IF... The Interactivity Foundation

Facilitation Guidebook

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Jack Byrd, Jr.
Author

Adolf Gundersen
Editor

Introduction

Many facilitation books are currently available. These books typically present a collection of tools for facilitators to use in different situations. Many of these manuals will also describe skills that facilitators need to have (e.g., listening, feedback).

What is missing from existing facilitation books is advice on operations and more general strategies for leading a discussion. High quality facilitated discussions require that the facilitator plan the event well. They also require a strong awareness of strategy when leading a discussion.

The material that follows is organized as a series of operations and strategy guides. These guides are placed into different sections for quicker reference. The guides are given titles that make it easy for a facilitator to identify a particular topic that is likely to be helpful in a specific situation.

The guides are based upon the extensive experience of the Interactivity Foundation (and the Center for Entrepreneurial Studies and Development). The guides are also a result of many discussions among the Fellows of the Interactivity Foundation (and Associates of the Center for Entrepreneurial Studies and Development).

Three noteworthy concepts run through these guides.

1. The focus is on <u>possibilities</u>, not recommendations. We believe that the result of a discussion is improved when the final product gives a number of useful <u>possibilities</u> rather than a single "answer." All too often the richness of a discussion is lost when the end result is a single recommendation or set of recommendations. What is missed when you get just one answer is the variety of other possible approaches for dealing with the area of concern that is being explored.

2. Convergence is what is sought, rather than consensus. The most commonly promoted approach to decision making in facilitated discussions is consensus. When decisions are made by consensus, participants arrive at a conclusion that everyone can live with and support. However, in many cases, consensus can be reached in name only. Discussion participants often may feel pressured to come to consensus. The term consensus is usually a poor description of the true feelings of the individual participants. A more realistic and desired outcome from a discussion is that the participants converge in a "mutual" understanding of <u>possibilities</u>. They may not all agree on each of the specific <u>possibilities</u> discussed, but the combined thinking leads to a collection of <u>possibilities</u> that address a broad area of concern. Convergence embodies a process of mutual understandings, while consensus represents a conclusion that may have been forced or falsely described.

3. The term "group," as contrasted with "team," is used here as a description of the discussion participants. Many facilitation or training guides emphasize developing the participants into a "team." They go on to describe "teams" as having a number of essential characteristics. In reality, the characteristics that are associated with teams take a long time to develop (both in chronological time and time spent working together to achieve a consensus). When facilitators focus extensively on "team" development, they are seeking an objective that is very difficult. Instead, the "group" facilitator should focus on developing understanding about the area of concern and identifying <u>possibilities</u> that would be useful, by seeking <u>possible</u> conceptual answers to <u>possible</u> conceptual questions.

As you begin to explore this "group," you may want to consider the following:

1. Read "The Essence of Facilitation" (G-1) first. This guide gives you a conceptual model for how we view facilitation.

2. Spend fifteen minutes a day quickly reading through the various guides. You should be able to cover all of the guides in two weeks. A quick read of the guides will give you a feel for the content and will help you recall a topic that you may want to refer to for more specific guidelines.

3. When you are thinking through an upcoming facilitation event, review in more detail the specific guides that are likely to be the most relevant for you at that time.

Finally, if you have very limited facilitation experience, you many want to supplement this guide with a more standard facilitation manual that presents a number of "team" facilitation tools.

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General

This section describes some concepts that embody the essence of the facilitation process. The guides presented here are more a collection of observations than guidance on how to handle a specific situation. The observations will be helpful in that they describe situations that you are likely to experience when you facilitate a discussion.

The Essence of Facilitation

G-1

What does it take to be a great facilitator? There are facilitation courses that teach facilitation techniques. But knowing facilitation techniques does not make a great facilitator.

The essence of what it takes to be a great facilitator is captured in the following interview.

An Interview with Ed Byers

Ed Byers had just won his third national title as a glider pilot. The award was based upon his ability to guide his powerless glider over a long distance and land the plane at a target location. Ed's story had become a personal interest story in an extreme sports magazine.

Reporter:	I'm impressed by your award but I'm curious. What skills do you need to be a champion glider pilot?
Ed:	Obviously you need to know how to pilot a plane, but that's not what makes you a champion.
Reporter:	I'm intrigued. I thought you would have told me about your piloting skills.
Ed:	Actually, I think of myself as a micrometeorologist. When you fly a glider, you have to judge the weather 10 feet in front of the glider. Then you just have to guide your plane in response to the immediate weather you see.
Reporter:	It sounds like your success is really controlled by things you can't control?
Ed:	It's true that I can't control the weather but I can, to some extent, control the weather that I fly my glider into. With experience, you can learn that one small segment of weather will often lead to other segments of weather.
Reporter:	Fascinating. Could you say that you are less of a pilot and more of a facilitator for your plane?
Ed:	Very well said.

Facilitating a discussion is much like being a glider pilot. You have no power to control the substance of the discussion, but you can guide the discussion to make it useful. The function of facilitator guidance is one of sensing where the discussion is going and guiding the discussion by asking questions and by helping put the discussion into proper perspective. Like the successful glider pilot, a facilitator is anticipating the next five minutes of discussion and making adjustments to ensure that the discussion flows in a useful direction. Unlike the glider pilot, there is no target or distance goal to facilitation. The measure of successful facilitation is much more difficult to describe (more will be said about this later.)

Facilitation is a very instinctive skill. There are no rules or structures that guarantee successful facilitation. Rather, successful facilitators react to the moment based upon their experience, judgment, and instinct.

Types of Facilitation

G-2

While there are common qualities of a successful facilitator, the types of facilitation events may vary considerably. Each of these different types of facilitation is likely to require a different strategy. Some of the most common types of facilitation are described below.

1. Problem Solving—This is the most common type of facilitation. A group of people is convened to work through a problem. Typically the group meets for a number of sessions. The end result is a strategy for solving the problem. In some cases, the group may also implement the recommendations made.

2. Pulse Taking—In this type of facilitation, the purpose of the facilitation event is to gain an understanding about how people feel about a specific topic. The role of the facilitator is to organize an event where people can express their thoughts in an organized fashion. The end result of this type of facilitation is typically an organized collection of statements that capture the essence of the comments made. These events are typically one-time sessions although they may be repeated with other groups.

3. Working Session –In this type of facilitation event, the purpose of the facilitator is to support the work of a group. The facilitation event represents an on-going activity of the organization. An example of these types of events may be a monthly progress review meeting. These facilitation events continue indefinitely. There is no special report produced in this type of event.

4. Training Session –The facilitator in this type of event is also serving as a trainer. Participants are learning a new skill and then applying this skill. The facilitator teaches the skills and then works with the group to apply the skill. This type of event may last just one session, or it may continue for several sessions. The facilitator may do an evaluation of skills learned and applied at the conclusion of this event.

5. Conceptual Development Session—In this case, the facilitator helps a group work through a series of possibilities for addressing an area of concern. Discussions are exploratory and conceptual in nature. The end result is a collection of possibilities without recommendations. The facilitator produces a report at the conclusion of the discussion that describes the possibilities and the thinking that led to the possibilities. The report can then be used to stimulate further discussion of the possibilities.

The frequency of occurrence for the facilitation events is roughly in the order listed above with problem solving being the most frequently experienced facilitation event and conceptual development sessions the least frequent. Organizations tend to be bottom line oriented and focus on problems. Much less time is spent on conceptual development or exploration of possibilities.

The focus of this facilitation guide will be on conceptual development in a public policy arena. Many of the topics covered in this guide will also apply to the other types of facilitation events. Conceptual development, however, poses specific challenges that will be developed in this guide.

The Ebb and Flow of Discussion Group "Moods"

G-3

Any group that is involved in a long term process can be expected to go through predictable moods as the discussions unfold. These moods and their probable sequence are outlined below.

1. Enthusiastic but Doubtful – At first, participants can be expected to be enthusiastic about being selected for the group. Selection often conveys to the participants that they have unique perspective on the area of concern to offer.

   At the same time, participants may also be doubtful about the effort. They may question the process, and they almost certainly will question the outcome expected from the effort. Their skepticism may be expressed forcefully but at the same time they are inherently trusting that the effort will be worthwhile or they would not agree to participate.

2. Confused but Expansive – During the early stages of the process, participants will be confused about what is expected of them. The process may be new to them and they will be uncertain about where they are going. The process may seem to them to be a lot of talk without any resolution.

   At the same time, they will be expansive in their thinking. They will be learning a lot and their own thinking will be unfolding. Part of their confusion may be due to their preconceived ideas changing.

3. Excited but Daunted – As the process begins to move to its middle phases, participants will become excited. The facilitator's developing of the discussion into work products will start to bring clarity to the process. Participants will have a sense that they are getting somewhere.

   At the same time, the participants may be intimidated by what is left to do. They may begin to see the issues in their entirety and be overwhelmed by the remaining work to be done.

4. Weary but Hopeful – Toward the later stages of the process, the participants will begin to "burn out". They are likely to become exhausted by all that they have done. They may be "tired" of the issue they have been focusing on.

   At the same time, they will be proud of what they have done and hopeful that their work will be useful to others. Their hopefulness will carry them through the tough final stages of the project.

5. Elation and Loss – At the conclusion of the process, participants will feel a strong sense of accomplishment. The final product is one that they realize is something that couldn't have been achieved without their individual efforts.

But at the same time, they will have a sense of loss as they realize that the group will not be meeting again. Discussion groups develop a sense of belonging that is often stronger than work groups or social groups. At the end, there are truly poignant moments when the group ends its working together. They may even suggest post-project "reunions."

The Humor of Discussion Groups

G-4

As a facilitation project unfolds, the group tends to develop a sense of humor. Often the humor is focused on a specific incident, a common response to an issue, or the participants themselves. Humor helps lighten the discussion.

Humor evolves naturally. It cannot be structured or pre-planned. Humor tends to be good natured, and not harmful.

The facilitator needs to recognize that humor is desirable in that it adds to the shared experience of the group. The facilitator should not try to interject humor into the discussion unless it is a natural response to the discussion. On the other hand, the facilitator should be sensitive to humor that may be harmful. In these cases, the facilitator may need to refocus the humor in a positive way.

Management

This section describes how you might handle some of the management issues that are typically present in a facilitated discussion. The central point that runs through this section is that the facilitator is the one who is in charge of a facilitation project. While the participants are free to express their thoughts, the facilitator is the person responsible for the overall project.

Confidentiality

M-1

One of the most difficult issues to handle in any facilitation is confidentiality. There is a natural tendency to want to keep discussions confidential because individuals feel freer to discuss issues when they are protected by confidentiality.

The reality is that very few discussions are ever confidential. In spite of cautions and pledges, some parts of the discussion will likely be shared with others.

Often the perception of what is being discussed is wrong when word of the discussion is leaked. These wrong perceptions can often create more problems than would have existed if discussions were more open.

The critical need for confidentiality is to protect individuals and to encourage them to be candid in their comments. No one wants to have his/her candid comments repeated. Individuals can be protected by several facilitation practices.

1. No recording or verbatim transcripts should be made.
2. Any documents that are developed as part of the discussion should not identify specific individuals' comments.
3. Each member of the discussion group agrees not to share the specific comments of others.

In some cases, the facilitator may want to produce a document that can be shared with others following each discussion. Such a document would be simply the highlights of the discussion session without attribution.

Ironically, when confidentiality is not a major issue, others become less interested in what is being said.

Managing Discussions Outside the Group

M-2

One of the inevitable issues in any facilitation activity is how to manage discussions between two or more participants outside of the normal meeting times. Typically these are informal exchanges, but they can be very insightful. The challenge for the facilitator is to ensure that these discussions support the overall discussion project, not distract from it.

One way to manage these “outside” discussions is to establish guidelines for these discussions. These guidelines would typically be established at the kick-off meeting.

The practice that works best is for one of the participants in the “outside” discussion to summarize the essential points in the discussion in a note to the facilitator. The facilitator can then decide whether to send this note to others in the group.

The facilitator may also want to ask the individuals to summarize the essence of their discussion at the next meeting of the entire group.

The facilitator should also emphasize that any outside discussions should be within the spirit of the overall project. Discussions that are essentially for the purpose of coalition building, lobbying, or simply complaining, are not helpful and should be discouraged. If such discussions do occur, the facilitator should encourage the participants to hold such discussions until the next full meeting.

In some cases, “outside” discussions may be planned and essential to the project. These discussions are essentially work sessions between group meetings. In these cases, the facilitator may want to give the participants more specific guidance on what to report to the full group. Again, the facilitator should be the communications control point.

Time Requirements for Useful Discussions

M-3

Time is a practical consideration for planning facilitated discussions. What are the guidelines for minimum and maximum discussion times?

Discussions typically take time to get going. Even when the participants know each other well, there is an initial reticence in discussion. Because of this, discussions lasting less than two hours are rarely productive.

There is also a burn out factor in discussions. After a point, participants grow weary and are not as willing to explore issues with the desired openness and creativity. From practical experience, burn out typically sets in after 3-4 hours. Should longer discussions be necessary, these may be broken up by some type of social event (meal, informal meeting time).

Much of the value of facilitated discussions is what happens after the discussion. The facilitator's synthesis of the discussion can make a significant contribution to the subsequent discussion. Lengthy discussions don't provide the opportunity for this synthesis. Thus longer discussions can be less productive as participants tend to lose focus without a guiding synthesis.

Whatever time period is set for the discussion, the facilitator should be disciplined to conduct the discussion in the selected time period. One of the biggest complaints of participants is that discussions go longer than planned.

A related management question for the facilitator is one of how many discussion sessions will be needed to accomplish the project's purpose. This is a difficult question to answer since the facilitator may not know what issues are likely to arise in the project.

Rather than plan discussion meetings based upon a set number of discussion sessions, a better approach is to plan for a completion date and then adjust the discussion sessions to meet the date. That way the participants will be comfortable about the length of their commitment but will not be counting the discussion sessions.

Limiting the Development of Cliques

M-4

Cliques in facilitated discussions can be very harmful. In this context, cliques are small groups of participants who have joined together to promote their own cause.

Cliques may develop during the discussions, or they may be present prior to the discussion group setting started. Cliques can form in a variety of ways, but the most common catalyst of cliques is a shared view on issues. Cliques may also have a gender, socio-economic, educational, or other basis.

When the group divides into cliques, the openness of the discussion often dissolves into a debate. Positions are formed on the basis of the clique and not on the merits of the discussion.

There are several things that a facilitator can do to limit the chances that cliques will develop.

1. Select participants who value open discussion more than advocacy. This will help elevate the importance of sharing of views over winning the discussion.

2. Should there be a hint of the development of cliques, challenge the group by reminding them the discussion isn't a debate and there are no winning or losing sides.

3. Rotate the participants among different subgroups should subgroups be used for development of the issues.

4. Challenge every participant to view each possibility from different perspectives. This can help diffuse the advocacy inherent in cliques.

Should cliques become a serious issue, the facilitator may need to have a private discussion with the members of the clique.

Managing the Document Flow of a Project

M-5

Facilitation projects which involve a series of meetings have to be managed well. There is a definite flow to such projects, especially with regard to documents. While all projects will have different document needs, there are some common features to documents needed for projects.

The first document developed by the facilitator is typically a reflective note that puts in writing the facilitator's impressions of the discussion. This document is typically produced within a day of the discussion. This reflective note can be very useful in capturing a sense of the discussion while the discussion experience is still fresh. The process of writing such a note helps bring out points that may be latent in the facilitator's consciousness. This document may or may not be shared with the participants.

The second document typically produced is a summary of the discussion. This document can be prepared as a chronological flow of the discussion or it can be a topical recap. These are not minutes but rather a recapitulation of the development of the key points of the discussion. Typically this discussion summary is supported by notes that are taken during the meeting by a scribe. The facilitator should generate these summaries within a week of the discussion in order to capture the essence of what was said.

The third document is a work product which the facilitator tends to use in the transition from the previous discussion to the next discussion. This work product is often a short organized structure of the discussion progress which can be used in taking the next step. This document depends upon the facilitator's creative/organization skills. It is typically generated a few days before the upcoming discussion and is not sent to the participants in advance. This is the document the participants will find most useful, and that will do most to move the project along.

Handling "Meals"

M-6

Meals, breaks, and similar activities can be very useful in a facilitation project if managed well. The logistics of a project may dictate the need for meals or overnight stays. The time for these activities can be very helpful to the eventual outcome of a project.

Meals offer the opportunity for informal developing and sharing of thoughts in a more relaxed, less formal setting. They are also a time when the group can start coming together. The facilitator may want to encourage the utilization of meal times by

- Requesting that participants sit by different people at each meal event.
- Giving the participants a question to explore informally during the meal.
- Using the meal to bring together participants who have differing views on an issue to see if some convergence is possible.
- Using the meals to diffuse challenging personal interactions. While breaks are much shorter, they can be used in a similar manner. Often a break can also serve as a cooling off period when the discussion is intense but not very productive.

