

NOTE: You may use handouts, PowerPoint, very short video clips, brief in-class writing reflections or exercises, etc. if you feel that these will assist you in effective facilitation, though you are not required to do so.

The Role of the Facilitator: It is not necessary to have training or experience in facilitating group discussion as long as you are enthusiastic, friendly, a good listener and able to think on your feet. It is essential that you know your role and prepare carefully. You do not need to be an expert in the topic being discussed but you should know enough about it to be able to ask sensible questions. You must be able to create a friendly atmosphere of cooperation and trust where participants are comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas. **You are not the teacher;** you will not have answers to all the questions; you help people find their own answers.

Tips for effective discussion leadership:

Be prepared

- Be the best prepared person in the room. This means being familiar with the subject, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go and preparing discussion questions to help the group in considering the subject.

Set a relaxed and open tone

- Welcome everyone and create an atmosphere where each participant feels at ease expressing ideas and responding to those of others.
- Well-placed humor is always welcome!

Assist the group process

- Keep the group focused on the content of the discussion. Monitor how well the participants are communicating with each other - who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points have not yet received a fair hearing.
- When you have to intervene, put it off as long as you can. Too many interruptions stifle discussion. Let it go until you are sure they are not coming back to the topic.
- Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. The most effective facilitators often say little, but are always thinking about how to move the group toward its goals.
- Don't be afraid of silence. It will sometimes take a while for someone to offer an answer to a question you pose. People need time to think.

Help the group grapple with the content

- Make sure they consider a wide range of views. Ask them to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.
- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Either summarize the discussion occasionally or encourage group members to do so.

Use questions to help make the discussion more productive

- Prepare lots of questions. You will find a list of useful questions below. (PLEASE REMEMBER THAT THESE GENERIC QUESTIONS MAY OR MAY NOT BE APPLICABLE TO YOUR PARTICULAR READING!)
Adapted from <http://www.nald.ca/library/learning/study/scrole3.htm>.

QUESTIONS to help the facilitator guide the discussion:

to start the discussion



What do you think of the author(s)' main argument(s)?
Was the reading easy to understand? Why or why not?
Did you learn something new from the reading? What?

that encourage the expression of a diversity of views



What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?
Does anyone have a different view?
Does anyone want to add to or support or challenge that point?
Could you give us an example to illustrate that point?
What do people who disagree with that view say?
What would be a strong case against what you just said?

about values



What are the most important concerns that underlie your views?
Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?
What experiences or beliefs might lead people to hold that view?
Are there any common values or concerns here in spite of different opinions on how to deal with them?
What motivates that choice?

that sum up



What seems to be the key point here?
Are there any points on which most of us would agree?
What have you learned about this issue?
In what ways do you see the issue differently as a result of considering others' views?

Adapted from: <http://www.nald.ca/library/learning/study/scquest.htm>

TROUBLESHOOTING:

Problem

Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible Response

Try to draw them out but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact to remind them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non-verbal cues that they want to speak. Often, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions and will begin to take part. When that happens, show genuine interest and ask for more.

An aggressive person dominates the discussion

It's your responsibility to intervene and set limits. Remind him/her that you want to hear from everyone. Next, you might ask him/her not to talk until everyone else has had a chance. If someone goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to interrupt to get back on track.

Discussion suddenly stops, or doesn't even get off the ground.

Acknowledge that this is occurring. Ask, "What is happening here?" "Maybe we're not getting at your real concerns. What do you think people really need to talk about here?"

Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

This is a hard call - after all, the discussion belongs to the group. Yet, it's your job to focus the discussion and move it along. Allow room to explore closely related topics but if only a few are taking the discussion in a new direction the others are likely frustrated, resentful and bored. Try to refocus by asking, "How does your point relate to..... ?" or stating, "That is interesting, but let's return to the central issue." If, on the other hand, most or all of the group are more interested in pursuing a different topic than the one planned, you should be sensitive to that.

Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or participants get hung up in a dispute about facts but no one present knows the answer.

Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. If no one knows the facts, and the point is not essential, put it aside and move on. If the point is central to facts the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree and there may be no generally accepted answer.

Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Are you talking too much or not giving enough response time after posing questions? People need time to think, reflect and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle so everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you will have a group of people who are tired or who have had a bad day. There may be a lack of excitement if the group seems to be in agreement. In this case, try to bring up other views. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they have against the views that you have expressed?" If all else fails, end the meeting early.

Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, someone gets angry, yells at another, or puts another person down.

If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict are good but, in order to be productive, it must relate to the issue. It is acceptable to challenge a person's ideas but not the person. Interrupt personal attacks, name-calling or put-downs as soon as they occur. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help. They will support you if they bought into the ground rules in the first place.

Adapted from: <http://www.nald.ca/library/learning/study/sctroubl.htm>