permission to the less verbal members of a group that it is okay if they do not wish to speak, but that if they would like to participate, the opportunity is extended. For whatever reason why a participant might not speak, the facilitator can make room for them by:

- Being aware of the quiet members and watching for signs that they wish to speak. (for example, body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, etc.)
- Invite them to speak: “Do you want to add anything?” or “Was there an idea you wish to express?”
- Graciously accept their decision to not participate and move on.
- Hold others from jumping in or dominating the conversation by going one at a time (stacking). Allow the quiet individual to go first if they choose.
- Suggest a structured “go-around” method of sharing if participation seems uneven.
- Door opener: “Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken for a while.”

Tracking Various Points Being Made – This skill relieves the anxiety felt by someone who wonders why the group is not responding to his or her ideas in the discussion. Tracking lets the group see that there are several components of the issue being discussed and all are valid.

- First, acknowledge that there are various lines of thought going on simultaneously within a single discussion.
- Second, identify the different conversations or lines of thought.
- Third, check your accuracy with the group by asking for confirmation.
**Attentive Silence** – This skill gives participants the time to reflect on what they are thinking and feeling, and whether they want to express their thoughts in more depth.

- Be prepared to tolerate the awkward five to ten seconds of silence while members organize their thoughts.
- Stay focused on the speaker.
- Provide no verbal or nonverbal feedback — just stay relaxed yet attentive.
- Be prepared to prevent others from breaking the silence by nonverbal cues such as a raised hand or a quick shake of the head in their direction.
- Use this technique also when the group seems confused, agitated, or having trouble staying focused.

**Active Listening**

The ability to effectively communicate with other people is an important life skill. Through communication, people reach some understanding of each other, learn to like each other, influence one another, build trust, and learn more about themselves and how people perceive them. People who communicate effectively know how to interact with others flexibly, skillfully, and responsibly, but without sacrificing their own needs and integrity.

**Effective Listening**

*People generally remember:*

- 10% of what they read
- 20% of what they hear
- 30% of what they see
- 50% of what they hear and see
- 70% of what they say and write
- 90% of what they say as they do something

The communication process is complex. A person sends from 100 – 300 messages each day. These include:

- The message that was intended to be sent.
- The message that was actually sent.
- The message as the hearer interprets it.
- The response of the hearer based on what they heard.
- The reaction to the exchange of words, meaning, and interpretation that follows.

*To have communication both speaking and listening are required.*

We only hear half of what is said to us, understand only half of that, believe only half of that, and remember only half of that!

People do more listening than any other form of communication. But most listen at an efficiency level of less than 25 percent. Tests show that, immediately after listening to a 10-minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, properly evaluated, and retained only half of what was said. Within 48 hours, that comprehension rate dropped to one-quarter.
Who has the primary responsibility for effective verbal communications, the speaker or the listener? This question has been asked of thousands of people. 75 percent of those who answer say the speaker, 25 percent say the listener.

This attitude is mirrored in people’s behavior as listeners. Because they assume the speaker has the main responsibility, they listen passively instead of taking an active responsible role.

Just think how much more effective communication would be if the speaker and the listener each would take 51 percent of the responsibility. This adds up to 102 percent, which may not be good mathematics, but represents highly effective communications.

Listening is your primary communication activity. Studies show that you spend 80 percent of your waking hours communicating. About 45 percent of that time is spent listening. Your listening habits are not the result of training, but rather the result of the lack of it.

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**A Good Listener**
- Works at **listening**.
- Helps the speaker **transmit thoughts**.
- Listens to understand — not to refute.

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**Facilitation Skills Used for Supporting the Exchange of Ideas and Building Group Momentum**

**Determining Who Talks When** – One of the most clear-cut and valuable contributions a facilitator can make is to help group members know when it is their turn to speak. Allowing members to speak whenever they have something to say can result in confusion and inequity. Being able to effectively determine who goes when helps the facilitator organize the flow of a discussion.

**Focusing the Discussion** – It is critical to know when to keep the focus of group discussion on specific points being raised and when to help the group move away from specific points to other lines of thought.

**Additional Skills of a Good Facilitator**

**Be Authentic** – Even with a well-prepared agenda and key points you must make, you need to be flexible and natural. If people sense that you are reading memorized lines, they will feel like they are being talked down to, and will not respond freely.

**Be Mindful** – Are people shifting in their seats? Are they bored? Tired? Looking confused? If folks seem restless or in a haze, you may need to take a break or speed up or slow down the pace of the meeting. And if you see confused looks on too many faces, you may need to stop and check in with the group to make sure that everyone knows where you are in the agenda and that they are with you.
Check Your Inferences – Be careful about deciding where the meeting should go. Check back after each major part of the process to see if there are questions and that everyone understands and agrees with decisions that were made.

Summarize and Pause – When you finish a point or part of the meeting process, sum up what was done and decided, and pause for questions and comments before moving on. Be prepared to wait five to seven seconds while participants process and focus their thoughts.

Self-Monitor

• Take a break to calm down if you feel nervous or are losing control. Watch that you are not repeating yourself, or saying “ah” or “um” between words or thoughts. Be sure to not speak too fast or too slow.

• Do not stand too close to the members so that they feel intimidated. Make eye contact so people feel engaged. How you act can influence how people feel.

• Hold onto a marker, pen, or the back of a chair. Do not play with things in your pocket or fidget annoyingly.

• Be careful that you are not offending or alienating anyone in the group. Use swear words at your own risk!

• Using body language to control the dynamics in the room can be a great tool. Moving up close to a shy, quiet participant and asking them to speak may make them feel more willing, because they can look at you instead of the big group and feel less intimidated. Also, walking around engages people in the process. Don’t just stand in the front of the room for the entire meeting.

• Always wait until you have stopped writing and are facing the group to talk.