



## 12 Common Techniques in Facilitating Groups

### Summary of Techniques and Their Application

The following table might be useful for facilitators when deciding what technique that they want to use in various group situations. The procedures associated with the following techniques are described more fully later on in this document.

<b>Common Techniques</b>	<b>Common Application in Groups</b>
Brainstorming	Generate a broad range of new and creative ideas
Consensus	Make a group decision in a highly participative, egalitarian fashion, and that everyone can live with, even though not all members might readily agree with the decision
Discussion	Open exchange of comments among group members to explore or clarify a topic, often in preparation for a decision
Facilitator intervention	Techniques used by the facilitator to strengthen a constructive practice or discontinue a destructive practice (this section of information in this document is about how to do interventions; the other rows in this table are forms of interventions)
Ground rules	Guide and scope the group members to certain, desired behaviors in meetings; they establish the group's desired personality of the group
Meeting agendas	Ensure meetings are highly focused and results-oriented around certain topics, their order and their timing
Meeting management	Ensure all participation and group processes are highly effective and efficient in a meeting; can include most or all of the facilitation techniques, in addition to planning and following up the meeting
Nominal Group Technique	Collect, organize and summarize a wide range of ideas from among group members to generate group conclusions and recommendation
Parking Lots	List a topic or question to be addressed later on by the group
Round-Robin	Ensure complete collection of all ideas from all participants
Stories	Descriptions of experiences meant to convey important learnings
Voting	Make a selection from various alternatives

## Procedures for Common Techniques in Facilitation

### Brainstorming Technique

1. Specify the facilitation topic or goal to the group (if possible, do this step as pre-work before the next meeting).
2. Ask for free-for-all generation of ideas from among members of the group.
3. List all the ideas on a flipchart, holding back any reactions and/or discussion from any members of the group until all ideas are collected. (Members might ask a quick question about an idea, but only to understand the meaning of the idea, not to make a decision about the idea.)

*Optional:*

4. Combine the ideas into common categories. This can be done by using the discussion, voting (ranking or rating) and/or consensus techniques.
5. Select the most preferred categories and/or ideas. This can be done by using the discussion, voting (ranking or rating) and/or consensus techniques.

### Consensus Technique

Often, there is confusion around the term consensus. Consensus means that every member of the group can live with the group's final decision. It does not mean that every member completely agrees with the decision. Consensus is often the means by which highly participative groups members reach their decisions, especially if they favor a highly egalitarian approach to decision making.

There are several approaches to the technique of reaching consensus. One quick approach to consensus is to just ask for a quick conclusion from the group by 1) suggesting a specific answer to the decision that must be made by the group and 2) asking if everyone in the group can live with that suggestion. Although that approach might save a lot of time, it certainly does not support the kind of discussions that generate ownership and learning among group members. Therefore, planners might consider the following, more thoughtful approach to reaching consensus.

#### ***Before Meeting***

Members receive information that:

1. Clarifies the decision to be made.  
It is often best if the decision is written in the form of a "yes/no" question or a choice from among alternatives, for example, "Should we approve \_\_\_\_?" or "Should we hire \_\_\_\_?"
2. Is sufficient for each member to come to some conclusion on his or her own.

### **Ground Rules During Consensus Activities**

The facilitator explains ground rules to other members of the group, for example:

1. Members do not interrupt each other.
2. Members can disagree with each other.
3. Members do not engage in side discussions.
4. Silence is considered agreement with the decision to be made.
5. If decision is reached by consensus, then all members act as a united front to support decision.

### **Consensus Process in Meeting**

The facilitator guides the procedure.

