

## 1. Active Listening

When we actively listen we suspend our own thought processes and give the speaker our full attention. We make a deliberate effort to understand someone's position and their underlying needs, concerns and emotions.

## 2. Summarising

A succinct and accurate summary of what's been said so far can be really helpful to move a group towards a decision. Outline the emerging common ground as well as the unresolved differences: "it seems like we've almost reached agreement on that element of the proposal, but we need to explore this part further to address everyone's concerns." Check with everyone that you've got it right.

## 3. Synthesis

After discussing the issue freely move on to finding agreement on what needs to be done. During this stage, sometimes called synthesis, you need to find the common ground, find connections between seemingly competing ideas and weave them together to form proposals.

Start with a summary of where you think the group and different members are at. Then start building a proposal from whatever agreement there is. Look for ideas on how the differences can be resolved. Focus on solutions that address the fundamental needs and key concerns that people within the group have. It's not unusual for people to be willing to give way on some things but not on others which affect them more closely. The solution will often be found by combining elements from different proposals.

To make summarising and synthesis easier it is helpful to write up key issues on a flipchart as the discussion happens, and to encourage people to come up with proposals.

*For more information read our in-depth facilitation and consensus briefings, available on our website.*

*For more briefings and training workshops see:  
[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)*



# Facilitating Meetings

short guide



Meetings are a necessary part of working in any group – they give us the chance to share information, to reach decisions and to get jobs done. But too often they drag on and on, with tempers running high, people talking over each other, and no decisions being made. Bad meetings leave you wondering why you bothered turning up. Unfortunately this pattern is very common in groups. However by using some facilitation skills it's easy to turn around the style of meetings and actually make them an enjoyable and inspiring experience.

## What is facilitation?

Facilitation is about helping the group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. It's also about making sure everyone can be involved in discussions and making decisions. It combines a series of roles and tasks. Sometimes these are taken on by one person – the facilitator, however there's no reason why they can't be shared between one or more people in the meeting. Good facilitators stay neutral, winning the trust of everyone in the meeting and treating everyone as equals. At no time do they make decisions for the group or take sides in a conflict.



## Was the meeting successful?

**Tasks** – What got done? Did you get the necessary results? Were problems solved, and were the objectives of the group met?

**Maintenance** – How did it get done? How did people feel and how will this affect morale and group cohesion? Did the meeting make good use of the pooled talents? Was it enjoyable?

## Key facilitation tasks

- ✓ Help the group plan the meeting agenda. Think about timing and order of agenda items, and how to tackle each point.
- ✓ Prepare the room so it's comfortable and everyone can participate; sort out materials the meeting might need e.g. paper, pens.
- ✓ Introduce the meeting, what it's about and how the meeting works (e.g. consensus or voting, handsignals, breaks).
- ✓ Keep the group to the agenda and decision-making process.
- ✓ Keep the meeting focussed on one item at a time.
- ✓ Help everyone to participate. Keep track of who wants to speak. Draw out quiet people and limit those who talk a lot.
- ✓ Challenge aggressive or discriminatory behaviour and put-downs.
- ✓ Introduce techniques such as ideastorming, go-rounds and working groups to make the meeting more efficient and participatory.
- ✓ Clarify and summarise points, make sure everyone understands the discussion.
- ✓ Test for agreement and get clear decisions made.
- ✓ Ensure that action points and decisions are recorded.
- ✓ Keep the meeting to time.
- ✓ Help the group deal with conflict.
- ✓ Listen for underlying issues, concerns or emotions. Help bring them out so they can be dealt with.

## Co-facilitation roles at a meeting

Instead of just one facilitator you could have two or more people sharing the different tasks:

**Co-facilitators** can take turns facilitating and support each other.

**Taking hands:** the job of keeping track of whose turn it is to speak next and of giving appropriate time limits to speakers.

**Vibes-watchers** pay attention to the emotional atmosphere of the meeting, They watch out for individuals' feelings and intervene if necessary.

**The timekeeper** keeps track of the time and the agreed time frame for the different agenda points, negotiating extensions if needed.

**Notetakers** or **recorders** take minutes or notes, collect reports, and also draw attention to incomplete decisions – e.g. “who is going to contact so and so, and when?”.

**The doorkeeper** welcomes people in, bringing them up to speed on the meeting and practical stuff.

## A facilitator's skills and qualities

**Good listening skills** to hear underlying concerns in the group. This includes strategic questioning to be able to understand everyone's viewpoint properly.

**Respect for all participants** and interest in what each individual has to offer.

**Understanding** of the aim of the meeting as well as long-term goals of the group.

**Neutrality on the issues discussed.** Avoiding taking sides or manipulating the meeting towards a particular outcome. If this becomes difficult, or you know in advance that you'll struggle to remain impartial try:

- **letting someone else facilitate;**
- **making it clear when you're expressing your own opinion and when you're intervening as the facilitator**

**Clear thinking and observation** – pay attention both to the content of the discussion and the process. How are people feeling? What is being said?

**Assertiveness** – know when to intervene decisively and give some direction to the meeting.

## Facilitating consensus

Many grassroots groups use consensus decision making rather than voting in their meetings. When working to reach consensus we bring together different ideas and try to find a proposal that is agreeable to everyone. Consensus is about participation and equalising power. Good facilitation plays an important role in helping a group to reach agreement.

*The key to helping a group towards consensus is to encourage all members of the group to **express their needs and viewpoints clearly, find the common ground and find solutions** to any areas of disagreement. Active listening, summarising and synthesis are three skills that help the facilitator with this.*