Overnight stays offer the same opportunities as meals but the longer time together offers more possibilities for personal interactions. Overnight stays also offer the opportunity for community building using a variety of programmed and/or natural activities. Perhaps the unique contribution of an overnight stay is how it lets participants get to know each other on a more personal basis.

Developing Commitment

M-7

When participants agree to join a discussion group, they are naturally skeptical about the effort. Most people are action-focused and discussions seem to be something that have a high sounding purpose without much of an outcome. Building commitment for the discussions can be challenging.

Participants increase their commitment as a result of one or more of the following:

1. They believe what they are doing is useful.
2. They believe they are developing new insights.
3. They are learning from the experience.
4. They enjoy the interaction with the other participants.

Commitment can be enhanced when the facilitator helps the participants meet their personal needs in a project. Some strategies for doing this include:

1. Help participants put their work into perspective. Often this means helping them understand the value of the work product they will be producing. Developing understanding is especially important when participants are used to bottom-line, results-oriented activities. Examples of how ideas about possibilities shaped our fundamental understanding of critical issues can be very helpful.
2. Share with them how others have thought about the area of concern. This sharing can often be helpful in letting the participants see how insightful their own work is.
3. Periodically ask the participants what they have learned from the discussion. Often this sharing of learning can bring into focus how much has been done.
4. Provide opportunities for participants to get to know each other on a personal level. This can often be done with meals or breaks.
5. Conduct periodic "where we were/where we are now/where we are going" reviews. These reviews should focus more on personal understanding than process steps in order to connect the review to each person's own experience with the project. Often these reviews can be very helpful in establishing the broader perspective of a project.

Developing commitment is something that needs to happen at every session. The facilitator needs to have one activity each session that helps the participants with their commitment.

Discharging a Participant

M-8

A common experience for a facilitator is the discharge of a participant who has not worked out. The reasons for discharge may be:

- Infrequent attendance at discussion sessions.
- Disruptive or other forms of inappropriate behavior.
- Lack of follow-through on assignments.
- Violation of project practices (e.g., confidentiality, external discussions).

The process for discharging a participant involves the following steps:

1. Step 1 (Assessment of Participant Behavior) – The facilitator needs to evaluate how serious the participant's behavior is on the other participants and on the project itself. This is something the facilitator will want to discuss with another person.

2. Step 2 (Discussions with Participant) – The facilitator needs to review the concerns developed in Step 1 with the participant in a face-to-face, private meeting. The participant should be given an opportunity to change his/her behavior.

3. Step 3 (Decision to Discharge the Participant) – The facilitator will need to judge whether improvement has been made. The facilitator should review the participant's response to the discussions of Step 2 with the same person who was consulted in Step 1.

4. Step 4 (Discharge Notification) – The facilitator should have a face-to-face follow up meeting with the participant to ask the person to resign from the project. At this time, the facilitator should discuss communications with the other participants. In all cases, the facilitator should help the participant make a graceful exit.

5. Step 5 (Communication to the Group) – The facilitator needs to communicate to the group in a way that focuses on the future of the project and not on the problems that led to the discharge. Nothing negative should be said about the leaving participant. The group may be consulted about a replacement.

The discharge of a participant can be a critical moment for a project. It can increase or decrease the effectiveness of a group depending on how it is handled.

Managing Gaps in the Schedule

M-9

Ideally, facilitation projects will have a schedule with regular meetings. There are occasions when there will be gaps in the schedule. The reasons for these gaps include:

1. Heavy vacation or holiday seasons.
2. Inability to find an acceptable meeting time.
3. External events creating higher priority attention for some participants.
4. Built in project gaps (normally at the report writing phase).

The challenge in managing gaps in the schedule is to minimize the effect these gaps have on the overall flow of the project. Some specific things a facilitator can do to manage the gaps in a schedule include:

1. Dividing the participants into smaller groups which have compatible schedules. Assign these groups specific activities to do that will help the group continue to make progress.
2. Developing a communication strategy that keeps the group thinking about the project. This strategy may include an exchange of emails about specific questions.
3. Planning to have a review session when the group does get back together again.
4. Working ahead on document production and other time consuming end-of-the-project activities. (This is primarily a facilitator activity.)
5. Asking the participants to review specific issues from past discussions for possible revisit when the project is concluded.

Gaps in a project are not desirable, but they can be managed.

Communicating with the Group Between Meetings

M-10

There are some standard communications that need to occur with the group between meetings. These communications are critical for the overall success of a project.

The first communications that needs to be sent out is the meeting recap. This is a document that contains highlights of the discussion. These highlights are summaries but not a transcript of the discussion.

The second communications will be a synthesis of the discussion into a work product that will form the basis of the next round of the discussion. This synthesis typically includes an organization of the concepts being developed in an outline or tabular format. This is the document that brings the discussions into focus.

The third communications will be a reminder of the upcoming meeting. This reminder should include meeting details along with an indication of the discussion topics.

There are also non-routine communications that may occur between meetings. These can include:

1. Updates on topics of interest. Typically these include items or relevance to the project.
2. Reflections or personal notes to the group.
3. Notifications of interest involving participants.

It is also important to note what is not communicated. Extensive articles about the discussion are not appropriate. These articles can take on a level of importance that is unwarranted. Also topics that warrant full discussion by the group should be deferred until the meeting.

Showing Command Presence

M-11

A facilitator is a guide for the discussion, but the facilitator should also clearly be in charge of the facilitation project. The facilitator must be an honest discussion leader and not bias the discussion in any way. But there should be no doubt among the participants that the facilitator is in command of the discussion process.

Command presence in this context refers to the facilitator's "aura". The participants must trust in the facilitator to lead them to a useful result that truly reflects their discussion. Command presence results in a sense of confidence in the facilitator on the part of the participant for the facilitator.

Command presence is in some respect a product of the facilitator's experience, but there are things that a facilitator can do to enhance this command presence.

1. Be in charge of the project. Don't let the participants take over the project.
2. Respond to challenges to the facilitation process with firm statements of rationale built on past experience that demonstrate you know what you are doing. Don't ever debate the process or become defensive.
3. Anticipate directions a discussion might go and have strategies for facilitating the discussion for different scenarios.
4. Make everything you do be your approach. Don't ever give the impression you are following direction from others.
5. Give guidance when problem behaviors appear. Don't let others violate the discussion practices you and the group have developed.
6. Let the group know you are thinking ahead. This sense of forward thinking can help build confidence.

In general, command presence results when you know what you are doing, you are firm in your approach, and you are in charge.

Planning

This section describes what the facilitator needs to do in getting ready for a discussion. The focus for these topics is what it takes for a successful discussion. The topics that follow address both operational and strategic issues.

Suggested Environment for Discussions

P-1

The conceptual development of public policy possibilities requires a supportive environment. The environment needed is one in which discussion participants feel free to explore conceptual issues without the rush of time or the fear of public attribution. Specific suggestions for these types of discussions include the following:

1. Confidentiality—Participants are more likely to be open to conceptual exploration when they know that discussions will be held in confidence and only summaries of the discussion will be produced. In such an environment, participants can openly explore concepts that are not fully developed. They can engage in discussions about possibilities with an open mind without fear of consequences should their exploratory comments become public.

2. Anonymity—The development of conceptual possibilities is enhanced when those participating in the discussion are not identified as part of the final product of the facilitation. The value of anonymity is similar to that of confidentiality, but there is one very important additional value. When the participants are not identified in a public report, the report itself gets a fairer evaluation. Readers of the report are not as likely to prejudge what is said by who participated in the report.

3. Time for Reflection—Conceptual development takes time, both in the discussion itself and in the lapsed time for the overall project. While many facilitations events are done with a sense of urgency, conceptual development facilitation needs time for reflection. Meetings should provide sufficient time for reflection and should not be tied to a rigid agenda. There should also be time between meetings to give the facilitator time to organize the discussion in a coherent manner.

4. Interaction Time—Meetings are more effective when there is an opportunity for participants to get to interact with each other outside of the actual discussions themselves. Meals are often very effective interaction times.

5. Note Taker—Facilitators can be more effective when they have a note taker who can capture the essence of the discussion. While the facilitator will want to make notes of major discussion points on flip charts, a note taker can be very effective in filling in the actual discussion flow.

6. Meeting Space—There are many acceptable types of meeting space. The meeting space should

- be comfortable for extended discussion
- provide seating arrangements that are supportive of interaction
- provide opportunities for meals
- provide opportunities for phone participation should this be necessary
- be easily accessible for participants
- be free from distractions

The environment for discussion is likely to be adapted as the discussions continue. The facilitator should regularly query the participants on the environment to see what improvements can be made.

Developing a Discussion Strategy

P-2

Successful facilitation requires a strategy. A strategy in this context is much more than an agenda. It involves a thoughtful plan for the discussion. The strategy should incorporate both the logical flow of the discussion and recognition of group dynamics. In some respects, the facilitation strategy can be compared to a singer putting together the song list and sequence for a show.

For a singer, the opening may be a familiar song that warms up the audience but this song may offer new phrasing or an approach that leads to less familiar but exciting numbers to follow. Facilitation often occurs over a period of time. The opening discussion topic has the dual purpose of helping people recall what was previously discussed and exciting them about the session ahead.

The opening for a facilitation meeting will generally involve some recapitulation of previous discussions with a segue to new discussion topics that excites the participants. The opening can be achieved by using stories, metaphors, testimonials, recent events that are relevant, cartoons, and anecdotal experiences. One key to a successful opening is getting everyone engaged in the discussion. By overcoming individuals' natural reluctance to speak up, the facilitator will be able to get everyone involved early in the session.

<u>Old Favorites/New Offerings</u> – A singer has both the task of entertaining the audience with their favorite songs and getting them interested in the new material that has been recently recorded (and "available on the latest CD in the lobby"). In a like manner, the facilitator needs to use past discussions as transitions to new topics. The second phase of the strategy brings closure to previous topics but it also builds a sense of accomplishment. The difficult challenge is to make this transition subtle. The keys to the transition are to develop a "visual" description of what has been achieved and a "visual" description of where the group needs to get to. Then the facilitator can describe what will be done to make the transition. "Visual" descriptions are especially helpful when the past and the future can be portrayed in familiar images.

<u>Getting Ready for an Intermission</u> – The singer wants to leave the audience with something to talk about at intermission. For the facilitator, there will need to be a break in the discussion. This break can be of strategic importance if used properly. In advance, the facilitator should be able to anticipate the topic that will give the group the greatest difficulty. Difficulty in this case could be related to concept or it may be related to differences of outlook, beliefs, perspective, etc. The facilitator should use the time prior to the break to develop the topic and the challenges for dealing with it. A well-timed break and the facilitator's encouragement of informal discussion of this topic

during the break may lead to new insights for meeting the challenge after the break is over.

Completing the Program – A singer will need to complete the song list in the second half of the program. Everyone has songs they want to hear, and the singer needs to be certain that these are covered in the program. For the facilitator, the second half of the session involves a fuller development of the new concepts but within the framework of the overall facilitation project. In effect, the new concepts are adding to but also fleshing out what has been done before. Often this is the most difficult part of the strategy because the excitement of the new is behind the group, and the hard work of completing the task needs to be done. During this phase of the session, the facilitator may encourage "quick notes" from the group that the facilitator can more fully develop for review at the next session.

Final Song – The singer wants the audience to leave the performance with good memories. The last song is often a favorite but it is often accompanied with a message from the singer. The last topic of a facilitation event is a recap of the progress made with a message for the future. The message could be a topic to be thinking about or an assignment. But the facilitation event should also conclude with a recollection of something special that happened during the event. Often these special moments become the social legacy of the project.

Developing the Charter Statement

P-3

The charter statement is a document that describes what the participants are being asked to accomplish. It is typically shared with the participants at the first meeting.

The charter statement typically includes:

- Background on the issue to be discussed.
- A description of the final work product to be developed.
- A set of questions to be explored.
- The scope of the discussion.
- The desired completion date.

In addition to the charter statement itself, the participants may be given some guidance on the discussions themselves. This guidance may include the process to be used, expectations for the discussion, the use of the final work product, sponsorship of the effort, etc.

The facilitator should review the charter statement at the initial meeting and answer questions about it. Typical questions that are likely to be asked concern such topics as the scope of what is to be done, the commitment expected of the participants, the "authority" of the group, the sponsorship of the project, and the usefulness of their involvement.

The charter statement may be revisited after several meetings to ensure that the participants remain on track.

Use of Facts/Background Information

P-4

Facts and background information are one of the most challenging planning decisions for a facilitator. Obviously the discussion participants need some background on the discussion topic, but the question that the facilitator must answer is what background to provide.

Facts and background information require a selection process. The selection of facts and information can influence and possibly bias a discussion. There is also the issue of validity of facts and information. The facilitator is rarely in a position to independently authenticate facts and information. As issues become more complex, it's hard to sort out what is factual and what is biased.

Even if the information can be validated as factual, another issue the facilitator must face is how the information itself will influence the discussion. People tend to focus on the known rather than explore the possible. Information tends to tie the discussion to extensions of current thinking rather than promote more free and open discussions which don't focus on current reality.

In general the facilitator should limit the facts and background information provided to participants. What works best as background information are descriptions of basic concepts relevant to the project that the facilitator prepares. The purpose of these descriptions is to provide general and neutral understanding of basic concepts. These descriptions are qualitative. They are not designed as statements of the issues.

When the discussion gets to specific factual issues, the facilitator can challenge the participants to "assume the facts" and explore the issue based upon these assumptions. By "assuming the facts", the participants are much more likely to explore possibilities than they would if they were bound by facts. In many cases these possibilities, once developed, are useful over a broad range of factual situations. Rarely does the merit of a possibility rest on factual precision. Thus the facts themselves can impede the exploration of possibilities but the usefulness of a possibility is rarely determined by specific facts.

Logistical Planning for a Discussion

P-5

Planning for a discussion involves a considerable amount of logistical detail. This detail can be categorized as

- Equipment
- Room arrangements
- Meals/refreshments
- Participant materials
- Other arrangements

Checklists are an effective way to ensure that the logistical details are taken care of. Outlined below are checklists for the various logistical arrangements for a facilitation event.

<u>Facilitation Equipment Checklist</u>

☐ 1. Flipchart stand and paper
☐ 2. Projection equipment (if needed)
☐ 3. Laptop computer (if needed)
☐ 4. Flipchart markers, tape
☐ 5. Post-it notes

<u>Room Arrangements</u>

☐ 1. Seating arrangements (sight lines, table, skirting)
☐ 2. Electrical outlets
☐ 3. Facilitator space for flipcharts, work space, etc.
☐ 4. Wall space for flipchart posting
☐ 5. Refreshment location/space
☐ 6. Lighting
☐ 7. Ambient noise
☐ 8. Location of restrooms
☐ 9. Use of room before/after the meeting
☐ 10. Temperature controls
☐ 11. Break out rooms (if needed)
☐ 12. Smoking space

- ☐ 13. Internet access
- ☐ 14. Electrical outlets

Meals

- ☐ 1. Location
- ☐ 2. Menu
- ☐ 3. Special diet arrangements
- ☐ 4. Timing
- ☐ 5. Activities planned during meals

Participant Materials

- ☐ 1. Discussion agenda
- ☐ 2. Working papers developed from previous sessions
- ☐ 3. Legal pads/pens
- ☐ 4. Other materials to be used in the discussion

Other Arrangements

- ☐ 1. Parking
- ☐ 2. Public transportation
- ☐ 3. Payment arrangements
- ☐ 4. Fax access
- ☐ 5. Meeting support contact person

The facilitator will probably want to visit the facility in advance to check out the arrangements. Also, the facilitator will probably want to arrive early to ensure that all arrangements are taken care of.

Asking/Framing the Discussion Question

P-6

Any discussion will need to have a starting point. Typically this starting point is a question that the participants are asked to explore. The selection and wording of the question can be critical to the quality of the discussion to follow. While each facilitation event will be different, there are some general guidelines that can be offered for the starting question.

1. Ask the question at the right conceptual level. A question that is very specific may elicit a very narrowly focused discussion. On the other hand, too general a question might let the discussion wander without getting it on the desired track.

2. Establish boundaries for answering the question if you want some things to be "out of bounds". There are few questions that can be asked without some bounds. Often the participants will implicitly consider their own bounds, but these bounds could be made explicit in order to have all of the participants working from the same perspective.

3. Make the tone of the question hopeful as in "How might we…?" Using this phrasing will help the participants think beyond the present and perhaps be more willing to explore concepts.

4. Make the question "ironic". Irony in this case can juxtapose seemingly disparate concepts and help the participants think more creatively about a concept. An example might be: "How might the richest nation in the world develop a healthcare system it can afford?"

