

Tips for facilitation

What is a facilitator?

DEFINITION

To facilitate: to make an action or process easy, easier or possible

A facilitator helps make the process of learning, exploring attitudes and gaining new skills easier for participants.

A FACILITATOR:

- uses participatory methods to help participants engage and interact with each other and the issues in fun, serious and inspiring ways.
- creates an environment of trust, openness and mutual learning, where differences of opinion are respected, for example helping the group establish ground rules.
- recognises and addresses power imbalances in the group, ensuring that everyone feels included and has an opportunity to participate.
- provides a structure for learning and leads participants through the process.
- makes sure the 'housekeeping' is done – preparing the session, setting up the meeting space, notifying participants and so on.

The resources of this toolkit are designed to help you do these things. The exercises include a clear structure for the learning processes and clear guidance on how to prepare for the sessions.

A FACILITATOR IS NOT:

- a teacher or lecturer – in participatory learning processes a facilitator is a peer to the participants and guides a learning process to which everyone contributes.
- necessarily an expert – although the facilitator prepares each session, some participants may know more about the subject than the facilitator! Everyone's knowledge is drawn upon.
- the centre of attention – a good facilitator speaks less than other participants, drawing them into the discussion.

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General facilitation tips

PREPARE YOUR SESSIONS WELL AND BE FLEXIBLE!

The better prepared you are, the more confident you will be. Adapt the activities to your group in advance and be flexible during sessions as you see what exercises need more or less time.

PROVIDE AN OPEN-MINDED FORUM

Attitudes are transformed in processes where we have the space to hear other voices, think and develop without feeling forced to take positions we are not ready to take. Allow opportunities for participants to disagree and to arrive at positions that are different from your own. Avoid arguments that aim to establish winners and losers.

AVOID SIMPLE ANSWERS TO COMPLEX QUESTIONS

The causes of rights violations are usually complex, involving many factors such as cultural norms and power structures. Be cautious about oversimplifications, especially of reducing responsibility for the denial of rights to one or two causes, e.g. religious identity. Encourage participants to analyse the various factors that contribute to their experiences.

STRIVE FOR PRECISION OF LANGUAGE AND DISCOURAGE STEREOTYPES

Resist the temptation to generalise and help participants to avoid generalising e.g., “Muslims are...”, “Hindus think...” or “Women don’t...”. Remind participants that even if many members of a group share common experiences or beliefs, generalizations need to be qualified (e.g., “sometimes”, “in many cases”).

AVOID COMPARISONS OF PAIN

Encourage solidarity and empathy between individuals and groups rather than comparison, competition or argument as to who has it worst.

DON'T HESITATE TO SAY I DON'T KNOW

Remember that a facilitator is also a learner! When you can't answer a question, ask if anyone else can. Resist the urge to try to answer all questions yourself, especially if the question involves an opinion (e.g., “What is the best way to respond to hate speech?”). Instead, ask the group how they would answer the question and open up for differing ideas.

WORK IN A TEAM AND KEEP A RECORD

Facilitators learn from experience and from each other! Try to work in a team of 2-3 facilitators who plan, run and evaluate trainings together. Note what happened at each session, including adaptations and changes to plan, new ideas, successes and difficulties. This will help you plan future workshops.

Common challenges facilitators face

FACILITATION CHALLENGE: POWER DYNAMICS

There are systematic power imbalances in society – between men and women; racial, ethnic, or religious groups; adults and children/young people; physically able people and people with disabilities; educated people and people lacking education. These imbalances affect how participants relate to each other and to the facilitator. The participation of religious leaders in FORB trainings influences group dynamics, as does discussions of issues that women are not expected to have opinions on according to local cultural norms, (e.g. theology). Power dynamics are often hidden, and facilitators need to monitor and manage them to ensure a positive space for learning.

Here are some tips on managing power dynamics:

- Be observant! Be aware of how dominant or quiet participants are, where they are sitting, their posture and how they are relating to each other and to you.
- Use your own power as a facilitator to subtly challenge and modify negative power dynamics, for example by referring to ground rules or emphasising that you welcome all participants' opinions and ideas.
- Use participatory exercises and small groups to get participants moving around and engaged. Try to ensure that the same people are not always working together.