1. The facilitator specifies a deadline by which to reach consensus in the meeting.
2. In a roundtable fashion, each member:
  - a) Gets equal time to voice his or her preferences and reasons in regard to the question.
  - b) Focuses perspectives on what is *doable*
  - c) Does not mention other members' names
  - d) The most senior leader or manager in the group voices his or her opinion last.
3. At the end of each person's time slot, all members take a quiet minute to:
  - a) Collect his or her own thoughts in response to the last speaker's preferences.
  - b) Decide what he or she would be willing to compromise or have in common with the last speaker.
4. At the deadline:
  - a) The facilitator poses what seems to be the most common perspective voiced by members.
  - b) Asks all members if they can support that perspective.
5. If no consensus is reached, members might choose one of following options:
  - a) Consider further research until a specified future time. Decide what additional information is needed and maybe appoint a committee to do research. The committee researches and provides recommendations, preferably in writing to each member of the group before the next meeting. At the meeting, members hear the committee's recommendations and initiate the consensus process again.
  - b) Consider using a vote to decide (via rating or ranking). Some people would assert that voting is not consensus, but it sure is handy if the consensus process has not reached a conclusion by an absolute deadline. See the Voting Technique, later on below, for a description of the rating and ranking approaches to voting.

### Discussion Technique

1. Specify the discussion topic and the goal to the planning group (if possible, do this step as pre-work before the next meeting). The goal is usually to identify, clarify, analyze and/or select an item.
2. It is often best if the topic is described in the form of a “yes/no” question or a choice from among alternatives, for example, “Should we approve \_\_\_\_?” or “Should we hire \_\_\_\_?”.
3. Specify when the discussion is to start and stop.
4. Allow for open, unassigned exchange of information, including, for example, questions, suggestions and general comments, until it is time stop the discussion.
5. Facilitate to focus the discussion around the topic.
6. Attempt to capture key points on a flipchart.

#### *Optional:*

7. Attempt to summarize the discussion by identifying conclusions or decisions from the discussion.
8. The group can make selections from the results using voting (ranking or rating) and/or consensus techniques.

### Facilitator Intervention Technique

The nature of the intervention depends on the nature of the problem in the group.

1. If the group seems stuck, then it is appropriate to point this out to the entire group. (Ideas about how to handle this situation are included in the next subsection.)
2. If there is prolonged conflict between certain members, then it may be more appropriate to invite the members out of the group and to conduct an intervention among those members. (Ideas about how to handle this situation are included in the next subsection.)
3. If a ground rule is being broken, then it may be appropriate to point this out to the entire group.

There are a wide variety of intervention techniques, for example, summarizing, confronting, making suggestions, asking questions, providing other perspectives, asking for clarity, reminding the group about their ground rules and structuring activities.

Whenever intervening in a group, try to give the group an opportunity to take responsibility for recognizing the situation and deciding what to do about it. If an intervention is to the entire group, consider:

1. Briefly describe what you are seeing or hearing (in the here and now) that leads you to conclude that there is a problem. Do not just report what you feel or sense – try to be more specific.
2. Ask the group what they want to do.
3. Be silent while group members react and discuss the situation.
4. Focus the discussion on the problem at hand.
5. Ask them for a decision.

## Ground Rules Technique

Ground rules can be identified before the group meeting and then proposed to the group for their review, modification and/or approval. Or, the ground rules can be developed by members of the group in a group meeting. Some common ground rules are:

1. Meetings start and stop on time.
2. Focus on priorities, not on personalities.
3. Everyone participates.
4. All opinions are honored.
5. No interruptions.
6. No sidebars (or conversations not involving the main group).

## Meeting Agendas Technique

1. Design the agenda together with the organization's leadership ó do not design it yourself. Ensure an effective meeting by first reflecting on the goals for the meeting and then the activities to meet those goals.
2. Think about how you label an event so that people come in with that mindset. It may pay to have a short dialogue around the label to develop a common mindset among attendees, particularly if they include representatives from various cultures.
3. Always include introductions or some type of "check in" early on so that all members get involved early in the meeting.
4. Be sure to dedicate time to reviewing status of actions assigned in previous meetings.
5. Allow time for brief evaluations, or "satisfaction checks," among the members.
6. Next to each major topic, include the type of action needed, the type of output expected, and time estimates for addressing each topic.
7. Review the agenda at the beginning of each meeting, giving participants a chance to understand all proposed major topics, change them and accept them.
8. Ask participants if they will commit to the agenda.
9. Keep the agenda posted at all times.
10. Ensure a meeting recorder (or documenter) who documents major activities during the meeting and actions to be conducted after the meeting. This person should issue meeting minutes shortly after the meeting (although meeting minutes may seem the most perfunctory duty from a meeting, the minutes can end up being the most useful part of the meeting by ensuring all actions are completed).
11. In general, do not over design the meeting. Be willing to adapt the meeting agenda if members are making progress in the meeting.

