

How to Facilitate Discussion

Kari Whittenberger-Keith, Ph.D., Research Development Services
William M. Keith, Ph.D., Department of English
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

1. Think about goals

The point of having discussion is that people will not only learn through interaction, but engaging each other will produce “sparks,” or new ideas and understandings.

- What knowledge or resources do people have which they can share?
- What are the most salient questions or problems people are bringing to the discussion?
- How can they best help each other?
- If you feel you have to communicate particular information, or you want to “get something across,” discussion is not the right format. For a well-facilitated discussion, the facilitator has to trust to the group to produce something wonderful, even though the facilitator can’t know in advance what that will be.

2. Framing

For an hour long discussion (for example), it’s best to have no more than 2-3 minutes of framing before turning over almost completely to the participants.

- Start with a brief contextual statement: what the general or specific topic is, and how you anticipate it will be relevant to them. The discussion will be particularly framed by what you say about relevance.
- Identify 3-5 questions that will be the focus of discussion; it’s helpful to have them on a handout.
- The questions should be open-ended, implying no particular answer. A useful genre of question is a hypothetical “If you had all the control and money you wanted, how would you run this program/restructure your organization/create new materials/ etc.?” The best questions will allow

people to draw on their experience, and share their values and accumulated learning.

3. Begin the discussion asking the participants to select a question and begin. Your function as facilitator is to do some gentle steering and counter-steering.

- It's ok to interrupt people if their turns seem to be too long ("Let's make sure we have time for everybody").
- As far as possible let the discussion take its own course. You don't have to cover all questions, the group can decide how far or fast they want to go. You can periodically remind people of other questions as it seems relevant.
- Most groups can manage themselves without raising their hands to be called on, but if the group is more comfortable with that you can do it.
- Feel free to call on people who seem to participate less or have trouble working themselves in ("Barb, what are your thoughts?"). If someone clearly doesn't want to make more than a minimal contribution, don't force it.
- Praise participants for asking good follow-ups, or clarifying, or engaging another person's point of view, or being creative. Challenge participants to be interesting rather than correct.
- When people speak in generalities, ask them for examples. When they talk about specifics or their own experience, ask them to generalize.

4. When there is about 5 minutes left, find a natural place to begin summing up.

- A helpful technique is to ask each participant to briefly name the two things that came up which were most helpful, memorable or striking.

Here is a nice article on facilitation more broadly:

Cut through the Small Talk and Connect—Lessons from 130+ Dinners, Summits, and Salons:

<https://firstround.com/review/cut-through-the-small-talk-and-connect-lessons-from-130-dinners-summits-and-salons/>