# Facilitation Tips and Interventions

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Introduction to Planning and Facilitating Effective Meetings and Navigating in Rough Seas: Public Issues and Conflict Management, NOAA Coastal Services Center

# Facilitation Techniques

The following techniques are used by facilitators during meetings to assist groups in accomplishing their objectives.

### Table 2: Facilitation Techniques

| Technique | Description |
|---|---|
| **Breakout Groups** | Some groups can be too large to enable in-depth discussion. For example, in a one-hour discussion session involving 100 people, many participants would not be able to share their thoughts. Depending on the nature of the issue, the facilitator may decide to break a large group into smaller groups of 5 to 20 participants. These groups usually “report” back to the larger group to share the results of their discussion or any decisions made. |
| **Active Listening** | The facilitator should look people in the eye, use attentive body language, and make participants understand that they are being heard. Body language should neither show support for or disapproval of any suggestions, comments, or ideas, since this can discourage open communication. The facilitator should face and take a step toward the person who is speaking to show interest. |
| **Asking Questions** | Questions test assumptions, invite participation, gather information, and probe for hidden points. The facilitator can ask open-ended questions to encourage thorough discussion of all ideas presented. |
| **Paraphrasing** | Paraphrasing involves repeating what has been said to let participants know they are being heard, to let others hear the point a second time, and to clarify key ideas. This also provides an opportunity to ascertain if the facilitator has correctly “heard” or interpreted what was said. |
| **Summarizing** | After listening attentively to all that has been said, a facilitator should offer a concise and timely summary. Summarizing is a good way to revive a discussion, or to end one when things seem to be wrapping up. |
| **Synthesizing** | While it may sometimes be appropriate to record individual ideas of each participant, in other situations the facilitator may encourage attendees to comment on and build on each other’s ideas and then record the “collective idea” on a flip chart. This builds consensus and commitment. |
| **Negative Polling** | It is sometimes easier to reveal disagreement within a group than to confirm agreement. Often used during the “closing” part of a discussion, the negative poll is a way to find out if the group is ready to confirm a decision and move on to the next task. When using this tool, the facilitator can ask the group if anyone disagrees with what has been suggested or put forth by participants. If no one speaks up, it is usually safe to move on. If any individual has hesitation, he or she will usually speak up in a negative poll. |
| **Boomeranging** | Participants will often look to the facilitator to answer questions about content or suggest solutions. However, the facilitator is the process expert, not the content expert, and must resist the temptation to solve content problems for the group. Instead, the facilitator can “boomerang” the question back to the group by asking the following questions:<br>• “*What do YOU think the groups should do?*”<br>• “*What does the GROUP feel is the best choice?*”<br>• “*How would YOU suggest solving this problem?*” |
| **Restating the Purpose** | When a discussion gets off track and participants are talking about issues that are not on the agenda, the facilitator can ask the group to pause and reconsider the meeting purpose or desired objectives. The facilitator may say,<br>“*I sense this issue is important to the group, but the purpose of our meeting today is ______ ______ , so would it be okay to table this discussion until a later time?*” |

| Table 2: Facilitation Techniques *(continued)* | |
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| **3-Step Intervention to Deal with Disruptive Behaviors** | The facilitator can use this intervention when a person's behavior is disruptive to the meeting.<br>Step 1 – Describe problematic behaviors. For example, "Allen and Sue, both of you have left and returned three times during the meeting."<br>Step 2 – Make an impact statement to tell group members how their actions are affecting the facilitator, the process, or other people. For example, "We had to stop our discussion and start over on three occasions because of this."<br>Step 3 – Redirect the person's behavior. This can be done by asking members for their suggestions about what to do. For example, "What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?" or "Would everyone like a short break so that when we return everyone will be able to fully participate?" |
| **Labeling Sidetracks** | The facilitator should let the group know when it gets off track. The group can decide if it wants to pursue the sidetrack or get back to the agenda |
| **Parking Lot** | The facilitator can use a flip chart page, or ask the recorder to keep a sheet, labeled "Parking Lot." Sidetrack items are placed in the parking lot and reviewed later to determine if any should be included in a future agenda. Questions and concerns recorded in the parking lot need to be followed up—either by the facilitator or (more often) by the meeting leader. |
| **Mirroring** | The facilitator can periodically tell group members how they appear so they can interpret their actions and make corrections. This is particularly effective for drawing the entire group's attention back to the tasks at hand or dealing with disruptive behaviors. This is also a good way to see if the pace is too slow, too fast, or if the group needs a break.<br>"*I see some confused faces out there. Do we need to clarify the process? Or perhaps take a break?"* |
| **Remaining Neutral** | The facilitator must focus on the "process" role and avoid the temptation to offer an opinion on the topic under discussion. A facilitator who becomes involved in the content discussion must let the group know that he or she is stepping out of the facilitator role. |
| **Flip Chart Note Taking** | Taking flip chart notes not only serves the purpose of recording decisions, priorities, and key points of discussion, but also focuses the group's attention and ensures that all participants are in agreement with what is being recorded.<br>Some tips for utilizing flip chart notes effectively:<br>1. Ask participants to report whether their points are being captured accurately.<br>2. Write large enough for everyone in the room to be able to read; do not use flip chart notes in a large group where many participants would be unable to see the chart.<br>3. Consider using alternating marker colors for each main point to improve readability.<br>4. Label each page with the session it is from and a page number to make it easier to type up the notes later. |