5. Use philosophical questions to explore a concept. Such questions tend to generate very thoughtful responses. For example, a question: "Would you rather have or be?" might be used to elicit very interesting responses in a number of discussion areas.

The facilitator may wish to try out the question on those who aren't involved in the panel to get a sense of the responses that the question might generate. A trial run could avoid questions that are off target.

Pre-work

P-7

One of the tasks of the facilitator is to develop documents that the participants will use in their discussion. These documents are often referred to as pre-work.

There are a variety of pre-work materials that could be used by the facilitator. These include

- A list of discussion questions for the meeting
- A summary of the discussions from previous meeting (1-2 pages)
- Drafts of materials that may ultimately become a part of the final work product
- Templates for discussion exercises

The facilitator may use combinations of the above examples as well.

Typically there will be pre-work done for each meeting. The pre-work should be thought of as a catalyst for the discussion, but the pre-work should not be used to force the discussion in a specific direction. Discussions need to have a natural flow but the pre-work can help get the discussion going in a useful direction.

The facilitator needs to be concerned that the pre-work not bias the discussion itself. Pre-work implies selections and these selections can influence the discussions. The facilitator can alleviate this concern by asking the participants if they want to modify the pre-work before the discussion begins.

Finally, the pre-work needs to be brief. Extensive pre-work can inhibit the discussion because participants are more focused on the pre-work than on the discussion.

Frequency of Meetings

P-8

Another planning decision faced by the facilitator is the frequency of meetings. This decision is influenced by

- The time availability of participants
- The desired completion date of the project
- The total meeting time that is expected over the course of the project to produce the desired result
- The time between meetings that the facilitator needs to wrap up one meeting and prepare for the next.
- The time available for each discussion

While the above factors will be influential in determining the frequency of meetings, there are some rules-of-thumb that might be useful

- Three to four hour meetings tend to be the limit for most participants. After this time, people tend to burn out.
- The minimum time between meetings is generally one week. This is the time that is necessary for the facilitator to wrap up one meeting and plan for the next one.
- The total time projection is often underestimated. An allowance of 10% additional time is prudent for planning purposes.

The decision about the frequency of meetings is typically made at the first meeting of the group. Also at this time, the facilitator and the group will probably set the meeting schedule.

Skills

This section describes specific personal skills needed by facilitator. The focus on these topics is strategic in nature. There is an additional collection of skills not presented here that deal with the operational aspect of skills (e.g., listening, note taking, etc.).

Qualities of a Successful Facilitator

S-1

The qualities of a successful facilitator are similar to those that would be associated with any of the 'helping' professions (e.g., doctor, teacher, social worker, counselor). The major contrast in the role of the facilitator and those of the other 'helping' professions is that the facilitator is trying to support a group rather than an individual.

Some of these qualities are described below:

1. Active Listener—A successful facilitator must be an active listener. But being an active listener goes well beyond simply hearing what is said; a facilitator listens for tone, emotion, and feeling. Often these latent aspects of what is said are critical to an understanding of an issue.

2. Perceptive Observer—A successful facilitator must be perceptive. Often what is not said is just as important as what is said. The facilitator may often want to probe what is not said because there may be real insight in what people don't feel confident in expressing.

3. Organizer—A successful facilitator is very good at bringing coherence to what may appear to be disparate thoughts. This requires a sense of structure that takes a wide ranging discussion and brings clarity and meaning to what was said.

4. Empathetic Questioner—A successful facilitator will need to ask challenging questions in a way that gets a group to think in new ways. But the facilitator must do so in a way that keeps the group from becoming defensive.

5. Convergence Initiator—A successful facilitator will need to help a group converge on a common understanding of an issue. In some cases, this convergence will lead to agreement on a particular issue while in other cases convergence may simply be an understanding of different points of view.

6. Insight Developer—A successful facilitator must be creative and have the ability to suggest new insights and possibilities to the group that helps them explore an issue at a much higher level.

7. Neutral Guide—A successful facilitator must be able to guide a group without interjecting his/her personal beliefs.

8. Planner—A successful facilitator must be able to work through the many details that are needed to have a successful discussion. These include but are not limited to the meeting space, the facilitation strategy for each specific session, the

support materials, and other details that are necessary elements of a successful facilitation event.

9. Counselor—On occasions, the facilitator may need to work with specific group members to help them become more effective. The facilitator may also need to understand how the discussion strategy can be tailored to take advantage of individual strengths and weaknesses.

10. Document Developer—Many facilitator events require a written product to be developed at the conclusion of each discussion session and often used to introduce the next session. The facilitator must be able to develop this document in a way that accurately reflects the discussion but also provides clarity of discussion concepts that might not have been evident from looking at a transcript of the discussion.

The traits listed above are not common to many individuals. They are certainly less common in organizations that favor forceful leadership. They are more commonly found in collaborative organizations. While the skills associated with facilitation can be learned, it's usually hard to help a person acquire the many qualities listed above.

Keeping the Discussion Focused

S-2

One of the challenges that any facilitator faces is to ensure that the discussion stays focused. This is especially true when the members of the group come from organizations where there is minimal discipline in discussions. Outlined below are typical situations that arise in discussions that are likely to lead to problems of focus.

One of the challenges that a facilitator faces is how to keep the discussion focused without controlling what is being said. The suggestions outlined below respect the comments of participants but yet keep the discussion on focus.

1. Challenge: A comment is made that is not yet on target.

   Suggestion: Maintain a parking lot list. This list is a compilation of topics to be returned to at a later time period.

2. Challenge: A participant makes a comment. A second participant brings up a related point but one that is not in response to what the first participant said.

   Suggestion: Develop a discussion discipline that comes to closure on one topic before the next topic is discussed. This can be done by responding to each comment by saying: "Who would like to respond to or add to the comment just made?"

3. Challenge: Individuals start to get bogged down into details on an issue when they should focus on the big picture.

   Suggestion: Remind the participants that the focus is at the big picture level and ask that they keep their comments to that level.

   Suggestion: If the details are important to further the group's discussion, ask a few participants to meet separately to discuss details and bring these back to the group.

4. Challenge: The response to a discussion topic is off target and is likely to continue to be off target.

   Suggestion: Call a break in the discussion and better explain to the participants what you were asking for. You may want to give them an example as a starting point.

5. Challenge: Someone brings up an extraneous point and others continue on the same path. The discussion is becoming diverted.

   Suggestion: Point out that the discussion is off track. Comment that you will come back to this topic at a later time. Put the item on the parking lot list.

Keeping the discussion focused is a critical task for the facilitator. Rather than being criticized for "riding herd" on the discussion, participants will actually praise the facilitator for helping them stay focused.

Setting the Tone for the Discussion

S-3

Facilitated discussions, when successful, operate at a level that is far different from discussions that most individuals are used to. One of the reasons for this is that the facilitator sets the tone for the discussion at the very beginning. Setting the tone involves both a structure and continuous practice of the structure during the discussion.

A key element of the structure is a collection of discussion practices agreed to by the group. Typical discussion practices are shown in the box below.

Example of Discussion Practices

1. We will build on a person's thought before we move to another person's thought.
2. We will explore before we criticize.
3. When we do criticize, we will offer an alternative.
4. We will wait to be recognized by the facilitator before we speak.
5. We will focus on the concept before we become involved in the details.
6. We will listen first and then respond to what was said.
7. We will keep our perspective on our "reason for being", not on our narrow interests.
8. We will respect each other as persons.

These discussion practices are generally developed by the group with a straw model (as shown above) used as a starting point. Once the practices are set, the facilitator generally conducts a review of these by asking the team members to describe their understanding of these.

These practices are useless unless they are observed throughout the discussion. The facilitator may need to caution the group on the disregard of a specific practice should these violations become common. The facilitator may also want to do a periodic review of the practices by asking the group members to do an assessment. This can be done with a simple rating exercise.

The facilitator may also need to counsel an individual group member should there be a repeated disregard for one or more of the practices.

Typically a group will agree to a set of practices and stick with these for a period of time. Then the practices tend to erode. The facilitator needs to be aware of the tendency toward erosion and reinvigorate the use of the practices. This can be done by periodic reviews of the practices.

The Facilitator's Role in a Discussion

S-4

Facilitators enable discussions and keep them focused. Facilitators rarely contribute to the discussion itself. The facilitator's spoken contribution will be in such areas as:

- Introducing/describing a step in the process
- Asking clarifying questions
- Prompting the discussion of new areas of exploration
- Keeping the discussion flow on target
- Bringing clarity to each of the various useful positions expressed
- Recapping the sense of the discussion from time to time and at the end of each session and the beginning of the next one

When the facilitator does make comments, these should be addressed to the group, not to a specific person in the group. When the facilitator uses arguments instead of suggestions or questions to specific persons, the facilitator is inappropriately acting as another participant, not a facilitator.

While the group is discussing an issue, the facilitator has the task of synthesizing what is being said. This is much more than simply recording what is being said. The facilitator takes the points of discussion and helps to develop concepts from them. This is very challenging and reflective work, which cannot be successful if the facilitator is a frequent contributor to the discussion.

One of the facilitator's necessary skills is the acceptance of silence. Moments of silence can be valuable to a group as members think about an issue. Rarely are moments of silence wasted. The facilitator needs to accept silence as a key moment in the group's deliberation and not try to fill it up with words.

The skilled facilitator will be able to accept that others must discover insights for themselves as they work through issues, even when the facilitator could have provided such insights. The facilitator must obtain satisfaction from the success of the group, not from "showing off" his/her knowledge, wisdom, experience, etc.

Handling Difficult Participants

S-5

Every facilitator is likely to encounter difficult participants during a facilitation experience. These participants often don't recognize they are displaying behavior that is troubling. There are some general practices that apply to all of these cases.

- Provide corrective feedback in private.
- Help the person overcome the troubling behavior.

Specific actions that can be taken to deal with the most troubling behavior are described below:

Someone who remains passive

This person might not participate or might answer "I don't know." He or she may have ideas to contribute, but is worried the ideas might not be acceptable to the group. You may want to call on this person at some point with a specific question such as "How do you feel about that?" When the person does respond, help reinforce the points made and show the person that his/her ideas are valuable.

Someone who is continuously negative

If someone dwells on negative issues, ask how he or she might resolve those issues. Record the ideas and move on to the next person. If the person can't think of a resolution, record the issue and move on. Don't dwell on any one person or issue for extended periods of time because there is only so much time available in the session. Keep the group focused on the big picture. If someone persists with a single issue, ask the group whether or how they want to address it.

Someone who rambles or dominates

During a pause in such a monologue, the facilitator should jump in and make a summary statement of what was said. Then, the facilitator should either say that "we need to move on" or ask how the rambling relates to the task at hand. Again, record the idea, if any, and move on. But if the panelist continues, the facilitator should ask the group if they think it's worthwhile to focus on this issue, given the other agenda items that need to be covered. If the person continues to dominate against the group's wish, talk to the person at break time. Point out how much time they are taking and what effect it is having on the group. Help them recognize the cues sent by other group members who want them to stop (e.g., glazed eyes, looking at their watches, etc.). The Facilitator should be as firm as necessary to keep the general flow of the discussion moving along.

Someone who attacks others personally

This rarely happens. When it does happen, the facilitator should direct it away from personal issues to systemic issues. For example, if someone says, "That's a stupid idea," the facilitator should respond with something like, "We need to focus on specific ideas in a constructive manner." The facilitator should talk privately, as soon as possible, with the person making the personal attacks.

Someone who is overly helpful

Sometimes a group member will be inappropriately helpful to the facilitator. For example, they might summarize statements for you, but you notice that they are not accurately reflecting what was said. They are usually trying to control the direction of the group by trying to align themselves with the facilitator. Point this out to the person if it becomes too frequent. Help the person state his/her own opinions and make it clear that you will not allow yourself to become their mouthpiece. Also make it clear that you do not 'control' the group's decisions or actions, and therefore, they need to align themselves with the entire group in order to influence the process. Their voice will be heard and noted, even as the Facilitator keeps the discussion moving along.

Someone who starts side conversations

This can be particularly disruptive to the group and needs to be addressed. If the group sets 'no side conversations' as a ground rule, simply remind the offender of the ground rules that were established by the group. If it happens several times, try to vary the use of the following tactics:

- Move closer to the offenders and gesture for them to be quiet.
- Ask the offenders whether they heard the current discussion.
- Ask the offenders their opinions on the current discussion.
- Ask the group how they feel about side conversations.
- Talk about how destructive such "alliances" can be to building a true group effort.
- Talk to the offenders at a break.

Someone who is distrustful of the process

This often happens during the early moments in a project and shouldn't be overlooked. This person might not understand the big picture. Spend time explaining it to the group or have the group discuss why this particular process was chosen. Let participants know why they were chosen to participate. This person also might not understand the specific process you've chosen for the project. Explain it in more detail. Also, ask the person to trust you through the early stages until they can see the process unfold.

<u>Someone who repeats points already made</u>

This usually happens because the facilitator has not been paraphrasing and summarizing points or has not written them down on a flipchart. People tend to repeat when they are afraid their point was not captured or understood. Write points down and ask the person whether you've adequately summarized what was said. People also repeat themselves to try to convince others to agree with them. They think, "If you really were listening to me, you'd see the value of my point of view and you'd agree with me. Therefore, I'll repeat myself to give you another chance at listening." What they don't understand is that others have listened carefully, but they still don't agree. The Facilitator might simply say to the repeater, "I get the feeling that you don't think people are listening to you. Could someone paraphrase what was just said?" Once someone paraphrases, ask the group whether they want to resolve the underlying differences or agree to disagree or put it in the "parking lot" and move on promptly. Speak to the person privately if the behavior persists.

Overcoming Suspicions, Cynicism, and Doubts about the Effort

S-6

Every facilitator is going to have to face suspicions, cynicism and other doubts about the effort. Typically people who are asked to serve on a group have had previous experience with similar efforts. Often these previous efforts were not positive. The typical issues that a facilitator is likely to encounter include:

1. There is a hidden agenda – Participants may feel that they are being asked to give "credibility" to something that has already been decided.

   Strategy: Review the process to be used. Show the participants how they will be determining the final outcome. Give the participants a complete disclosure of your role as a facilitator and the "charge" you were given from those who commissioned the effort.

2. They are cynical about the impact of the effort – Participants are likely to comment on previous efforts that went nowhere and challenge the facilitator as to how they can be assured that this effort will be any different.

   Strategy: Describe what will happen with the effort after the group has concluded its work. Describe their role in the follow up efforts. Be honest. Often there can be no assurances as to the eventual impact of any group effort. But make the point that they can be assured that nothing will happen without this effort.

3. They are skeptical that anything useful can be done – They may not believe that there are any possibilities that can impact the area of concern. They may be challenged by the complexity of the issue.

   Strategy: Let them know how you will be helping them develop a project scope that is manageable. Also you may want to focus on the steps in the process and how these can be used to deal with the complexity.

4. They are concerned about how open they can be with their comments – They may feel that they will get in trouble if they really say what they think.

   Strategy: Review the discussion process agreement. One element of this agreement should address confidentiality of discussions. This is a matter of trust that will take time to develop.

5. They are concerned about the time this effort will take – They may feel that this effort is an imposition on an already busy work load.

Strategy: Tell them that you will be doing most of the work between meetings. Also share with them the benefit that other individuals have gained from similar efforts. Comment that they are making a rather small investment for an effort that they can learn a lot from.

6. They may wonder why they were selected – They may feel that there is an unstated reason why they were selected.

   Strategy: Tell them exactly how the selection process worked. In nearly all cases, there is a rationale for selecting participants. Make the point that they were selected for the unique contribution they could make.

Should other doubts arise, the general approach is to be open and honest with the participants. Don't give assurances if none are possible. If there was specific guidance given to you, let the participants know. Otherwise, it is your project – although you are facilitating, the participants are the intellectual "owners" of the Citizen Staff Work Product, both in their agreements and their disagreements.

Handling Divergence and Convergence

S-7

Public discussion groups are put together with individuals who have diverse perspectives on the discussion topic. These diverse perspectives are needed to develop a spectrum of useful possibilities for dealing with any area of concern.

The facilitator needs to take advantage of this diversity of perspectives. All too often, the facilitator tries to achieve a common ground solution from such a diverse group. This common ground solution is often so compromised by the necessity of consensus that it fails to provide any useful insight into the issue being discussed.

A more useful approach than working for consensus is to seek out a convergence of concepts where convergence is genuine and useful and to develop fully the divergence of concepts when such divergence is meaningful and useful. The goal of such discussions is not agreement for the sake of agreement; rather the goal is useful agreement and disagreement.

