



FACILITATING MEETINGS

MAKE IT EASY

**AMNESTY
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Amnesty International Australia
www.amnesty.org.au

Convenor notes

PURPOSE

To teach convenors how to facilitate effective group meetings and workshops.

To support and mentor new convenors.

To conduct one on one facilitation, or run a facilitation skills workshop.

Time: Approximately two hours for workshop

WHAT IS FACILITATION

Meetings are a necessary part of working in any group – they let us share information, make decisions, set plans and celebrate successes. But meetings have another very important function that is often overlooked – group maintenance.

A good meeting involves, supports and empowers all group members, creating a high level of energy and enthusiasm. Good facilitating helps you achieve a sense of community and connection within your group, which will lead to greater human rights impact

Meetings are often facilitated by one person, but it can be a shared responsibility for ensuring a meeting is well run, productive and participative.

Facilitation tasks include:

- Agenda setting and keeping the meeting focused on that agenda until decisions are reached.
- Ensuring active participation by asking to hear from more reticent group members, or those with the most relevant expertise, and intervening if one member is dominating discussion.
- Clarifying and summarising issues, moving disagreement towards consensus and confirming decisions.
- Keeping the meeting to time and ensuring that minutes are recorded including any action points and decisions.

Schools groups in Rybnik take part in the AI Poland Letter writing marathon. © AI



FACILITATING A MEETING – BEGINNING TO END

Preparing the meeting

All groups need members to be active. It is difficult to keep a group going when there are only a few members, and even harder to organise functions and activities to achieve human rights impact.

Below are some tactics for finding new members and making your meetings and activities interesting. This will help keep your new and existing members interested and active.

The meeting agenda

A well-structured and realistic agenda is vital for a good meeting – if the meeting is only an hour long, there should only be an hour's worth of items on the agenda!

During the meeting

Go through the agenda item by item. Keep the group focussed on one item at a time until a decision has been reached – even if that decision is to defer the decision for another time. Use short items, fun items, announcements and breaks throughout the agenda to provide rest and relief from the more taxing items.

Nominate someone to take minutes for each meeting – it helps to share the load. Make sure that any action points include what, how, who, when and where. Note who will do them and set a deadline.

If new items come up in the meeting, make sure are dealt with. Invite and move forward discussion.

Ending the meeting

Agree a time and place for the next meeting and record it in the minutes.

Make sure you have everyone's contact details to send the minutes for the meeting. Circulate the minutes within 48 hours of the meeting.

Remind people of what the action points they are to complete, and provide a close the meeting by thanking everyone for coming.

Children learn about human rights at Queensland's schools conference 2009. © AI



The Qld/northern NSW region's launch of the Demand Dignity campaign. © Tammy Law

GOOD FACILITATION TECHNIQUES

Think back to a really good workshop or meeting you have attended. What qualities did the facilitator possess that make it so productive and enjoyable?

Be aware of people's feelings. Most people do not admit to being uncomfortable, hurt or angry – they merely withdraw from the discussion and often from the group. Pay attention to how people are feeling and respond in a way that is appropriate.

Be aware of the group's feelings. Group 'chemistry' can vary meeting to meeting according to who is present and what is happening at the time. It can be eager, restless, angry, bored, enthusiastic, suspicious or even silly. Work out the group's dynamic each meeting and facilitate appropriately.

Listen. Listen to both what and how things are being said by group members. The best facilitators speak less than anyone else and often their comments repeat, sum up or respond directly to what others have said.

Be tactful. Sometimes a facilitator must act on or speak about something uncomfortable; the ability to do so carefully and kindly is critical. Human rights issues can often evoke strong feelings and painful memories; try to deal with emotional situations respectfully.

Commit to collaborate. Collaboration can sometimes feel inefficient, and convenors are tempted to lead rather than facilitate. However, collaborative groups are much more empowered and productive. Make an effort to share group facilitation with group members.

Have a sense of timing. Know when to bring a discussion to a close, when to change the topic, when to move the conversation along, when to let discussions run overtime, and when to let the silence continue a little longer. Don't be afraid of silence – often group members need time to think before they respond.

Be flexible. Facilitators must plan, but be willing to change those plans. Group meetings can sometimes go in an unforeseen direction or demand more time to explore a particular topic. You might sometimes decide to remove something from the agenda in order to discuss something else at length.

Have a sense of humour. A facilitator's ability to appreciate life's ironies, to laugh at themselves and to share the laughter of others enhances the experience for everyone.