**Interventions**

When a person's behavior begins to disrupt a meeting, workshop, or other event, the facilitator should be prepared to intervene. In the language of facilitation, an intervention is "any action or set of actions deliberately taken to improve the functioning of the group."

This may be necessary if anyone with the described personality types is present, or if:

- someone isn't listening,
- side conversations are going on,
- people are interrupting each other,
- someone uses a sarcastic tone during a debate or discussion,
- people's comments get personal, or
- the discussion is getting off track.

*Intervening is like holding up* a *mirror to the group so that participants can* see *what they're doing and take steps to correct the problem.*

Regardless of its length and complexity, an intervention is always an interruption. The facilitator must stop the discussion and draw attention to an aspect of the process-how relations are maintained, the rules or norms, group dynamics, or the meeting's climate. The facilitator's goal should be to minimize the interruption by resolving the situation as quickly as possible. You may do this by 1) ignoring the situation, 2) discussing it privately with the person during a break, or 3) intervening.

Always be cautious about whether or not you intervene. If you intervene every single time there's a distraction or problem with any member of the group, you might be interrupting too frequently. You should keep a watchful eye for repetitive, inappropriate behaviors that don't seem to resolve themselves.

The following questions may help you decide whether it's advisable to intervene:

- Is the problem serious?
- Might it go away by itself?
- How much time will it take to intervene? Do we have that much time?
- Will the intervention be more disruptive than the problem?
- Can the intervention hurt the climate?
- Do I know the people well enough to do this?
- Is it appropriate, given their level of openness and trust?
- Do I have enough credibility to do this?

**The 3-Step Intervention Strategy**

Interventions need to be worded carefully, so that they do not make the situation worse.
There are generally three distinct components to an intervention statement:

Step 1: **Describe** what you're seeing ("Hold up a mirror"). This is nonjudgmental and doesn't attribute motive. It's based solely on observations of actual events. For example, "Allen and Sue, both of you have left and returned three times during this meeting."

Step 2: **Make an impact statement.** Tell members how their actions are impacting you, the process, or other people. Base this on actual observations. For example, "We had to stop our discussion and start over again on three occasions, because of your comings and goings over the last hour."

Step 3: **Redirect** the person's behavior(s). This can be done by:
• Asking members for their suggestions about what to do. For example,
"What can we do to make sure this doesn't happen again?" or "Would everyone like a short break so that when we return, everyone will be able to fully participate?"
• Telling members what to do. For example, "Please either leave, or stay for the rest of the meeting."

*Special note: Step 2 can be omitted if the impact statements may be interpreted as laying excessive guilt on the offending parties. You'll need to use your best judgment to determine whether this step is necessary. A good rule of thumb is to use the impact statements when the offensive behavior is persistent or repetitive and previous intervention attempts have been ignored.*

<u>A Few Examples of the 3-Step Intervention Strategy</u>

As you'll see in these examples, the three steps of the intervention strategy don't have to be used in the order presented, and in some cases, the impact statement can be omitted or worded in an indirect way.

**When someone is being sarcastic:**
"Ellen, I'm afraid your good ideas aren't being heard (**impact**), because of the tone of voice you're using (**describe**). How about stating that again, only in a more neutral way (**redirect**)?"

**When one person is putting down the ideas of another:**
"Joe, you have been saying 'yes, but' after every suggestion Carol has put on the table (**describe**). I'm going to ask you to explore these ideas by asking a few questions, to make sure you fully understand them before dismissing them (**redirect**). It will make Carol feel more like she's being heard (**impact**)."
Another way to deal with this is to ask the person to paraphrase what the person they'd criticized had said (**redirect**).

**When one person dominates the discussion:**

"Al , you always have lots of valuable ideas (**describe**), but we need to hear from the other members of the team (**indirect impact****).** Would you please hold your comments until the end (or for a few minutes), so other people can be heard (**redirect**)?"

** Avoid saying things like "No one else gets a chance to speak." Instead, stay more neutral, and say, "Others need to be heard."