### Meeting Management Technique

Meeting management tends to be a set of skills often overlooked by facilitators and planners. The following suggestions for facilitators apply to most meetings.

#### ***Facilitator Preparation for Meetings***

Remember that your behavior sets the tone for the meeting. Depending on your personality, you should become as comfortable as possible before each meeting. Regardless of your personality, it is important to acknowledge to yourself whatever you are feeling about the meeting. Note what might be the best and worst outcomes of the meeting, and realize the meeting will probably be somewhere in between.

#### ***Developing Agendas***

The agenda is the "roadmap" for the entire meeting, so it is very important to design the agenda carefully. See the above-listed "Meeting Agendas Technique."

#### ***Opening Meetings***

1. Start on time. This respects those who showed up on time and reminds any late-comers that the meeting and its scheduling are serious.
2. Ask if anyone is missing who should be present. If there is anyone who should be there and is not, visit the reason for the absence and address how to get him or her involved.
3. Model the kind of energy and participation needed by the facilitator and meeting participants.
4. Clarify your roles for that meeting, that is, note when you will be doing any training, facilitating, recording, etc.

#### ***Establishing Ground Rules for Meetings***

The ground rules establish the overall "personality" of the meeting, so they are very important to establish early on when working with a group. See the subsection, "Ground Rules Technique."

#### ***Time Management***

One of the most difficult facilitation tasks is time management. In a highly energized meeting, time seems to run out before tasks are completed. Therefore, the biggest challenge is keeping momentum to keep the process moving.

1. Consider asking the group for a volunteer to help monitor and remind the group about the time.
2. If the planned time on the agenda is getting out of hand, present it to the group members and ask for their input as to a resolution.
3. Adjourn a meeting when scheduled – rarely deter from this guideline. It is far better to adjourn a meeting even if members feel work is incomplete than to drag a meeting on and on, with the illusion that everyone should leave the meeting with a strong sense of closure. Adjourning a meeting on time ensures that all members feel their time is respected and they can continue to count on sound meeting management.

### **Evaluations During Meeting Process**

Evaluation of the quality of a meeting is a critical, but often overlooked, requirement for effective meetings. Avoiding evaluations in an effort to “get more work done” in meetings is a good example of working harder, rather than smarter. Perhaps the most critical element of any successful meeting is each member’s complete and responsible participation. Round-Robin evaluation is a useful technique for ensuring meetings include this full participation.

If the meeting is a long one, for example, more than 1.5 hours, then every hour or so, conduct a 5-minute “satisfaction check.” Have each member visit his or her “internal weather” and report his or her evaluation so that each person is involved (have the senior management provide their evaluations last). Far too many meetings end up with members going out of the room, remarking to each other that the meeting was not useful. Get this impression *during* the meeting so you can do something about it.

### **Evaluating Overall Meeting**

Leave 10 minutes near the end to evaluate the quality of the meeting. Do not skip this portion of the meeting. The facilitator and planners can quickly learn a great deal about what is working and what is not.

1. Have each member rate the meeting from 1-5, with 1 as the lowest.
2. Have the member explain his or her rating.
3. Finally, have the member explain what he or she could have done *in that meeting* to now be rating the meeting a 5.

Have the senior management provide their evaluations last.

### **Closing Meetings**

At the end of a meeting, review actions and assignments, establish the time and location for the next meeting, and ask group members if they can make it or not (to get their commitment). Deciding membership in meetings is extremely important, but often overlooked. Ask who should be at the next meeting and ensure that someone is assigned to invite them.

### **Nominal Group Technique**

There are many versions of the overall nominal group technique (NGT), which, in any form, is a combination of various other techniques. The technique usually includes various phases, including:

1. Facilitator clarifies the topic or goal to be addressed by the group, for example, to select the most important items from a list.
2. Ideas are collected from members of the group.
  - a) The Round-Robin technique is often used to compile an initial list of ideas.
  - b) Brainstorming is used to expand the compiled list of ideas.



