

Tools for Approaching Challenges to Group Facilitation

Calvin Chou, Nan Cochran, Mary Ann Gilligan, Kit Gracey, Dave Gullen - 2/08

Our intention with the following list is to provide several skills, approaches, thoughts, words, etc., that can help with facilitation challenges. Obviously the point is not for every facilitator to use every one of these tools, nor is every tool right for every occasion, but we hope that some of these will be useful in many facilitation situations.

I. Make the Diagnosis -

- A. Observe what is happening in the group.
- B. Observe what is happening in subgroups (both obvious subgroups, such as gender, ethnicity, etc, as well as more subtle subgroups, including occupation, prior alliances, spirituality, etc).
- C. How is the challenge affecting you? Is this your own personal issue, or can you generalize it to how the rest of the group might be feeling?
- D. What data do you have about its effects on group members and/or subgroups?
 1. Verbal
 - a. Who is/is not participating?
 - b. How are they participating?
 2. Non-verbal
 - a. Engaged - in what way? what are the behaviors?
 - b. Not- engaged - in what way? what are the behaviors?
- E. Synthesize the data - What do you think is going on? Form a hypothesis and decide whether or not to intervene.

II. Intervening -

General principles - Interventions can be non-verbal, verbal or both. They also can include watchful waiting. Often the appropriate intervention seems to come “naturally”. At other times, especially when our “hot buttons” are being pushed, a more deliberate plan may be helpful. It is useful to anticipate the potential consequences of your action(s) as well. Possible interventions include the following:

- A. Waiting for a group member to intervene - part of the watchful waiting strategy.
- B. Non-verbal interventions - can start with the most indirect and progress to the most forceful/direct. An example of a graded series of interventions for the “over-talker” might be as follows:
 1. Look directly at the person.
 2. Avoid eye contact.
 3. Flash a brief look with perhaps a “head nod” or some other subtle signal to indicate that it’s time to stop talking.
 4. A very direct non-verbal intervention would be to glance very quickly at your watch.
- C. Verbal interventions - Examples that can be used for the “Over-talker” :
 1. “That’s interesting, I wonder if anyone else has any comments.”
 2. “I think I would like to check in with the group and see how they are doing.”
 3. “Terry, would you be able to stop right there, hold that thought or feeling, while we check in with the rest of the group.”
 4. “Pat, you seem really energized about this issue. I wonder if you can help us by connecting this on an emotional level.”

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5. Or “I understand how you’re thinking about this issue. I wonder how you’re feeling about it?”

III. Personal Awareness - Of course it’s never just about “them”!!!

How does the “personhood” of the facilitator affect the group? What are common challenges for the facilitator? Often it is easiest to think about these issues before the group begins, based upon the facilitator’s self-understanding, or after the group has concluded during debriefing - harder to get there in the real time of the group.

For more profound insights, please refer to Charlie O’Leary’s handouts on facilitation.