Seeking out useful agreement as to convergence and divergence is the primary task of the facilitator. To be useful, such agreement should be:

- Genuine – all participants should freely accept the essential aspects of the convergences and divergences.
- Relevant – such agreement should be about concepts that matter.
- Insightful – such agreement should extend an understanding of the various aspects of the area of concern being discussed.

Convergence should be something that occurs naturally. Often such convergence is subtle and not apparent until noted by the facilitator. Convergence that is forced through a formal selection process is often not a true convergence. In order for divergence to be useful, it should be:

- Focused – Diverging viewpoints should be about specific aspects of an area of concern, not just vague disagreements about broad political, economic or other perspectives.
- Fully Developed – Divergence should be presented in the form of possibilities that the public can discuss and make decisions about.
- Respectful – Divergence is about concepts and possibilities, and not about people, and it should be described in non-adversarial language.

- Insightful – Divergence should aid understanding of the area of concern itself and not introduce the confusion that is so often characteristic of public debate.

Divergence is often at the heart of useful public discussion. The facilitator needs to encourage genuine divergence of opinion and use this divergence to shape meaningful contrasting possibilities. Divergence is the highest form of civility and the discussions of diverging viewpoints need to reflect this civility.

The process of identifying convergence and divergence is often very reflective. It rarely happens during the discussion themselves because the discussion participants are often so involved in the moment that they don't realize when convergence and divergence is occurring.

The facilitator often suggests the areas of convergence and divergence after thinking about the discussion and reading the discussion notes. This is a reflective process that has no set structure. The facilitator will always need to get the participants' concurrence on the general outline of where there is convergence and divergence.

Limiting Facilitator Bias

S-8

One of the essential qualities of a facilitator is being unbiased in all aspects of the discussion process. Should the facilitator lose his/her neutrality, the discussion process will lose all credibility. Facilitators may describe themselves as being unbiased, but there are many ways that bias can enter the discussion process unintentionally.

Selecting the Discussion Group – The discussion group itself has a significant impact on the direction of the discussion. It is virtually impossible to balance all public perspectives in the selection of the participants. Nor is seeking such selective balance desirable among democratic citizens, each representing the citizen's individual point of view or personal convictions. In many cases, the participants are even unlikely to have a point of view on an issue until the discussions unfold. On the surface, a critic could almost always make the point that the selected participants have a bias.

Strategy – Select participants who are capable of being open minded even though they may have a specific perspective on some issues. Emphasize that the discussion will require the full development of contrasting possibilities, some of which they may not like.

Leading the Discussion – The facilitator can direct the discussion to lead to certain perspectives by the questions asked and the points emphasized.

Strategy – Limit Facilitator comments or guidance to those that are essential to keeping the discussion flowing. When questions are asked, frame these from contrasting perspectives. Should the participants themselves show a limited perspective in their comments, challenge them to look at other perspectives. Wherever possible, capture comments made in the participants' words, not in summary statements.

Developing Work Products – The facilitator will be responsible for developing the work products. These are an obvious source of potential bias. The emphasis given to some points can display bias. The wording of statements can also be a source of bias. It is often difficult to keep unintended bias out of written words.

Strategy – Include reader's notes in written work to highlight concern for how particular concepts are described (e.g., Have I given this concept a fair description?). Always solicit the participants' feedback and concurrence on written materials. After writing the materials, imagine yourself as a "bias checker" and review the materials again. In some cases, you may want to explore questions of potential bias with the meeting participants.

Providing Documents – One of the most likely sources of bias is in documents provided to the participants. These are documents prepared by others. No matter how unbiased these documents may appear to be, there is an inherent bias in the selection process, let alone the potential bias in the documents.

Strategy – Limit documents provided to the participants. Should there be a need for background material, the facilitator should prepare these. In most cases, background information can be structured as short descriptions of situations with a personal perspective rather than presented as an authoritative account.

Final Report – The final report developed by the participants can be filled with bias. The selection of the content of the report is an obvious source of bias as are the written words themselves.

Strategy – Provide the reader with an array of contrasting possibilities to consider. Provide a good description of all possibilities developed, along with the thinking and the testing of these possibilities. Ask the participants to review the document for potential bias before public presentation.

Prompting the Group

S-9

Ideally the discussion will flow with minimal facilitator prompting. There will be times when the facilitator needs to prompt the group. These include:

- Getting started, especially on a new topic
- Overcoming a conceptual block
- Looking at a new perspective
- Fully developing a discussion topic

The decision of when to prompt a group is a difficult one for a facilitator. Prompting too early can have the perceived effect of controlling the discussion. Prompting too late can result in wasted time. The decision to prompt is also influenced by the group. In some groups, prompting is more likely to be necessary and welcomed. In other cases, prompting is likely to be intrusive. There are some rules of thumb that might be useful in deciding when to prompt a group.

1. Don't be afraid of silence **-** Often silence is a sign of thought. Let the group have some silent time before prompting.
2. Prompt the group when you see a discussion going in the wrong direction - (off topic or at the wrong level of detail). In these cases, prompting earlier rather than later is better.
3. Before you prompt a group, ask yourself, "How likely is the group to make progress without being prompted?" **-** If the group is unlikely to make progress, prompt sooner rather than later.

The approach that is taken in prompting a group can also be important in removing the perception that you are trying to control the discussion. The various approaches that might be used include:

1. When the group has had a full discussion on some perspectives and not others:
    - **Comment:** "Let's look at this from another perspective." Then describe the new perspective. You may want to serve in the role of devil's advocate on the new perspective should the group not fully comprehend the new viewpoint.
2. When the group is on the wrong track or at the wrong level of detail:

- **Comment:** "That's not exactly what I was looking for." Then clarify what you are asking them to do. You may need to give an example.

3. When the group is struggling to get started:

   - **Comment:** "Let me help you get started." Then give them an example of what you are looking for. The example should be one they would likely have suggested.

4. When the group feels it has exhausted a topic, but you want them to continue:

   - **Comment:** "What do you think of this?" Then describe the new dimension to be considered.

5. When you feel the group is wrong in the premise for its discussion, and it is likely to be led astray by the incorrect premise:

   - **Comment:** "Let me clarify something for you." Then provide a correction to the premise. Do this gently so that your correction doesn't inhibit further discussion.

6. When certain points of view are being dismissed or not fully developed:

   - **Comment:** "I don't think you have fully developed this perspective." Then ask them to think about some questions that will more fully develop the point of view.

Prompting decisions are often instinctive. Facilitators learn from experience when to prompt. For some facilitators the decision to prompt is very conscious and thoughtful. For other facilitators, prompting takes on more of an air of "showing off" if not done carefully. They use prompting to display their control of the group and mastery of the topic.

Managing Time

S-10

Facilitation is not a process that can be scripted. In some cases, a group will get through a discussion topic much more quickly than expected while in other cases, the discussion will seem endless. While discussion time is difficult to predict, it can be managed if the facilitator uses some of the following suggestions.

1. Avoiding Repetition – One of the reasons that discussions extend beyond what is expected is that individuals continue to repeat themselves.

   - **Suggestion:** Capture key points on a flipchart. Keep asking the group, "What thoughts do you have that are not on the list?" This question tends to reinforce the point that you are looking for new insights, not repeats.

2. Endless Point/Counterpoint – In some cases, two or more participants will continue to make the same arguments without adding new insights. For one reason or another, they are unwilling or unable to hear the other person's point of view.

   - **Suggestion:** Genuine differences are to be valued because they can lead to valuable perspectives. But the facilitator needs to help the participants articulate their points of view so that their positions are clear. Once the positions have become clear, new insights may emerge. The facilitator may want to develop a list on the flipchart of critical issues in the point/counterpoint discussion. Then the facilitator can help the participants see where they have similar or different points of view. A structured approach to point/counterpoint discussions can reduce time and make the outcome from the discussion more useful.

3. Slow Start Up – One of the most time consuming aspects of any facilitation is the start up of a discussion. Often the group is uncertain of what is being asked of them.

   - **Suggestion:** Prepare a summary sheet of previous discussions to help them remember where they were. Then start the new topic with an illustration of what is being asked. The facilitator may need to do more prompting at first to get the discussion going.

4. Working Through Details – Some discussion topics require considerable time to work through because they involve considerable detail.

- **Suggestion:** Work through some of the detail in the group. Then ask smaller groups of participants to work through more of the details outside of the meeting. At the next meeting, review the work of the smaller group with the full group and make modifications as needed.

5. Report Review/Editing – One of the most frustrating and time consuming tasks is to work through the review of the final report. No two individuals will share the same point of view as to how something should be written.

   - **Suggestion:** Ask participants give you their substantive comments on the report. Capture these comments on the flipchart but do not try to make changes in the meeting. Ask the participants to make minor editing comments on the draft report and give these to you. You should then take these comments and work them into a new draft. The facilitator should always maintain final editorial control over the report.

The approach that a facilitator uses to manage time can directly impact the acceptance of the project by those who volunteer to serve in the discussion group. When the participants see that the discussions are facilitated well, they are much more likely to continue to support the effort.

The Non-Verbal Side of Facilitation

S-11

Facilitators need to understand non-verbal signals from panelists and appreciate the value of non-verbal signals. These non-verbal messages are often valuable to understanding what is not being said.

The facilitator can set the tone of the discussion with the messages he/she sends. The most common of these messages are facilitator's reactions to what a discussion participant has said. Rolling of the eyes is a signal that the facilitator doesn't value what is being said. Facial expressions can also convey acceptance or rejection of an idea. The facilitator needs to lead the discussion in a way that is non-judgmental both in oral expression and non-verbal messages.

The physical presence of the facilitator can also send non-verbal messages. When the facilitator is standing, he/she is conveying the message of someone who is managing the flow of discussion. When the facilitator is standing, the discussion is more structured (e.g., people wait their turn to speak, their comments are crisper, etc.) When the facilitator is sitting, the discussion is less structured, more ragged, and often more open and revealing. The skilled facilitator will need to know how to use his/her positioning to manage the discussion flow.

The non-verbal messages of the participants can also be very revealing. Many of these are obvious (e.g., yawning, looking at a watch). Others are less obvious. Some of the less understood non-verbal messages and their signals are listed below.

- Frequently looking down at the table or floor – Uncertain of the topic being discussed and/or uncomfortable about offering a thought.
- Occasionally staring off into space – Thinking deeply about what is being said.
- Leaning forward – Intensely interested in the discussion, often wants to make a contribution.
- Sitting sideways – Uncomfortable with the discussion and the process, often this participant is signaling a desire to change the discussion direction or the facilitation process.
- Sitting away from the group – Often this participant is trying to distance himself/herself from the rest of the participants.

There are a number of other non-verbal messages that are too numerous to mention here. The facilitator should be aware of these messages but be careful not to misinterpret them. Every non-verbal message can indicate different things depending upon the circumstances. The key is to realize that there are non-verbal messages being sent that might be important.

Maintaining the Discussion at the Right Level

S-12

In order for discussions to be effective, they have to be maintained at the right level. The management of the proper level of discussion is one of the primary responsibilities of the facilitator.

Typical situations that can lead to digressions from the right level of discussion include:

1. Repeated use of anecdotal experiences – While some personal stories can be instructive, they often can lead to unproductive discussions that lead nowhere.

2. Excessive attention to rather minor points – Participants have a tendency to dwell on insignificant issues that are their personal "hot buttons". When these come up, the discussion can quickly focus on what is of little importance to the overall project.

3. Endless "Ping pong style" debates – While contrasting viewpoints are desired, the contrasts need to be acknowledged, and the discussion needs to move on. All too often these contrasts can become debates where few new insights are gained after the original contrasting viewpoints are given.

4. Too detailed/too conceptual discussions – Every project will have a level at which the discussion needs to focus. There is a tendency to stray from this focus in either direction.

5. Personal interests – Participants often come to a discussion with a particular subject of interest. Often they will want to direct the discussion toward this particular interest.

6. Excessive focus on a cause – Some participants will want to raise concerns for a social cause repeatedly throughout a discussion. Every time the discussion moves to a new area of interest, the participants will want to interject their social cause into the discussion.

The facilitator needs to be directive when the discussion level gets off track. If the facilitator doesn't take a direct approach in these situations, then participants may also lose faith in the ability of the facilitator to lead the discussion.

Some approaches that the facilitator can take to keep the discussion at the right level include:

1. Calling a "timeout" in the discussion when it seems to be evolving to the wrong level. Give feedback to the participants as to the level that is desired. Facilitators may also want to use these situations as an opportunity to remind the participants about the goals of the project.
2. Talking privately with individuals who interject personal interests or causes into the discussion. Ask these persons to raise these interests/causes to the appropriate level of the discussion.
3. Giving them an example that might help them understand the discussion, especially if the participants have a difficult time understanding the level you are seeking.
4. Establish some guidelines up front in the project about the level of detail desired. Periodically ask the participants to evaluate how well they are living up to the agreement.

The facilitator needs to be sensitive about the perception of controlling the discussion. At the same time, the facilitator needs to redirect the level of the discussion if it appears to be going in the wrong direction.

The Proper Level of Discussion Leadership

S-13

One of the challenges that a facilitator constantly faces is how much leadership to exercise during a facilitation event. Assertive leadership may be perceived as being controlling while lax facilitation may lead to chaos.

Different situations require different levels of facilitation. The proper level of leadership needed can often vary during one facilitation event. Outlined below are the most common situations and the most appropriate facilitation leadership needed.

Situation 1: The group seems to be at a loss as to how to respond.

Facilitator leadership: Give the group an example of an appropriate response.

Situation 2: The group is at an impasse. Comments are repetitive with limited additional insight.

Facilitator leadership: Suggest an organizing concept that may put the various points of view into proper perspective so that the impasse can be broken.

Situation 3: The group is in a spirited discussion with many new insights coming forward.

Facilitator leadership: Synthesize the insights on the flipchart so that the participants can see their thoughts in a visual schema.

Situation 4: The group appears burned out. They can't seem to engage with the issue being discussed.

Facilitator leadership: Change the direction of the discussion so that the participants will be interested in more active involvement. Often engagement can be improved by having the group focus on a specific topic before moving to a higher level of discussion.

Situation 5: The group is off target in its discussion.

Facilitator leadership: Stop the discussion. Explain what is needed. Give an example to redirect the discussion.

Situation 6: The group is not following the discussion agreement (e.g., side conversations, personal attacks).

Facilitator leadership: Point out the problems as you see them without criticizing specific persons.

Situation 7: The group is challenging the process and waiting to "take over" the facilitation.

Facilitator leadership: Remind the participants that you are the facilitator and ask them to work with you. There can only be one facilitator.

Situation 8: There are subgroups developing during the discussions that are acting as cliques.

Facilitator leadership: Break up the groups in both seating arrangements and assignments.

Situation 9: There are unequal levels of participation among the participants.

Facilitator leadership: Create more opportunities for non-participants to contribute.

Situation 10: The group responses are disappointing and display tendencies of group think.

Facilitator leadership: Challenge the group to expand their thoughts. Provide examples of how their responses are inadequate.

When in doubt, more assertive facilitation is generally preferable to looser facilitation. Participants value assertive leadership as long as the assertive facilitator doesn't attempt to control the actual comments being made.

Bringing the Topic into Focus

S-14

Typically facilitation projects have a specific purpose. This purpose is often described in a document given to the discussion group at the first meeting. While the purpose may be clear, the discussion will often go beyond the original intended bounds.

This tendency for the discussion to go beyond the original bounds can be called the "world hunger effect". Ultimately any issue can be broadened in scope until the group is exploring meta issues. World hunger is an example of the extremes to which the discussion can go.

The basic cause for expanding the discussion reflects the participants' concern that the topic of the discussion can't be dealt with effectively unless a higher level issue is brought into the discussion. Once this higher level issue is brought into the discussion, then it can't be dealt with until an even higher level issue is explored. It doesn't take too long before "world hunger" or some other meta issue becomes the issue.

The challenge to the facilitator is how to keep the original discussion topic as the primary focus of the discussion. Some approaches for dealing with this focus issue are:

1. Establish givens for the discussion. That way the discussion can establish a reference point for dealing with the higher level issues. Statements such as "We can't discuss this until we discuss…" are tip offs that the discussion focus is broadening. The facilitator should put a stop to this broadening by saying "Let's assume that…" to describe the boundary point.

2. Establish a "parking lot" list for expansions of the discussion that might be revisited but are not appropriate for the current discussion.

3. When meta issues are discussed, ask the participants: "How can we bring your comments into focus on this specific topic?"

The facilitator's ability to maintain focus will be greatly appreciated by the participants even though they may have been frustrated at first that they didn't get to broaden the discussion.

Preserving Boldness

S-15

During the early phases of a facilitation project, the group will begin to think boldly about possibilities. This happens when they break out of the “constraint” mindset that tends to inhibit a group’s initial thinking. The possibilities that arise during this time are often very innovative and far reaching.