3. The overall list is organized and analyzed.
  - a) The discussion technique is often used.
  - b) The list is analyzed for overlaps, duplications, conflict, interdependences, etc.
4. Ideas are selected from the overall list, using any of the following techniques.
  - The discussion technique can be applied, depending on the nature of the members of the group.
  - The consensus technique can be applied if the group highly values strong participation and egalitarian approaches to decision making.
  - The voting technique can be used to make a final selection.

### Parking Lot Technique

1. One or more members of the group mentions that a matter before the group is not directly related to the established topic or goal that the group wants to address.
2. The facilitator or a group member suggests that the matter go on the "parking lot."
3. If group members agree with the suggestion, the matter is listed on a "parking lot," which is usually a flipchart sheet posted off to the side in the meeting room.
4. Before the end of the meeting, members agree how the "parking lot" matters will be addressed later on, if at all.

### Round-Robin Technique

1. The facilitator clarifies the topic or goal to be addressed by the group, for example, to generate ideas about a topic or goal.
2. Members get quiet time before the group meeting, or early in the group meeting, to identify ideas on their own.
3. In the meeting, the facilitator collects a list of ideas by getting one idea from one person at a time, going around the table, until all members have shared all of the ideas from their list.
4. Members do not analyze or discuss any of the ideas until all ideas have been collected. Members can ask a question during the Round-Robin, only to get clarification on a suggested idea.
5. The facilitator and members avoid duplication of ideas on the list.

#### *Optional:*

6. Combine the ideas into common categories. This can be done by using the discussion, voting (ranking or rating) and/or consensus techniques.
7. Select the most preferred categories and/or ideas. This can be done by using the discussion, voting (ranking or rating) and/or consensus techniques.



### Stories Technique

Facilitator explains that the focus of this technique is on the positive by building on the strengths and opportunities of the organization and its stakeholders. Facilitator clarifies goal of technique, for example, to establish vision, values and/or action plans.

1. Each member quietly reflects on his or her best experience with the organization and the people it serves.
2. In pairs, members interview each other (each interview is 10 minutes long) about their best experience, including about:
  - a) What made it the best experience? What were they doing? Who was involved?
  - b) What do they value about the organization and whom it serves now?
  - c) What would they like to be core value in the organization?
  - d) Three wishes for the organization and the people it serves?
3. The interviewer documents the top 5-8 major themes in what the other person talked about, for example, "helping other people," "feeling of fulfillment" and "working in a team." The interviewer mentions the themes to the other person to get his or her agreement, disagreement or modifications to the themes.
4. Use the Round-Robin technique in the group to collect all of the themes. Also, use brainstorming technique to expand the list of themes if the group prefers.
5. Use the voting technique (rating) to select the top 5-8 themes to include in the vision and/or reflect in the values.
6. Use the Round-Robin technique for each person to identify his or her action plans to enact the vision and/or values.

### Voting Technique

There are a variety of approaches to the voting technique.

#### ***Show of Hands***

The most common approach to the technique is simply to ask for a show of hands regarding each item on a list, one at a time, and the item that gets the most show of hands is the item that is selected from the list.

#### ***Ranking***

Ranking is assigning one distinct value to each item in order to select the single, most important item from a list. For example, a ranked list would have one item ranked as 1, three as 2 and four as 3.

#### ***Rating***

Rating is associating a value with each item in order to select a range of items from a list. Some items can have the same value associated with them. For example, a rated list might have several items rated as high, medium or low or as 1, 2 or 3.

#### ***Dot-Voting***

A common approach to using the technique is as follows.

1. Each member gets a certain number of votes that he or she can use regarding items on a list. The number of dots that they get is usually equal to the number of choices that are to be made from a list. For example, if three items are to be selected, then each person gets three dots.
2. Each member walks up to the overall list of items and places his or her dots next to the items that the member recommends be selected from the list.
3. After all members have cast their votes, the items that received the most votes get selected from the list.

The dot-voting technique has variations. Different colored dots can represent more than one vote, or even a negative vote. Sometimes, each participant is given one vote of each weight and required to apply each vote to a different item. In some cases, a member is allowed to cast multiple votes for one item.