- Lead discussions, being systematic about inviting everyone to speak and ensuring everyone is listened to.
- Encourage shy participants to speak, especially if they seem to be on the verge of saying something (hand tentatively raised or nodding head, for example). Use your own body language, for example moving closer to them or encouraging them through eye contact.
- Use praise generously but avoid being patronizing.
- Give responsibility to people whose voices are not heard – for example appointing them to report back from groupwork.
- Never allow comments that denigrate others, convey a sense of superiority or arrogance, or that are harmful, cruel or discriminatory to go unchallenged, especially if these are aimed directly or indirectly at other participants. Refer to the ground rules or ask the “offending” participant(s) to explain why they said what they did and invite other participants for their opinions on the situation.
- Depending on the context, it may be easier (and in some cases, necessary) for girls and women, and boys and men to talk separately before sharing within the whole group. This also applies to different age, religious or cultural groups.

FACILITATION CHALLENGE: SENSITIVE ISSUES

Human rights engage our values, feelings and opinions, and can challenge our world views and preconceptions. Some participants may feel that the subject matter contradicts or threatens their values, beliefs and customs, and trauma may influence the responses of participants who have experienced human rights violations.

If participants become irritable, withdrawn, sabotage discussions or become aggressive, this can be a sign that they feel threatened by sensitive issues.

As a facilitator, your role is to manage the discussion and group dynamic by maintaining a safe environment for everyone including yourself, providing a non-judgmental forum for mutual learning and keeping the discussion relevant to human rights/FORB.

Here are some general tips on dealing with sensitive topics and tensions:

- Think through the session in advance, identifying sensitive issues, and thinking through how to handle situations that might arise.
- Don't hurry through a process to avoid controversial discussions. Allow people to ask awkward questions.
- Don't get drawn into arguments. You are the facilitator not a debating partner.
- Remember that human rights education involves building skills to discuss issues we disagree on. The group doesn't have to agree on everything!
- Prepare the ground – spend time developing ground rules and doing exercises that develop empathy and trust.
- Use personal contributions that draw on your own experiences to stimulate participants to open up and participate more fully.
- Refer to the ground rules when tensions appear and remind participants of the importance of listening and respecting different views.

- Acknowledge objections to human rights. Explain that we all benefit from understanding and working through conflicts of values and ideas.
- Welcome resistance! Use it as a tool to facilitate dialogue, asking group members to share thoughts, reactions or worries about the issue. Negative attitudes need to be talked about openly in a group setting in order for transformative learning to take place.
- Acknowledge and address tensions. Pause the process, say you can feel tensions in the room, ask participants to identify the differing opinions and ask whether it is okay to disagree. Ask the group's opinion about how they want to handle the topic. They may, for example, want to discuss the issue in small groups or a separate session, or they may want to stop the discussion. Express any personal reservations you have. For example, you could suggest postponing a particular topic until the group has got to know each other better and established mutual trust and understanding.
- If disagreement risks derailing the session and damaging relationships, then 'park' the discussion and refocus on issues where consensus can be built.
- Don't expect too much! Work gently to build dialogue on issues of disagreement. People are very unlikely to immediately and publicly change their minds in relation to deeply ingrained stereotypes and norms. However, being exposed to alternative points of view and building relationships of empathy makes participants more likely to reconsider their views over time.

FACILITATION: DIFFICULT INDIVIDUALS

Sometimes an individual, intentionally or unintentionally, obstructs the solidarity and effectiveness of the group, for example by dominating conversations or by focusing on their phone. Solutions are as varied as individuals and situations, but the following strategies can help.

- Use tact and humour when a participant has spoken for too long. For example, quickly interrupt them between points, with a comment such as: "That's a good point, thank you! What do others think?" or point to your watch and smile.
- Give a domineering participant a task, for example writing up the ideas of the group on a flip chart. This may diffuse their need to dominate others.
- Acknowledge when group dynamics aren't working well and remind people of the ground rules. Make sure that points like no interrupting, all discussions are confidential, no phones, and everyone's opinion is respected are included in the ground rules. Emphasise that enforcing the ground rules is everyone's responsibility and allow group pressure to solve the problem.
- If necessary, speak to a participant who is overly dominant or disrespectful on a one-to-one basis, for example in a break. Convey that you value their participation, point out the challenges, ask for solutions and discuss ways they can help improve the learning environment.
- As a last resort a participant can be asked to leave the group. The bad feelings evoked by such a step must be weighed against the bad feelings they create in the group.

Source:

The 'Tips for facilitation' section is adapted from ['The Human Rights Education Handbook'](#), Nancy Flowers et al., published by The Human Rights Resources Center and The Stanley Foundation. Used with permission.