Unfortunately the group will tend to return to its timid way of thinking as it gets closer to developing its work product. The group begins to fall back into a self-constraining mindset. It tempers its bold ideas with self imposed limits or it may eliminate the bold ideas all together.

The challenge for the facilitator is to preserve the boldness. The first thing that the facilitator can do is to challenge the group to keep from imposing constraints on itself. Often when the facilitator makes the group aware of these self-imposed constraints, the group will become more accepting of its own ideas.

The second thing the facilitator can do is to challenge the group with a statement like this: “We have an opportunity to do something special. Let’s take advantage of this opportunity by being bold.” Often this perspective can help the participants be stronger in their resolve to report out their best thinking, not what they think will be most acceptable.

The third thing that the facilitator can do is to encourage the group to present their boldest ideas along with other ideas which may be perceived as being more acceptable. Often these bolder ideas will excite others who see the report and encourage them to be less constraint-oriented.

One of the values of a facilitated discussion is that it generates ideas that transcend those that would otherwise be developed. Preserving boldness helps fulfill one vital purpose of a facilitated discussion.

Using Experiences

S-16

One of the challenges that a facilitator faces is how to use the participants' experiences. Participants are often selected because of their knowledge and experience but excessive dwelling on experience can be a drag on a project. The essential issue for the facilitator is how best to use the experience in achieving useful results.

The challenge of managing experience is to use the experience as a foundation for developing the issue and exploring possibilities. Often experience sharing can evolve into a sharing of war stories with minimal generalization of this experience into conceptual insights.

Experience can also act as blinders to new possibilities. Bad experiences especially can trigger defensive responses to new possibilities.

In some cases, participants will try to use their experience to establish an authority position in a group. They may use their experience to support their position in a discussion when in reality that experience had limited relevance to the current topic of the discussion.

The facilitator can manage experience using some of the following approaches.

1. Any time that participants discuss their experience, ask the question: "How can we generalize from this experience to our present discussion?" Often this question will give participants pause in bringing up an experience that may not be relevant or is repetitive of other experiences already shared.
2. Establish a discussion practice of keeping the sharing of experience brief. This will help shorten the story telling.
3. Whenever experience is used in an authoritative or argumentative manner, make the point that we are exploring possibilities and our concern is what will make the possibility work, not what kept it from working in the past.
4. Have a private meeting with those who are prone to dwell on their experience and ask them to go from their experience to explore new possibilities.

Experience is necessary in a project, but it must also be managed. All too often experience is not managed, and the project ends up as an oral history effort, not one of exploring new directions.

Handling Overly Enthusiastic Participants

S-17

When participants are asked to serve on a facilitated discussion project, the facilitator is looking for people who are enthusiastic about the effort. While enthusiasm is desired, it can also be a problem if the participant is overly enthusiastic.

An overly enthusiastic participant can engage in one or more of the following problem behaviors:

- Frequently is the first to speak up when a new discussion direction is taken and sets the tone for the discussion.
- Dominates the discussion.
- Volunteers for every external activity discouraging others from contributing.
- Tries to make helpful facilitation suggestions which may interfere with the facilitator's discussion strategy.
- May be resented by other participants, thus hurting the chemistry of the group.

The facilitator's approach to an overly enthusiastic participant needs to start with a private discussion with the participant. Generally this can reduce the concerns. Should the private discussion not be helpful, the facilitator may need to take a firm hand in managing the overly enthusiastic participant. Specific actions that the facilitator may take include:

- Rotating the lead off discussion contributors.
- Reiterating the discussion practice guidelines that focus on equal participation at each meeting.
- Pre-assigning participants to external activities with their concurrence.

Should the overly enthusiastic participant continue to be a problem, the facilitator may want to ask the participant to take on a different role where the person is asked to help in a way that better uses his/her enthusiasm (e.g., note taking).

Avoiding Debates

S-18

The facilitator has a responsibility to ensure that discussions are developmental and constructive. Developmental means that the discussions go from an unfolding of the issues to an eventual convergence on possibilities. Constructive means that the discussions lead to useful insights that may not have been possible without the collaborative efforts of all participants.

Debates tend to involve a discussion of point and counterpoint and are rarely developmental or constructive. Debates may be useful at first to reveal the underlying issues, but they become less useful as the discussion unfolds. Debates rarely lead to convergence and they tend to encourage advocacy.

The facilitator needs to manage the debate tendencies of participants, especially those who are experts in the area of concern. There are several approaches to doing this:

1. During the initial discussion of an issue, ask participants to make the case for their point of view. Capture these points as a list of viewpoints without letting the participants get into a point/counterpoint discussion.

2. Ask participants how they may interpret the various points of view as possibilities. Focus the discussion on the development of the possibilities rather than on advocacy for a specific point of view.

3. Challenge the participants who have the most advocacy tendencies to help develop the other possibilities. By engaging these participants in developmental efforts, they might become less advocacy oriented.

4. Take charge when the discussion moves to unconstructive restatements of points of view. The facilitator needs to refocus these discussions so they become more developmental and constructive.

5. Have private meetings with participants who tend to be debate oriented to see if they can channel their comments to ones that are more developmental and constructive.

How the participants approach a subject is largely under the control of the facilitator. Managing the debate tendencies can be a critical skill for facilitation.

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Strategies and Processes

This section contains suggestions for how to handle the actual discussion itself. The guides presented here are likely to be useful in every facilitation project at some point in time. The central theme of this section is to adjust the facilitation approach to the specific needs of the participants.

Handling Challenges to the Process

S/P-1

To rephrase a famous line: "All the world's a facilitator". In many cases, a project group will contain a number of individuals who have been facilitators. Often these individuals have their own approach to facilitating. They are likely to challenge the process that is being used in a particular public discussion. These situations are fairly common but can also be very disruptive. Some approaches that might be used to handle challenges to the process include:

1. Describe the process in its entirety up front. Acknowledge that there may be similar processes that could be used but ask the participants to work with the process being used.

2. Never suggest the process is someone else's. Make the process yours and describe it as something you have found to be useful.

3. When challenges are presented, explain why your process approach is being used. Justify but don't defend. You should never be in a position of having to defend the approach you are taking.

4. Cite examples from other experiences as you explain the process. Participants draw comfort from knowing that others have been through the process successfully.

5. Never claim that the process you are using is the best. The only claim you should make about the process is it is one that you have found to be useful.

6. If challenges persist, discuss these individually with members of the group. If these persons are so uncomfortable with the process that they are likely to continue to object, you may need to replace them in the group.

Well developed work products that show steady progress are likely to diffuse the challenges to the process. But there are also those who are doctrinaire in their beliefs about a process they think is better.

Making Process Step Transitions

S/P-2

Any facilitation effort that involves a series of meetings will involve a process containing a number of steps. Typically these steps go from exploration of the area of concern to the identification of possibilities, to the further development and testing of these possibilities. Participants often struggle when they go from one step in the process to another. There are ways to help the participants through this transition.

1. Show them the complete process up front. While few participants are likely to grasp the entire scope of the process, they will benefit from knowing there are a series of steps they will be going through.

2. Return to the process description each time you make a transition. Show the participants where they are now and where they are going.

3. Give the participants an illustrative example of what is being asked for in the next step. Often this example would be something that almost certainly would have been suggested by them in their discussions of this next step.

4. Facilitate the initial discussion of the next step as a series of very discreet tasks. The participants will benefit from this step-by-step guidance at first.

5. Loosen the facilitation guidance once the participants have become accustomed to the new process step.

The facilitator will need to give the participants feedback as they make the transition from one step to another. During these transition moments, the facilitator may need to be more evaluative than usual. The facilitator will need to let the participants know when they are off target or when their thinking is too narrowly focused.

Stimulating Thought and Discussion

S/P-3

Discussion groups are often asked to think about and discuss issues about which they have lots of knowledge or in contrast, only limited insight. When groups are asked to think about and discuss issues where they have extensive knowledge, they have a tendency to rehash their positions. When participants have limited knowledge about a subject, they may be intimidated by their lack of knowledge. Thus the facilitator has two challenges in stimulating thought and discussion:

1. How to get those with extensive knowledge to become open to new perspectives.
2. How to get those with limited knowledge to realize they can provide useful, new insights.

Part I – Those with Extensive Knowledge

This group can be very difficult to work with because they are already likely to have already strong feelings on the issue being discussed. Unless the discussion strategy is carefully developed, the discussions are likely to become pointless debates with individuals talking past each other. Little progress can be made in developing new insights until the participants are "freed" from their pre-established positions.

There are several possible approaches for dealing with a knowledgeable group of participants.

1. Select some of the key aspects of the issue and challenge the participants to refrain from using familiar terms or code words usually associated with the issue. For example, a facilitator for a panel discussion on intellectual property might challenge the panel not to use the terms patent, copyright, and trademark. This strategy forces the participants to deal with concepts rather than current situations.
2. Ask the participants to take the position of another person. This will require a description of this person. Often the participant will be "forced" to view issues from another perspective.
3. Challenge the participants to imagine the issue from the perspective that no prior history exists. Have them imagine alternative starting points for the evolution of the issue. The evolutionary development of the idea from this perspective may lead to useful new insights.

The focus of each of these challenges to participants is to get them to think in new ways about the issues they "know" so well. The facilitator should also ask the participants to limit their reliance on past positions throughout the discussion. This general admonition can also be helpful in setting the tone for the discussion.

Part II – Those with Limited Knowledge

This group can be intimidated by what they view as the complexity of an issue. They might not realize that their general knowledge can be very useful in approaching the specific issue at hand. There are several possible approaches for dealing with these participants.

1. Frame aspects of the issues as conceptual case studies. Use these as the basis for the initial discussion. Once the group has explored the case study, they can then move on to a more complete discussion of the issue.

2. Select a small number of experiences or situations they have all experienced. Analyze these experiences/situations from a conceptual perspective by exploring the underlying elements of the experience/situation. Then ask them to apply these concepts to the issue being explored. The selection of the experience/situation needs to carefully thought through to develop the connections being sought. For example, the experience of a Little League coach may lead to interesting concepts that might apply to issues associated with genetic technology.

3. Ask the group to reflect on their life's lessons. Use the list of these lessons to explore the issue at hand. For example, a lesson in life associated with "assessing risks" may be very useful in looking at environmental concerns. The facilitator will be critical in helping the group make the connections between life's lessons and the discussion topic.

These thought exercises can be very helpful in uncovering insights that each person has but may not be consciously aware of.

Completing the "Brass Door"
or
When Have You Gone Far Enough?

S/P-4

There is a story about an artisan who made brass doors. The artisan was asked in an interview, "When do you know when you're done?" The response was, "I'm never done. They just come and take the door away from me."

Groups are often like the artisan when developing their final report. They can always find changes to make to improve the report. Often these changes are minor in scope. Changes have the tendency of being recycled. That is changes are made so often that the result is a return to the original wording.

The facilitator must be the decision maker on when to "take the report away from the group." In making this decision, the facilitator should help the group understand:

1. Changes that reflect nuances of positions are rarely useful. Few readers will appreciate these nuances.
2. Any report will contain a limited number of significant insights. These insights should be the focus of the discussion of the report.
3. When changes are made to the report, these should enhance the usefulness of the report for others**.** Changes often have the opposite impact. They add complexity and detail and are written more for completeness than usefulness.

The facilitator must be the final decision maker on when the group has gone far enough. This decision isn't easy to make since there are no specific criteria upon which to base the decision.

Breaking Paradigms

S/P-5

Paradigms are patterns or models of how people think. They are very useful in dealing with familiar, practical problems. However, they can be very limiting as guides to thinking about issues in a more conceptual way.

The facilitator may need to help the participants to break the paradigms of their thinking. This can be challenging because participants may perceive the facilitator ss trying to influence the direction of the discussion. The goals of the facilitator in breaking paradigms are to:

1. Cause the panel to explore the topic in a new way that is not bound by practical reality.
2. Create a discussion environment where the facilitator is not thought to be controlling the discussion.

There are several ways to break paradigms and to achieve the above goals. Some typical approaches include:

1. Create a thought exercise that clearly requires thinking beyond practical reality. These thought exercises can be written hypothetical situations that stimulate conceptual thinking.
2. Use a story to serve as a “conceptual catalyst” for a new way of thinking. Often these stories trigger new insights without direct facilitator guidance of the specific discussion topic. The sources of the stories can be familiar tales that participants know but have never thought of as being relevant to the issue under discussion.
3. Use an analogy from a completely different situation to broaden the thinking of the participants. Analogies can be tricky because they are often suggestive of guiding the discussion. When analogies are used, they need to be ones that offer many different directions for conceptual possibilities.
4. Challenge the participants with what-if questions that get them to think beyond their current practical orientation. These questions should cover a variety of perspectives that do not show any particular facilitator bias.

While paradigms can be difficult to break, once broken they can create an avalanche of new thinking. Once paradigms are broken, the participants often open up to many new possibilities.

Starting the Discussion

S/P-6

Any facilitation event has awkwardness at the start of the discussion. Participants may be reluctant to be the first to speak up. They may be unsure of what is being asked. They also may not recall where the discussion left off from the previous meeting.

The start of a discussion can also set the direction for what is to follow. A "false" start can lead to a direction that is unproductive.

There are several practices that a facilitator can use to get the discussion off to a good start.

1. Give the participants a one page recap of the previous work. This recap should be more of a "sense of the discussion" than a detailed summary of what was said. The detailed material can be provided as a reference document.

2. Start the discussion with a "process" type of question that everyone can feel comfortable discussing (e.g., what was the most insightful point made last time? What was going through your mind at the conclusion of the last session?)

3. Provide an example of what you are looking for when you move into the new discussion topic. This example should provide an illustration of what is wanted from the new topic without being directive.

4. Ask participants to record their thoughts on paper for the new discussion topic before the group discussion begins. This will help those who are reluctant to speak up.

5. Call on people to open the discussion. Careful selection of those who start the discussion can give everyone a chance to initiate the discussion.

6. Use anecdotes, stories, or other thought provoking and easily accessible material to give participants something they can relate to. These materials serve the purpose of being a catalyst for the discussion.

The best way to decide how to start a discussion is to visualize the first five minutes and the responses of each of the participants. A skillful facilitator will generally have a good sense of how different participants will react.

Generating Ideas

S/P-7

There are countless facilitation tools for generating ideas (e.g. brainstorming, nominal group technique). These can be found in any facilitation manual and will not be repeated here. Rather the focus of this guide will be on the conceptual basis for generating ideas.

The common failures of traditional approaches for group generation of ideas are:

1. Ideas are shaped by current reality with respect to problems and perceived constraints. Participants fail to explore what might be.

2. Participants are linear in their thinking. They focus on simple cause and effect relationships when situations are not often so simple.

3. Ideas are limited by the individual's experiences and personal beliefs about what should be.

4. Ideas are not particularly creative or bold.

There are some conceptual approaches that can be used to mitigate the problems described above.

The facilitator may ask the participants to explore **connections** between the topic of discussion and a seemingly disparate concept. Often these discussions of "imposed" connections can lead to very interesting ideas that would probably not have been possible without the connection exercise.

Use a collection of **parables**, analogs, **stories or other "flights of fancy"** to get the participants to think anew about the topic of discussion. Often these parables/stories/etc. can create a "childlike" wonder that opens up the mind to explore possibilities that would otherwise be suppressed by adult wisdom.

Set **seemingly impossible goals** and challenge the participants to develop possibilities that achieve these goals. Often the pressure of an impossible goal can stimulate thinking of entirely new approaches.

Change the **frame of reference** of how participants are to think about the topic of discussion. Often a change in perspective can stimulate thinking of new possibilities.

Use **collections of words** to help participants draw connections between the words themselves and the topic of discussion. In this case, the words can be selected almost at random.

All of these conceptual approaches have common elements.

- They remove constraints on thinking.
- They force participants to think in ways that they would normally not think.
- They open the mind to possibilities.
- The challenge latent limitations on thinking.

Such explorations result in numerous ideas. Many of these will be discarded but others may be brilliant and unexpected.

Developing Ideas

S/P-8

The generation of an idea is the first step in the exploration of possibilities. But ideas must also be more fully developed if they are to be useful for further exploration.

The development of ideas is in effect the building of the concept. The end result of the development process is not a blueprint for implementation but rather a structure from which further detail can be later developed. Often the development process can require a different mode of thinking from that used in generating ideas.