Be resourceful and creative. Each group is as different as its members. A good facilitator needs an overall program and goals, but can adapt it to fit changing skills and opportunities. If you have a journalist join the group, you won't continue to write the media releases yourself. Use the talents and experiences of those around you.

Source: Human Rights Education Handbook. www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/hrhandbook/part2B.html



University of New South Wales action group forum on a Human Rights Act for Australia. © James Fehon

Qld/northern NSW region's women's rights action group hold an event in support of a National Plan of Action on violence against women. © AI

HANDOUT 1

Facilitation checklist

Use this checklist to evaluate the meeting or workshop you have facilitated. This will help you identify areas for improvement.

- 1 Did you get through the agenda?
- 2 Did the tasks you had set get done?
- 3 Did problems get solved?
- 4 Do the tasks / events planned meet the objective of the group?
- 5 Did you have active participation from all members?
- 6 Did the meeting make good use of everyone's skills?
- 7 Was the meeting enjoyable?
- 8 Did everyone leave with something to do?

Source: Adapted from the *Facilitating meetings* handout from the Seeds for Change UK training consultancy.

HANDOUT 2

Handling difficult behaviour

A meeting can be hijacked by the difficult behaviour of an individual or group. Dealing effectively with these behaviours takes practice. Getting to know the motivation behind the behaviours can help. You may like to role play with someone to practice dealing with these behaviours.

HOW THEY BEHAVE	WHY	WHAT TO DO
Heckler	Aggressive, argumentative, gets satisfaction from needling others	Don't let him/her upset you. Try to find merit in their comments, express your agreement, and then move on to something else.
Talkative	These people are usually either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> highly enthusiastic a show off someone well-informed and keen to contribute just plain talkative. 	When they take a breath, thank them and say something like "Let's hear from someone else". Or you could try: "That's an interesting point ... what do the rest of you think?" Try slowing the person down with a difficult question. If they make an incorrect statement, throw the comment back to the group and let them correct the person. In general, let the group take care of them as much as possible.
Griper	Have a pet issue, or gripe at random for the sake of complaining. In some cases, they may have a legitimate complaint.	Point out that the purpose of the meeting is to find better ways to do things by constructive cooperation. Try to have members of the group answer the negative comments instead of you.
Won't talk	These people may: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> be bored think they know it all already be timid and uncertain. 	Ask them directly for their opinion. Indicate respect for their skills and experience (but don't overdo it) Compliment or encourage them the first time they talk.
Personality clash	Differences of opinion get heated, or people just don't get along.	Compliment the individuals on their enthusiasm and participation, but ask them to focus on constructive solutions. Emphasise points they agree on. Throw out a question to the rest of the group, bringing them back into the discussion.
Side conversations	May be commenting on the discussion, or may be having a personal conversation.	Don't embarrass the person, but call on them and ask an easy question. Call on the person, repeat the last opinion expressed or the last decision made, and ask for their comment.
Definitely wrong	These people may be confused or misinformed.	If they are confused, say something like: "Let me see if I understand you ..." and tactfully restate the comment more clearly. If misinformed: thank them for the comment, then ask for another comment on the same subject. This permits a member of the group to do the correcting.

Source: www.uhc.org.uk/webpages/toolbox/meetings_and_organisation/handling_difficult_meeting_behaviour.htm

HANDOUT 3

Effective questioning in facilitation

The most important aspect of facilitation is asking questions. Questions test assumptions, invite participation, gather information, and can clarify complex issues.



CLOSED QUESTIONS

- Only require a one word answer (often yes or no)
- Close off discussion
- Usually begins with *is, can, how many* or *does*.

Some examples:

Does everyone understand the changes we've discussed?

Is everyone happy with that decision?

Does everyone agree with that point?



OPEN QUESTIONS

- Require more than a yes or no answer
- Stimulate thinking
- Usually begin with *what, how, when* or *why*.

Some examples:

What would you say to support or challenge that point?

Could you help us understand the reason behind your opinion?

Why would people support that point of view?

When have you experienced that kind of situation?

How would you persuade someone to change their point of view?

What have we missed that we need to talk about?



TIPS FOR ASKING QUESTIONS

- Have a list of questions you can ask the group to check they are engaged and understanding the material.
- Ask one question at a time, and give group members time to think about the answer.
- Use eye contact to direct your questions to specific group members.
- Be inclusive in your questioning – try to get feedback from all group members.
- Do not ask a question and answer it yourself – unless the question is rhetorical!
- Ask questions in a friendly, relaxed manner – some group members might have a fear of being called on 'in class'.
- Acknowledge every answer given by the group.

