

Working with Groups:

Consider Before Getting Started

Who should facilitate the meeting or session?

- It may be necessary to use a person from outside the organization as a facilitator rather than relying upon the elected/appointed chairperson to manage the process. Oftentimes, the chair is expected to be neutral, and if someone from the outside facilitates the meeting the chair is free to give suggestions or express opinions.

Where should I hold this meeting?

- Choose a room that is user-friendly. A room set up with chairs facing the front indicates you want people to listen to a speaker. Seating in a circle says that all members can look at the speaker and speak to each other. A semi-circle of chairs facing a blank wall can be used for people to speak freely and for a public record to be generated at the blank wall. Use a large flip chart or stick notes on the wall to record public input.

What should be the role of the facilitator?

- If you are acting as a facilitator, you are responsible for helping a group generate ideas and come up with decisions. Co-facilitation often is a good idea — one person can continue to facilitate and pay attention to the group while the other person does the recording on the board or flip chart. Facilitators commonly generate or contribute to the ideas being shared. As a courtesy, the facilitator who wants to contribute to the process should ask permission from the group. Co-facilitators also can help balance power, conversation, and ideas among all the participants, reducing the likelihood of one person dominating the discussion.

- It is important to describe the purpose of the meeting early on and help the participants set their own agreed-upon ground rules for the session. Sometimes this is called “setting the stage” or setting “house rules” for the meeting.
- Allowing people time to think and even write before you ask them to speak is a good practice. This is particularly helpful to people who may be shy or who feel intimidated. Use small cards or sticky notes to help participants write down their ideas before sharing them with the larger group.
- Sometimes due to power, status, or personality type, people tend to dominate a conversation, reducing the productivity of the overall group process. As a facilitator, tell the group members that you will call on them one at a time for their ideas. This technique can often help curb talkative people.
- Keep group memory. Write down the ideas on large sheets of paper so they are easily readable. This can be much better than waiting for minutes after the meeting. It also may be valuable to have someone who is not a member of the group record the ideas.

Source: *Working with Groups: Generating Ideas, Making Decisions, and Enhancing Communication*, by Phyllis I. Schoenholz and Cheryl A. Burkhardt-Kriesel, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, EC478, 2008, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture. Adapted with permission.