One way to develop ideas is to use a question checklist that can stimulate thinking about the structure that is needed for the idea. Some of these questions include:

1. Who are the key persons or groups involved? What are their potential roles?
2. What are the resources needed for the idea to become a reality?
3. What is the likely support for these resources?
4. What impact will this idea have? How might these impacts shape the structure of the idea?
5. How prepared are we and others for the implementation of the idea? How might preparation readiness be incorporated into the structure of the idea?
6. What are the challenges the idea is most likely to confront? How might these challenges be reflected in the structure of the idea?
7. How might the following concepts relate to the structure of the idea?
    - Justice
    - Fairness
    - Efficiency
    - Necessity of choice
    - Freedom
    - Distribution of costs/benefits
    - Morality
    - Free markets
    - Representative democracy
    - Citizen responsibility
8. What administrative/managerial support might be necessary for the idea? How might this support influence the structure of the idea?

9. How might the impact of the idea be assessed? How might an assessment and review process impact the structure of the idea?

10. What are likely to be the "opportunity costs" of the idea? How might these "opportunity costs" be reflected in the structure of the idea?

11. What could go wrong with the idea? How might these undesired consequences be reflected in the structure of the idea?

12. What is the likely time projection for the idea from concept to implementation? How might this time projection be incorporated into the structure of the idea?

Not all of these questions need to be answered in the development process. The questions are merely intended to be prompts for thinking. The key to answering these questions is to keep a focus on the idea as a concept and not as a detailed action plan. Thus the answers to these questions do not need to be either detailed or definitive.

Evaluating Ideas

S/P-9

Once the ideas have been developed, there needs to be some type of evaluation to determine which ideas should be carried forward for further consideration. This evaluation process is a critical phase in the overall project.

Groups have a tendency to face several challenges when they evaluate ideas.

1. They tend to be overly influenced by what they perceive to be constraints on what will be accepted by others.
2. They try to be too quantitative in their evaluation. They have a tendency to use ranking criteria and scoring systems to make their evaluations seem more valid.
3. They elevate the importance of the negative in contrast to the positive. A bold idea with significant attractive features will often get evaluated lower than an idea which has modest positives and few negatives.
4. They prematurely reject ideas rather than incorporating the good features of an idea into others.

The evaluation of ideas can be successful when the process involves a series of exploratory questions that focuses on the quality of the idea first. Some questions that might be asked include

- What are the most attractive features of this idea?
- How does this idea further the overall project?
- How do we answer the possible challenges to this idea?
- How might the best features of this idea be incorporated into other ideas?

The use of these questions focuses on the idea and not on the barriers to the idea. In this way, the ideas that are carried further tend to be ones that offer genuine possibilities, not just lukewarm options that are little more than extensions of current situations.

Structure vs. Freedom in Discussion

S/P-10

There are many different types of facilitation and facilitators. In spite of this variety, all facilitators face one challenge: "How do I balance structure and freedom in my facilitation?"

Structure vs. freedom is not an either/or proposition. Structure vs. freedom involves the matter of when to be structured while freedom refers to how to encourage open discussion.

Structure refers to

- The overall framework of the discussion process.
- The selection of the specific approach used to work through specific discussion issues.
- The synthesis of the discussion into a useful collection of ideas.
- The overall "rules of the discussion" that ensure that everyone will be heard.

Freedom in this context refers to

- A discussion environment that encourages everyone to be open in their comments.
- The lack of fear that the participant's ideas will be attacked by others in the discussion group or reported to others outside of the discussion group.
- A sense of comfort that one's ideas will be fully considered by others in the group.

Structure is inappropriate when

- It is so controlling that the outcome of the discussion is predestined.
- The discussion process discourages openness.
- It allows process tools to overwhelm the judgment of the participants.
- The structure of the facilitation becomes more important than the actual discussion and its hoped-for outcome.

Freedom is inappropriate when

- It leads to chaotic discussion with limited convergence or closure.
- It allows the discussion to stray into topics that are beyond the scope of the project.
- It permits participants to dwell on their personal agendas.
- It encourages disrespectful behavior between participants.

The challenge of balancing structure and freedom is one of ensuring that the structure encourages open discussion and the freedom of the discussion contributes to a useful and productive outcome.

Decision Making

S/P-11

Decision making is always a topic that is discussed when a facilitation project gets underway. The issue is how will the group decide what will be taken forward from the group's discussion. While there is often considerable discussion of the decision making process, decision making is less often a concern to the group as the discussions unfold.

The reality of effective facilitated discussions is that participants will tend to converge in their thinking. There is rarely a need for a vote or a polling of the participants on an issue.

Decision making is more of a growing respect for each other's thinking than it is a process for arriving at a conclusion. Respect in this case is the critical challenge for the facilitator. Rather than leading the participants to an "answer", the facilitator's job is to help the participants respect each other's ideas and achieve convergence in their thinking.

Decision making that relies upon a structure ultimately leads to results that are "political" in that the decisions tend to be influenced more by the process by which they were made than by mutual convergence of thinking of the participants.

A decision making approach that can be defined or described as a process often produces decisions that are compromises. These compromises rarely contain the boldness of thinking that explored a variety of possibilities during the discussions. Compromises also tend to prematurely foreclose discussion. When decision making is open ended but converging, the result tends to be a true reflection of the thinking of the group.

Avoiding Group Think

S/P-12

Groups can be very useful in developing ideas. They bring different perspectives on an issue. They also offer different sets of skills (i.e., some are better at idea generation and others are better at further development of the idea.)

But groups can also develop what is often referred to as "group think". In the case of "group think", participants in groups tend to think alike. Individuals have a tendency to go along with the group rather than to say what they really believe.

The keys to avoiding group think are to:

1. Recognize when group think is beginning to set in.
2. Take steps to encourage full and open discussion even when such discussion is rancorous.
3. Use challenging discussions as a positive learning experience for the group.

The facilitator can recognize when group think is setting in by how the participants react to a difficult issue. Typically participant responses will be lukewarm in the discussion. There will be few comments when many would be expected. The non-verbal signals of the group may indicate that they are uncomfortable with the topic but unwilling to speak up, or they may just want to avoid getting into a difficult subject.

The facilitator can minimize the group think by structuring the discussion so there can be a full airing on each topic. Some ways to do this are:

1. Ask specific participants to take on a "devil's advocate" role during a specific part of the discussion. The devil's advocate would challenge the concept being developed and to help improve the concept.
2. Ask participants to assume another perspective in addition to their own. Often this perspective could be one that is contrary to their own perspective. Ask them to approach each discussion from these perspectives.
3. Develop a list of challenges to use as prompts to ensure that the participants consider the difficult issues associated with a discussion topic.

The key to each of these suggestions is to facilitate thoughtful discussions of other points of view about an issue.

Difficult, and sometimes heated discussions, can be true learning experiences for a group. The facilitator can use these experiences to help the participants learn from them. A debriefing at the end of a specific difficult discussion can be helpful in encouraging participants to continue challenging each other in a positive, constructive manner.

Shaping Possibilities

S/P-13

Ultimately a facilitated discussion will move from loosely formed ideas to possibilities. The process of shaping possibilities can be very challenging for participants, and the facilitator may need to provide more guidance at this time than at other times.

The starting point for possibilities is the ideas that have been developed by the group. Often these ideas are simply thoughts without much development. Ideas are usually focused on a specific aspect of an overall issue. Ideas may be complimentary or may contradict each other.

These ideas should be placed on a list for use by the participants. Then the facilitator might ask: "Which ideas seem to fit together to create a possibility?" Ideas can be joined together in different combinations to form a variety of possibilities. One idea can be a part of more than one possibility.

Once a variety of possibilities are created by this combination of ideas, the facilitator might ask: "Which of these possibilities provide unique insights?" The participants can then begin to explore a smaller collection of possibilities which represent contrasting perspectives. The smaller collection of possibilities is often a combination of the initial possibilities rather than the rejection of some of the initial possibilities.

Once a meaningful set of contrasting possibilities is identified, these possibilities can be further developed by filling in the gaps that may exist. Further development, in this case, refers to integrating the ideas into a coherent structure.

The development of possibilities must be carefully facilitated to avoid "getting into the trenches" of details. Often the participants will lose track of their original purpose and begin to dwell on details. These details can often obscure the big picture represented by the possibilities. Individuals who subsequently consider the possibilities may also get hung up on these details as well.

The shaping of possibilities will ultimately be the responsibility of the facilitator who must pull together the thinking of the group into a written document. This process of shaping of possibilities may take several iterations to complete.

Creating Ownership and Commitment

S/P-14

Often a facilitation project has dual purposes.

- Developing possibilities.
- Developing a group of believers who can help in the sharing of the possibilities with others.

The second purpose may not be explicit or even thought about up front, but it is a valuable purpose nonetheless.

The process of developing ownership and commitment happens naturally in well managed projects. There are however, some essential practices that help ensure that ownership and commitment develop.

- The participants must feel that they are real contributors to the project – not just asked to bless something that has already been decided.
- The participants need to feel that their work will receive serious attention when it is completed.
- The participants must feel that their thoughts are accurately described in written products of the project.
- The participants must feel a sense of community with those in the group.

In order for ownership and commitment to occur, the facilitator needs to treat each participant respectfully. Whenever possible, the facilitator should be able to connect the written product of the project to specific discussion points. The facilitator should not incorporate any of his/her own thinking into the project unless there is genuine support for the facilitator's position by the group. There should be some social time to allow participants time to get to know each other. Although the facilitator may be commissioned to do the project by some sponsor, the sponsor's influence on the outcome of the effort should be minimal. Finally, the plan for use of the possibilities should be shaped in part by the participants. The participants need to feel some personal involvement in the effort once the discussion phase has concluded.

Developing a Sense of Community

S/P-15

Groups that go through a facilitation experience over a period of time tend to go through a series of stages. The facilitator is critical to how the group advances, but there is no guarantee that a group will go from a lower stage to a higher one.

Stage 1 is the **chaos stage**. The group is uncertain of what it is to do. It may also be doubtful of the effort itself. There may be some "push back" on the process used. Almost certainly the group's responses will be uneven in quality as individuals struggle to understand how best to contribute.

Stage 2 is the **exploring stage** both with respect to the topic of the discussion and with respect to relationships. The group begins to understand what is expected of it. It also begins to develop a sense of community. But the group has yet to be truly open with each other. Disagreements may be minimized so as not to offend anyone. As a result, the discussions are not as rich as they could be if there were a fuller exploration of issues even when such discussions may make some uncomfortable.

The third stage the participants may go through is called the **breakthrough stage**. In this stage, the participants are more open with their comments even when these comments are challenging. As a result, the group discussion rises to a very high level with truly innovative and useful ideas emerging. The participants grow more supportive of each other and are accepting of the need to challenge and develop ideas as they are developing. Participants are less prone to "show off" and more likely to develop the collective possibilities of the group.

The final stage is the **high performance stage**. The product of the discussions is truly exemplary. Bold but useful ideas are developed that go far beyond what any participant could have imagined. The mutual support of the participants is exceptional. Participants truly respect each other, but they also help each other throughout the discussions. Participants put aside their initial biases and develop a final work product that represents a contribution of everyone. There is no individual ownership of any idea in that each idea is fully supported by the group members.

There is no guarantee that groups will move to the third or fourth stages. In some respects, individuals in the group determine whether the group gets to the third and fourth stages. But the facilitator can help the group get to higher stages by:

- Setting the tone for the discussions up front.
- Taking action to minimize displays of showmanship (e.g., private meeting with participants, admonishments during discussion).
- Encouraging the full development of ideas.
- Creating or capitalizing on opportunities to build a sense of community.
- Facilitating periodic reflections of how the group is working.

High performance teams occur rarely but skillful facilitators can achieve breakthrough teams in many cases.

Fostering Anticipatory Thinking

S/P-16

Most groups have a reluctance to move beyond current reality to explore anticipatory issues. This may be due to their occupational focus on current problems. It may also be due to the limited ability of many people to think beyond their own experience. There may also be a tendency among some people to think of anticipatory thinking as a waste of time (i.e., "I'll deal with these problems if they ever materialize.")

Since few people are comfortable in dealing with anticipatory thinking, the facilitator needs to create the environment where anticipatory thinking is effective. One approach for doing this is to create anticipatory **case studies**. These case studies create situations that are both plausible and provocative in that they challenge the participants to deal with a situation that might emerge.

Once the facilitator presents the anticipatory case study, the next challenge is to help the group work through the case study in a realistic but exploratory manner. In many cases, participants may approach an anticipatory case study in an ideal manner that is far different from how they might actually deal with a situation if they were to encounter it for real. The facilitator may need to challenge these ideal responses to get to ideas that are more useful.

In some cases, the facilitator may use **analogies** to foster anticipatory thinking. Analogies may be used to show how some other realm of society has had to deal with a situation which may emerge in the topic under discussion. Analogies are helpful in that they give the anticipatory discussion more of a sense of emerging reality. The challenge in using analogies is to show the possible parallels between the analogy and the area of concern without getting bogged down in the details of the analogy itself.

A third way to deal with anticipatory thinking is to ask the participants to **project the future** of society in general terms. These are most often statements of the future. These statements are generated in a brain storming type of environment. Once the statements are generated, the participants can then explore the area of concern in light of selected statements. None of these statements should be viewed as predictions but merely starting points for anticipatory thinking.

There are other approaches for encouraging anticipatory discussions but the above three are perhaps the most helpful.

Dealing with the Energy Level of Participants

S/P-17

Discussions can be very tiring. They can also pose a different physical situation for participants who may be more active in their regular jobs. There is a natural drop in the energy level of participants that must be recognized and managed by the facilitator.

In most cases, 2-3 hours is the longest that a group can be effective in a discussion without a break. Even with a break, the energy level of most groups tends to fade after 5-6 hours of discussion.

There are some useful strategies for dealing with the energy level of a group of participants.

1. Take short breaks every 1-1.5 hours to allow people to move around and take care of personal needs.
2. Should the discussion be planned for more than 3 hours, plan to have a meal as an extended break (30-45 minutes).
3. Alternate discussion topics and possibly the approaches used to break up the challenges of one long discussion on a specific topic. For example, the facilitator could use a mix of large group discussions and small group work sessions.
4. Call a halt to a discussion when the energy level seems to be really low. There is little productive work that can come from such low energy discussions.
5. Should the energy level be a problem with shorter meetings, think about changes in the meeting time or day of the week.

Using Analytical/Facilitator Tools

S/P-18

Experienced facilitators will have a repertoire of tools they can use to support a discussion. Most experienced facilitators have an innate sense of "what will work" in a particular situation and with a particular group of participants. Often the decision to use a specific tool is a spontaneous one based upon the facilitator's experience.

Less experienced facilitators need to be cautious in using analytical tools. Here are some guidelines for using tools.

1. Don't use a tool unless you are comfortable with it and can use the tool without written instructions to guide you.
2. Don't force the use of a tool in a situation. The tool should be an aid, not an end in itself.
3. Match the tool with the participants (see S/P-19). Some participants have an aversion to specific types of exercises.
4. Make the tool an integral part of the discussion. Tools should not be used as extraneous "warm up acts", "community building", or "feel good" types of exercises. They should have a specific purpose in forwarding the discussion.
5. Use only those tools that can be used quickly.
6. Don't let the tool become a distraction or a focus of the discussion. The tool should be a catalyst for the discussion, not the topic of the discussion.
7. Don't let the tool over-structure the discussion or take away from the natural flow of the discussion.

Some facilitators tend to think they need to use tools to do their job. Tools should be viewed as an enabler but the real work of the facilitation is discussion leadership.

Matching the Facilitation Approach to the Audience

S/P-19

Not all participant groups are the same. The facilitator needs to understand the best approach to use with different audiences.

Some of the archetypal audiences that the facilitator is likely to encounter include:

1. **Results Focused** – This audience tends to want to focus on the results. They are not accepting of involved facilitation processes. They especially dislike what they view as "touch-feely" exercises. They are big picture oriented and not prone to detail. The facilitator needs to help this group understand that not all issues are bottom line oriented.

2. **Encounter Groups** – This audience is into process and personal sharing. They don't want to be hurried. They are prone to begin every discussion with a personal story. They need help in focusing and coming to a convergence around specific possibilities. This group loves facilitation exercises. The facilitator needs to help this group stay focused and come to closure.

3. **Compliance Focused** – This audience is hesitant to vary too far from what they know. They are also uncomfortable in going beyond what they think are the rules. The facilitator needs to give them authority to think about issues in different ways.

4. **Creative** – This audience is comprised of bold thinkers. They have big ideas. They do not dwell on the practical side of issues. They may also be "all over the map". The facilitator will need to help this group think through its ideas more fully as they are presented. At times the facilitator may need to slow down this group so it can more fully develop its possibilities.

5. **Logical Thinkers** – This audience explores issues as logic puzzles. Issues are explored in a rational manner where each thought is carefully analyzed for its logical merit. The facilitator needs to challenge this group to think beyond logic and to explore "what if" situations for which there may be no straightforward logical basis.

6. **Revolutionaries** – This audience tends to challenge everything that could be thought of as conventional thinking. They want to do away with the current systems and replace them with their own conceptions. The facilitator will need to help this group integrate the best of current practice with new possibilities.

Although the above set of audience types are not exhaustive, they do represent some of the more difficult audience groups that a facilitator may encounter. The different audience types tend to follow gender and occupational lines. Rather than to present audience demographic trends here, the facilitator should keep these audience types in mind when selecting participants. The challenge is to avoid getting a group that is so dominated by one type as to present serious problems in accomplishing the project results.

Managing/Fostering Dynamic Tension

S/P-20

Successful discussion groups often have an "edge" to them. Ideas are presented and discussed in a challenging and, at times, heated manner. To outsiders, these discussions may seem to be very confrontational. The common thread that runs through these discussions is that the focus of the challenging discussions is on the merits of the ideas, and not on the people contributing their thoughts.

Dynamic tension is healthy. It helps strengthen ideas. But most groups are reluctant to engage in tense discussions. People have become sensitive to what is typically accepted meeting behavior. Thus the challenge for the facilitator is to foster and manage the dynamic tension that is needed in discussions.

It would be inappropriate to try to foster challenging discussions until participants are comfortable with each other. Prior to this, challenging discussions may have the effect of intimidating some participants.

One way to foster dynamic tension is for the facilitator to demonstrate one side in a challenging discussion. Being a devil's advocate in a way that encourages the fuller development of an idea can be a learning-by-doing experience for participants. Once the facilitator steps out of the devil's advocate role, he/she should call a time out in the overall discussion and discuss how the tension the group just experienced can be valuable.

The facilitator may then need to set up another demonstration with two participants leading the way to reinforce the desirability of intense discussions.

With a few such moments of challenging development, the remaining participants may become bolder in their comments.

Use of Case Studies, Examples, Story Telling

S/P-21

Most people have difficulty thinking conceptually. They are more accustomed to dealing with specifics. In a facilitated discussion, participants are often asked to think about the broader aspects of issues. The development of these conceptual thinking skills may need to occur before meaningful discussions can occur.

Tangible situations may serve as a catalyst for more conceptual thinking. Case studies, stories, and related examples can create a tangible basis for identifying key learning elements. These learning elements are statements of what the tangible situation means in a broader context. These learning elements can then be reapplied as concepts for the topic under discussion.

Tangible situations actually work best when they have no apparent connection to the topic under discussion. Often these situations involve common experiences which the facilitator is asking the participants to think about in new ways.

Concepts which arise through these exercises often provide more meaning to participants who have not often thought in conceptual terms.

Once these experiences are shared, the facilitator then asks for what can be learned from the situation. The key is to transfer these descriptions of experiences into broader learning elements.

These learning elements can then be transferred to the broader topic under discussion.

The facilitator needs to be skillful at setting up situations where there is a connection between the tangible situation and the concept.

Ending the Discussion

S/P-22

The last 10 minutes of a discussion are important. Discussions need to come to an appropriate closure. In addition, participants need to be reminded of what comes next, including any commitments that might have been made.

The facilitator should plan to end the group discussions at least 10 minutes early to summarize the discussion and plan for the next meeting.

The facilitator needs to be thinking about when to bring the discussion to a close. Ideally the discussion can conclude at a natural break between topics. It is probably better to end a discussion early than to start up a new topic that the facilitator knows can't be properly discussed in the time available. Should the discussion end early, the facilitator may use this time for housekeeping activities.

The facilitator should try to conclude each meeting with a summary of the progress made. The facilitator may also want to give a preview of what is to come in the next session. These summaries are very helpful in giving the participants a sense of the bigger picture of the overall project. Summaries are also useful for helping synthesize what may have seemed to be a rambling discussion.

The facilitator may also want to remind participants of commitments they have made for the next session. This reminder will help ensure follow up.

Translating from Experience to Generalizations

S/P-23

Most discussion participants are comfortable in discussing things they have experienced. They are less experienced in drawing generalizations from these experiences. Often these generalizations are what are really needed in a project.

The facilitator can help the process of translating from experience to generalizations through the use of some of the following:

1. Guide the participants through the discussion of their experience by asking them questions that are likely to lead to generalizations. Simply having participants share experiences doesn't work very well. These experiences are more insightful when supported by the facilitator's questions.

2. Once experiences are shared, ask the question: "What does this experience tell us about ___?" When the facilitator helps the participants make a connection between a specific experience and a more general concept, the generalizations tend to be richer in meaning.

3. Ask the question: "What are the common connections between these experiences?" Once the common connections are developed, then see if you can get the participants to suggest generalizations. Connections can often be a useful first step in thinking about generalizations.

4. As the experiences are being shared, make a list of words or phrases. Ask the question: "Can you develop a generalization from what we have just heard using these words or phrases as the basis of the generalization?" The words or phrases should come from the experiences. Asking the question about these words or phrases may trigger some interesting thinking.

In general, the facilitator should follow every experience sharing with an attempt to develop generalizations. This helps make the experience useful for all participants.

Using Small Groups

S/P-24

There are times in a facilitation project when small groups can be very useful. In effect, the facilitator divides the larger group into smaller working groups and gives the groups a specific assignment. Often small groups consist of individuals who have different views on an issue or who have different personal/professional backgrounds. The small groups may work together in the session or between sessions.

Reasons why the facilitator may use small groups include:

- Need to work through a number of issues – Small groups, each with a different issue, can work multiple issues at once.
- Need to increase involvement of participants – Small groups can help participants become more involved.
- Need to work through tough issues – Small groups with different perspectives can help work out difficult issues.
- Need to change the pace of discussions – Small groups can be a useful change of pace in an extended facilitated session.
- Need to work through textual issues in the later stages of a project.

When small groups are used, the facilitator should visit with each of the small groups frequently. The facilitator should also be specific as to the expected work product, the time available, and any limits that might be imposed on the discussion. It may be desirable to ask one of the group members to serve as a facilitator and another member to serve as a scribe.

While small groups can be useful, there are also risks in using small groups. There is a very real risk that the group can get off target and not produce results that are useful. The facilitator can reduce this risk by visiting with the groups frequently. Should the small groups be used to do intersession work, the facilitator should join the groups for their discussions. There is also a risk that the small groups can get too far ahead of others in their understanding of an issue. As a result, the full group is likely to go along with what the small group says without a full discussion. Finally there is a very likely chance that the small groups will take longer to do their work than the facilitator expects. The facilitator should give the groups a time period to work in but plan on needing to extend this time period.

Small groups are an option, but they shouldn't be the norm. In a typical project, small groups would be used less than 20% of the time.

Managing the Speed of the Discussion

S/P-25

The speed of the discussion refers to how long specific topics are discussed before moving on to new topics. Discussions that go too fast leave the participants with the impression they are being rushed and that the facilitator is trying to have them reach convergence on an issue before it is fully discussed. Discussions that go too slow can become a real drag on the overall group and lead to dissatisfaction with the overall process.

The first principle in managing the speed of the discussion is: “Don’t have a fixed time that a discussion should last.” It’s very difficult to predetermine the discussion time. Working within a fixed time period can lead to discussions that are too rushed or are too slow.

The second principle in managing the speed of the discussion is: “Evaluate the responses of the participants.” If the responses continue to add insight or to show there is no convergence, then the discussion is not yet ready to conclude. If responses are simply restatements, then the discussion may have run its course. If the facilitator feels that the discussion has yet to get to meaningful issues, then the discussion topic should be revisited later with a different approach.

The third principle in managing the speed of the discussion is: “Keep a fast pace but be sure that comments are captured.” Participants are likely to grow impatient with discussions that are too drawn out. They want to have discussions where they can be fully engaged without the discussion wandering. They also want discussions to be useful. The facilitator has the duty to capture discussions on flipcharts and to help synthesize the comments into useful summaries.

The fourth principle in managing the speed of the discussion is: “Don’t let individual participants affect the speed of the discussion.” Participants can affect the speed of the discussion through their comments and their non-verbal signals. In some cases, participants can dominate the discussion either by their rambling comments or through excessive questions or challenges. When the facilitator begins to sense this pattern of behavior, he/she needs to have a private conversation with this participant. Participants can also affect the pace of the discussion through their non-verbal signals of impatience (e.g., looking at their watch, sighing). The facilitator should also talk with these participants privately and see why they are impatient. Often the impatience is more of a lack of tolerance for open discussion than it is a facilitation concern.

Over time, the facilitator will be able to quickly develop a sense of timing for a specific group of participants. Not all groups work at the same pace and the facilitator will need to match the facilitation to this specific pace.

Avoiding Competition in Groups

S/P-26

Whenever a group is put together, there is a natural tendency for there to be some competition among the participants. Most individuals work in environments where discussions are competitions for resources, prestige, or power. These competitive tendencies are hard to deal with in a facilitated discussion where the group needs to work together and where competition can be harmful.

The facilitator needs to be up front about competition. The facilitator needs to stress that the discussions need to be different from what the participants are used to. The following discussion practice can be helpful: "Think first of how I can support my colleague rather than thinking about what is in my best interest."

Reinforce the discussion practice by always asking first: "How can we support what was just said?" and later asking: "Are there alternative views or concerns?" Starting with supportive comments can tilt the discussion in a more collaborative direction.

Expertise can be a competitive tool that the participants use. The facilitator can diffuse this competition by asking the participants to think of issues from the perspective of the average person. The facilitator may ask participants to "express your expertise in words that everyone can understand." Reducing expertise to everyday terms can eliminate the aura of expertise.

Competition can also occur in small working groups. When working groups are used, there is a natural tendency to want to become the best group. This is not a bad situation as long as each group is supportive of other groups when the results of the working groups are presented to the full group.

Another source of competition is participants who choose to join together in a discussion bloc. This is a form of choosing sides. This competition can be avoided by a strong facilitator who focuses on the supportive aspects of possibilities. When the discussion explores possibilities, there is less opportunity for discussion blocs to arise.

The one common theme of all of these approaches to competition is to focus on supportive suggestions for possibilities rather than to dwell on why possibilities might not work.

Avoiding the Bounds of Language

S/P-27

Words can be limiting in expressing the true thinking of participants. Participants need to be comfortable in expressing their ideas without worrying about the specific words they use. Word meanings can impose bounds on a discussion when these meanings are bound to their traditional uses.

There are ways to limit the bounds of words.

1. When an idea is expressed, capture descriptive comments about the idea. The idea in essence becomes a descriptive collection of thoughts rather than a precise statement of the idea.

2. Replace definitions with descriptive phrases.

3. Use parentheses on words or phrases that may have non-traditional meanings. In essence, these parentheses allow the expression of ideas without being worried about traditional meanings.

4. Ask participants to focus on concepts and ideas without getting hung up on specific words that may be used to describe these ideas.

5. Postpone the concern for word precision until the final document is being prepared. Even at this stage, descriptions are more useful than precise definitions.

Facilitated discussions are venues for understanding. Words should never inhibit this understanding.

Avoiding Premature Judgment

S/P-28

Facilitated discussions are intended to think about new possibilities. These discussions are an inherently creative process. As such, the facilitator needs to understand some of the fundamental keys to creative thinking. One of these keys is to separate the process of creating possibilities from the act of evaluative judgment of these possibilities.

The facilitator needs to guide the participants through a process that begins with identifying and developing possibilities. This is the creative phase in the process. Judgment needs to be delayed until the possibilities are fully developed. Allowing time between creation and judgment by time is critical.

All too often when creation and judgment are closely linked in time, the process of creation becomes one of responding to judgmental statements. Often these judgments have an excessive focus on current reality, and as a result the process of creating possibilities is reduced to one of problem solving.

There are several approaches that can be used to avoid premature judgment.

1. Separate creation sessions from judgment sessions. This requires strong leadership on the part of the facilitator to keep evaluative comments from coming into the discussion during the creation phase.

2. When judgment sessions are conducted, use these as developmental sessions with respect to the possibilities. Use judgment to enhance possibilities rather than to reject them.

3. Focus the judgment on the future, not on current reality. Ask how the possibility might address issues that are likely to emerge.

The thrust of these thoughts is that judgment should be deferred until possibilities are fully developed. When judgment does occur, it should be developmental in tone.

Using Reservoirs of Experience and Belief

S/P-29

Everyone has a collection of experiences and beliefs. Our mind tends to maintain a reservoir of experience and belief to be used when needed. As is the case with any reservoir, these experiences and beliefs can be applied to new situations. The challenge is how to put this reservoir to productive use during discussions.

In some cases, experiences and beliefs can limit the exploration of ideas. Experiences and beliefs can shut down conceptual thinking when experiences associate new ideas with past undesirable experiences, or when beliefs cannot be adjusted to consider new possibilities.

The best way to handle these limitations is to acknowledge and then move beyond them. When the facilitator separates exploration of ideas from evaluation, experiences and beliefs are put on hold until an idea is more fully developed. During the evaluation phase, the facilitator may need to challenge the relevance of experience or the rigidity of beliefs when these seem to be limiting a more open discussion of an issue.

In other cases, experiences and beliefs can be used to enhance a discussion. The best way to do this is to ask the participants to share their experiences and beliefs about a subject that is very different from the one under discussion. These experiences and beliefs are captured as key points. Then these key points are used in an exploration of the primary topic under discussion. Often there are parallels in these experiences and beliefs that can be used to think conceptually. When these parallels are effective, they also raise the comfort level with the new possibility since they make use of already held experiences and beliefs.

Individuals

This section focuses on the participants in a discussion. The central theme is the careful selection of participants.

Selecting the Project Group

I-1

All facilitation events require a group of people who will meet over a period of time. The selection of this group can be a critical factor in the ultimate success of a project. The selection of the group involves several key issues.

<u>Size of the Group</u> – There is a temptation in every facilitation project to make the project group larger than is effective. One reason for this is the desire to have diverse representation. (See discussion on representational balance below.) The practical range for effective discussion is 5-12 persons.

<u>Representational Balance</u> – It is generally impossible to achieve practical representational balance in any project. By the time the facilitator attempts to balance experience, gender, race, age, functional knowledge, etc., the size of the group is far larger than can be effective. Rather than representational balance, the facilitator needs to select persons who are willing to put aside their representational perspective and approach issues from all perspectives. In a democracy, each citizen has his own vote and can be considered "sui generis."

<u>Type of Individual</u> – Successful participants in facilitated discussions tend to share some common traits.

- Open Minded – They are willing to explore issues and develop concepts without premature assessment.
- Supportive – They have a genuine interest in making the effort a success including helping and respecting others in the group.
- Willing to Express Their Thoughts – They are comfortable with expressing themselves. This does not mean that they have to be completely articulate.
- Creative – They are comfortable in an environment where challenging ideas are presented and developed.
- Flexible – They don't need a lot of structure. They can adapt to new approaches.
- Concept Focused – They can think at the concept level and don't get distracted prematurely by rigidities of language or details.
- Disciplined – They have a personal discipline that manifests itself in attendance, follow through on assignments, and support for the structure of the discussion.

Complementary Membership – The group is much more than a collection of individuals. They should also complement each other. For example, an entire group of highly creative people may not be as effective as a group of creative people mixed with others who are strong at building on the ideas of others.

Commitment – An unfortunate reality is that people with the qualities described above are not easy to find. As a result, they tend to be recruited for a number of projects. People who would make great participants may be overcommitted. The facilitator needs to be very explicit about the time requirements when recruiting a panelist.

Losing a Discussion Participant

I-2

Any facilitation effort that extends beyond a few months in length is likely to lose a participant. The most common reasons for this are:

- The participant loses interest in the project.
- The participant cannot fulfill the time commitments of the project.
- The participant must relocate and continued participation is unfeasible.
- The participant needs to be asked to discontinue participation.

The questions that the facilitator and the group need to address when a participant leaves are whether to replace the participant and how to do so if so decided. One of the critical variables in making these decisions is timing. In the early stages of a project, a replacement is likely to be much simpler and effective. Toward the end of the project, replacing a participant may be less appropriate. Replacing a participant in the middle of a project is a more difficult decision.

There is no set rule for replacement. There are however a number of questions that can guide this discussion.

1. Does the leaving participant have a unique perspective that needs to be available to the group in its discussion?
2. Is it likely that a new participant can be found with the appropriate perspective and willingness to put in the effort to get caught up?
3. How difficult would it be for a new participant to get caught up and be able to make a contribution?
4. What effect might a new participant have on the "chemistry" of the group?
5. Is a new participant likely to cause a delay in progress either through slowing down the discussion or wanting to revisit past discussion?

The facilitator should consult with the group on whether a new participant is desired, but the final decision should be the facilitator's.

Should a decision be made to replace a participant, the new participant needs to be carefully assimilated into the group. The facilitator will need to brief the new participant on all past discussions. The new participant also needs to review the meeting documents. The facilitator needs to introduce the new participant to the other participants and be attentive to possible impacts on group chemistry. Travel, meals, and other less formal group time need to be used carefully to allow the new participant to develop a rapport with other participants.

The facilitator should avoid slowing down the discussions for the new participant. This includes backtracking on previous discussions. Any background on a specific discussion topic should be provided by the facilitator prior to the discussion, not during the discussion.

Replacing a participant is time consuming and potentially critical to the success of the project. Replacement decisions and execution will require considerable thought and support from the facilitator.

Maintaining Diverse Perspectives

I-3

Diverse perspectives are critical in any facilitated discussion. Such diversity leads to a fuller exploration of issues. A natural tendency for a group is to begin to think alike as the discussions unfold. Participants develop a communal bond and by doing so are likely to lose some of the unique perspectives that they had when they were selected for the group.

The facilitator needs to maintain these diverse perspectives as the project unfolds. While group bonding is desirable, it shouldn't be at the expense of the diverse points of view needed for the discussion. At the same time, the facilitator should be encouraged by convergence of thinking as long as such convergence is genuine and not the result of social conformity.

The most important overall step in maintaining perspectives is to be conscious of when the group is losing its different voices and to take actions to ensure that these voices remain strong even when convergence is sought.

There are several approaches that might be taken to maintain diverse perspectives.

1. Frame the discussion questions to specifically seek different perspectives. Compare the following discussion questions.

   a.) What are the likely economic consequences of this possibility?

   b.) How might this possibility economically impact different socio-economic groups?

2. Use role playing in some part of the discussion to highlight specific perspectives. In this case, each participant would be asked to take on the role of a differently situated person to bring out perspectives that might otherwise not be present.

3. Once convergence is reached on a specific discussion topic, ask the question "What are the likely different points of view on what we just discussed? Do we need to incorporate these points of view into our possibilities?"

Overcoming Perceived Authority in the Group

I-4

Many facilitation projects have a perceived authority structure. When the participants are in the same organization, the authority structure may be real in that individuals may come from different levels of the organization. In cases where the project involves persons from different organizations, the perceived authority may be associated with a person's credentials, experience, and other factors.

The best way to deal with perceived authority is to address it directly with the group at the start of the project. This can be done by establishing a discussion process practice in which all participants' points of view are valued. The facilitator may also want to discuss the authority situation with those individuals who have perceived authority. In some cases, the participants who have the perceived authority may want to speak up about their role in the discussion.

Once the discussions are underway, the facilitator can help alleviate the perceived authority by:

- Calling on other participants prior to calling on the person with the perceived authority.
- Coaching the person with the perceived authority in the framing of comments in order to reduce the impact of these comments.
- Asking probing questions when participants seem to be reluctant to bring up points that may disturb the person with the perceived authority.
- Pairing up the person with the perceived authority with others of lesser authority.

Typically concerns on authority tend to go away as the discussions unfold if the facilitator manages the discussions properly.

Minimizing Representational Challenges

I-5

One of the challenges in starting a facilitation project is to determine perspectives that need to be represented in the participants selected for the project. This is a challenge that can never be fully met. It is virtually impossible to select a participant group that is wholly representative of some population. When representational balance is sought, the group often ends up being too large to be effective.

A better approach to representation is to encourage the participants to put aside their representational interests and to approach the discussion with an open mind. The key to being successful in minimizing representational limitations is to select participants who can approach each topic openly and "imaginatively" represent groups not actually present.

The facilitator can also help minimize representational challenges once discussions begin by specifically asking participants how people with different experiences or perspectives might approach a specific issue. The facilitator can also discourage comments which seem to be unduly restricted to the perspective of particular groups.

Identifying Characteristics of Successful Participants

I-6

The quality of a facilitation project ultimately depends upon the participants selected. In conventional discussions, participants are selected based upon some representational criteria. This is the wrong approach for selecting participants. Rather than look at representational criteria, the facilitator should look at another set of characteristics, as described below.

1. Has an open mind – This is perhaps the most important criteria. A participant will not be effective unless the person can approach discussion topics based on the issues, not on predetermined positions.

2. Is willing to contribute – Participants may have great ideas, but these are of limited value unless the participant is willing to share these ideas during the discussion.

3. Is supportive of the approach – Some individuals have great minds but they don't work well in group discussions. In many cases, these participants are highly competitive and view discussions as a competition of ideas.

4. Will devote time to the discussion – Facilitation projects are often "extra duty". The projects do take time, and participants need to be willing to spend the time needed for a project. Ironically the busiest people are often good participants because they can manage their time and have shown they can contribute in other similar contexts.

5. Is thoughtful – Participants who can think conceptually about issues are better participants than those who are good problem solvers. Problem solvers tend to develop good ideas for current reality, but they are less successful in thinking more broadly about the more systematic issues.

There are many other characteristics that could be listed, but the above set of characteristics is the most important. People with these characteristics do not represent any one point of view but they are very good at exploring issues from a number of perspectives.

Understanding Informal Roles Taken On By Participants

I-7

Participants often take on informal roles during a project. These roles are never predetermined, nor are they identified as such. These are roles that participants assume on their own. Often a person will take on the same role from one project to another.

Typical informal roles that participants take on include:

- Innovator – This participant is often the person who suggests new ideas that get the other participants thinking about new concepts.
- Builder – This participant supports the ideas of the innovator by helping flesh out the ideas.
- Synthesizer – This participant helps bring together the many thoughts of the participants into a coherent package.
- Analyzer – This participant helps the group think through important distinctions or the pros and cons of different possibilities.
- Provocateur – This participant challenges the other participants as a devil's advocate.
- Implementer – This participant excels at thinking about how concepts might be put into practical use.

Each of these informal roles is critical to a project. The project also needs the unique contributions of each of these roles. All too often, a project group consists of several participants who may take on a few of the roles (especially builders, analyzers, and implementers) and not enough participants who take on other roles (innovators and provocateurs).

A facilitator may try to anticipate the roles the participants might take on when making selections of participants.

Seeking Out and Developing Thinking Groups

I-8

Most people have jobs where they are asked to give their opinions on issues. When these persons are chosen to participate on facilitation projects, they are strong at offering opinions on discussion issues. They are not as good at thinking conceptually about issues.

The challenge that a facilitator has is whether to seek out participants who are strong at thinking about conceptual issues or to try to encourage conceptual thinking during the discussion sessions. Experience suggests that seeking out conceptual thinking persons will be difficult to do.

How can you identify conceptual thinkers? There are few common characteristics of conceptual thinkers. Nor are there job titles or organizational positions that are common to this group of people. Perhaps the best approach to identifying conceptual thinkers is through an interview. People who are strong at conceptual thinking tend to be expansive about ideas they have. They can point to specific situations where they gained new insights. They can talk about their creative thinking process and how ideas come to them. Not many people will naturally discuss their insights, ideas, and creative thought processes. Although conceptual thinkers are rare, it is fairly obvious who they are during an interview.

It's more likely that a facilitator will end up with people who are more accustomed to giving opinions than conceptual thinking. The challenge will thus more often be to develop the conceptual thinking abilities of the group. Here are some suggestions for doing this:

1. Describe up front the need for conceptual thinking. Ask participants to hold off on opinion based comments until ideas are fully developed.
2. Set aside separate times in the discussion for idea development and opinion. This helps underline the need to think conceptually.
3. Spend a few minutes on the creative process at each session to show the participants how others think conceptually.
4. Help the conceptual development process by asking specific questions that might trigger deeper development of concepts.

While the facilitation project won't change individuals' disposition to engage in conceptual thinking, facilitators can encourage conceptual thinking from the group as a whole.

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Work Products

This section focuses on the final product of the facilitation as well as the intermediate work products. The primary focus of these topics is how to make these descriptions useful for readers.

Developing Work Session Summaries

W-1

One of the most valuable contributions that a facilitator can make is producing work session summaries. These summaries are not a transcript (or minutes) of the discussion. Rather they are a synthesis of what was discussed in an organized and structured format. These summaries often bring clarity to what may have seemed to be a rambling or incoherent discussion.

The work session summaries are the product of the facilitator, based upon the discussion notes. The summaries may provide new insights, in that they organize the participants' comments in new ways. The summaries may reveal discussion themes that were latent but very insightful when brought forward.

The actual process of developing the work session summaries is a creative process that is hard to describe. Experienced facilitators comment that they often develop the summaries by reflecting on:

- What was implicit in what was being said but not fully stated?
- What was not said that might have been expected?
- What central ideas ran through the discussion?

The work session summaries often take the form of groupings of ideas or concepts, with specific reference to comments that were made that contributed to these ideas/concepts. Descriptive or visual images are also very effective in providing a way of looking at the discussion.

In all cases, the facilitator should share the work session summaries with the participants and get their concurrence that the summaries accurately reflect the intent of the discussion. Often these summaries will help the participants understand the true impact of their ideas.

The facilitator may also want to pose further questions or comments to the participants as a part of the summaries. These questions/comments can help stimulate thinking about the topic or point out topics that need further exploration.

Keeping a Record of the Discussion

W-2

There needs to be a record of the discussion. In most cases, there should be two types of records kept.

The facilitator will maintain a visible record of the discussion on a flipchart, whiteboard, or other medium. These records are short highlights of the main points being discussed. These notes are kept visible to the participants throughout the discussion session.

These visible notes of the discussion serve several purposes:

1. They give participants an assurance that their comments were heard.
2. They provide the participants a visual reminder of what was said.
3. They provide a basis for developing a synthesis of the discussion later.
4. The process of writing the notes helps maintain a discussion flow. The process of writing the notes helps slow down the discussion and allows the participants time to absorb what was said.
5. They provide the facilitator with handles from which to develop the work products of the discussion.

The second record of the discussion is a more detailed summary of comments made. This record is maintained by a note taker. These notes are not a verbatim transcript, but they do contain summaries of comments made by each participant during the discussion. The participant's initials are identified with the comments, but the notes are confidential and for the facilitator's use only.

These discussion notes serve several purposes:

1. They allow the facilitator to recapture the sense of the discussion as the work session products are being developed.
2. They allow the facilitator to review the contributions of the various participants to assess where there is agreement and disagreement.
3. They allow the facilitator to look at the level of participation of each person.

These meeting notes are normally kept by a person and not by electronic technology. Electronic records of the discussion often have a dampening effect on the discussion.

Legacy Documentation

W-3

Facilitated projects tend to generate a number of documents. These can be work products, correspondence among participants, meeting documents, etc. Unless there is some system in place, these documents can get lost or misplaced. Often the documents that were developed during the course of a project become critical as the project concludes and a final work product is developed. These documents are also useful in recapitulations of the project. The facilitator is typically the person who maintains the legacy system.

One way to create a legacy document system is to number each document by date and the number of the document on that date. For example, the first document issued on 1/27/05 would be labeled 12705-01, the second document 12705-2, etc. These documents should be placed in a binder by legacy number. It is also helpful to have an index that can be used to find documents quickly. The index would look something like this:

Index No.	Brief Description of Document	Comments

The comments column can be used to record notes related to such topics as confidentiality, distribution, etc.

While the legacy documentation system takes some time to maintain, it often saves time in the course of the project.

Preparing and Editing Reports

W-4

One of the functions of the facilitator is to develop the group's final report. While the preparation of the report is the responsibility of the facilitator, the participants will also be involved in the preparation of the report.

The facilitator prepares the final report based upon the work of the group. While the facilitator writes the report, he/she does not put anything into the report that the participants have not discussed and agreed to. The facilitator however will have a major responsibility in organizing the report. The organization and the presentation of an extensive series of discussions may be one of the facilitator's most significant contributions to the project.

Once a draft of the report is prepared, the group should have a role in reviewing the report and suggesting changes. The editing task needs to be carefully facilitated. The facilitator should first ask the participants whether they have major issues with the written content. These issues are discussed with the participants to ensure that the nature of the changes is clear.

Next the facilitator should ask the participants to suggest minor editing changes they would suggest on the document itself. These changes are not discussed in the group meeting. Rather the facilitator takes these suggestions and incorporates them into a new draft of the report.

There may need to be follow up sessions on the report to ensure that the report is what the participants want it to be. Should there be a disagreement on an element of the report, the facilitator may ask participants who are on opposite sides of the issue to work together to come to agreement on the wording.

In most cases, sections of the report are prepared as the discussions progress. Thus, the final report is something with which the participants have been involved throughout the project.

Intersession Work

W-5

Intersession work can be specific to a particular issue. In other cases, the facilitator may ask the participants to do some intersession work as a regular part of the project. Such intersession work will include reading and review of work products, thinking about an upcoming issue, or related project activities. This intersession work does not require any special facilitator involvement.

At times during the project, the facilitator will want the participants to produce work in between the sessions. The decision to assign intersession work is influenced by

- The need to do work in preparation for a future session
- The need to work out difficult issues between two or more participants
- The need to work on aspects of the project that are more appropriately done in small groups

Typically the facilitator will ask a small number (2-3) of the participants to work together. Often these participant pairings are based upon who has the most to contribute to the intersession assignment. In many cases, these participants offer contrasting sides of an issue to ensure that the work products are balanced.

The facilitator will need to work with the participants as they do their intersession work. The facilitator will support the participants and in many cases will produce the work products to be shared with the rest of the participants.

Once the intersession work is complete, the facilitator will need to decide whether to provide the other participants with copies of this work in advance of the next meeting. If the material is likely to be confusing, the facilitator many want to hold the material until the next session. Otherwise the facilitator will probably want to share the material in advance with the participants.

Assessments

The topics in this section examine how the facilitator can assess the progress made in a discussion. The theme of these topics is how to build improvement into the discussion process.

Assessing Usefulness of the Possibilities

A-1

As the group begins to reflect on the possibilities that are being developed, there will be a need to evaluate the possibilities. This evaluation requires some guidance from the facilitator. Outlined below are some specific points to consider when assessing the usefulness of possibilities.

1. Avoid using analytical evaluation systems such as ranking or subjective scoring. Such systems can often lead to evaluations that favor the "middle-of-the-road" possibilities when some of the other possibilities may offer valuable contributions to later public discussion.

2. Avoid either/or evaluations in which the usefulness of one possibility is compared to the usefulness of another. Such comparisons are not helpful. The value of the group's work will ultimately be the development of thoughtful alternatives. Either/or comparisons have the real potential of discarding one of these possibilities which might not seem as strong as another but still makes valuable contributions to later public discussion.

Rather than using these analytical evaluation approaches, assessment works best when the possibilities are assessed by asking more exploratory questions.

1. What contributions does this possibility make to the overall discussion topic?

2. How might this possibility be strengthened?

3. Could this possibility be combined with or otherwise complement another possibility?

4. How could this possibility be used as a counterpoint to another possibility so as to describe useful contrasts?

The assessment of usefulness is less of a "weeding out" process and more of a developmental process.

Evaluating the Discussion

A-2

Facilitators may want to engage the participants in a self-evaluation of the discussion. Typically this would be done at the end of each facilitated event. The simplest approach to doing this evaluation is called the Plus (+)/Delta (Δ) assessment. Plus (+) in this case stands for things the participants liked about the discussion and want to do more of in subsequent discussions. Delta (Δ) stands for things the participants would like to improve for the next discussion.

Here's how the Plus/Delta assessment is done.

1. Develop a specific focus area for the assessment (e.g. the discussion level, the support for each other's ideas, new insights).

2. Ask the participants to write down their pluses and deltas for the focus area (e.g. we developed two new ideas tonight (+), or we didn't develop Linda's idea as fully as we could have (Δ).)

3. Ask each participant in turn to give you a plus or delta. Generally the facilitator will want to seek one plus and then one delta to balance the assessment. This process will continue until all pluses and deltas have been listed.

4. Once the participants' lists are exhausted, recap what was said.

5. Prior to the next discussion, produce the complete list of pluses and deltas on a sheet of paper to be used as a reminder.

The total time for the assessment is about 15 minutes. This can be a very productive use of time that can lead to continuous improvement of the discussions.

Reflecting on the Discussion Experience

A-3

After the participants have been together for some time, the facilitator may want to set aside one half hour to reflect on the discussion experience itself. This is an opportunity for the participants to develop a larger perspective on what they are doing. It is also an opportunity for airing issues that may be present but unstated.

The reflection typically begins by asking the participants to respond with written notes to a couple of reflective statements. Statements that are useful starting points include:

1. The most useful thing that we have done to date is…
2. This discussion effort has helped me to learn that…
3. My most pleasant surprise has been…
4. I wish that we could be better at…

After the participants have made written notes, the facilitator should ask individual participants to share their reflections. When one reflection is presented, the facilitator then asks whether others have something to add to the reflection. This process continues until all participants have an opportunity to share their reflections.

When the reflections are shared, the facilitator should provide some synthesis of the reflections and use these reflections as a vehicle for looking ahead to what is coming. This is also an opportunity to thank the participants for their efforts.