



# Facilitation of Meetings

Good facilitation can go a long way towards making meetings successful. In fact the very word, “facilitation” means “to make easy (or easier).”

Facilitators have a key role to play in meetings, with a lot of responsibility but not much actual power. A facilitator is analogous to the chair in Robert’s Rules of Order, but with some differences. The facilitator’s role is to guide the group through an effective process, but not to unduly influence what decisions get made. If a facilitator feels strongly about the issue at hand, he or she may need to ask someone else to take over.

## **Keeping on Track**

As the facilitator, you should keep an eye on the big picture. Remind the group of the goal of the current item: Is this a brainstorming session, or does a final decision need to be reached at the meeting? Does the proposal need to be sent to a committee for further research before a decision can be made? Stay aware of the topic at hand, and if the group goes off on a tangent, gently refocus the discussion.

Restate points of agreement or disagreement. By saying something like “I’m hearing that a lot of people think the new schedule is fine – does anyone have concerns with that?”, a facilitator can let people know they’ve been heard keep the same point from being repeated. The same approach can be taken with concerns. Make a list of concerns that have been raised and ask the group to think of ways they could be addressed.

Pay attention to the group’s energy level and mood. Don’t forget to schedule breaks for longer meetings. Sometimes a quick energy break – having everyone stand up for two minutes, or make noise all the same time – can help the group refocus. If a discussion becomes too emotional, it is sometimes best to table the issue until the next meeting.

## **Keeping On Time**

Be sure to keep track of the time. If you think that a discussion is moving too slowly to finish in the allotted time, let the group know, and try to guide the discussion. This may be done by offering a summary of where the group seems to be in agreement and where there seems to be disagreement.

If you do run out of time for an item, it is your responsibility to address that. It is possible that someone (perhaps you) will request more time. You can then propose an extension, which should include which other agenda item will have its time be shortened. To do this well, you should have a feel for the whole agenda – know what items could afford to lose a few minutes, if necessary.

Try to avoid having meetings run overtime. This will occasionally be necessary, but if your group consistently meets for longer than is scheduled, you should explore why this happens and make changes. Often this points to a need to delegate some decisions, which is discussed in detail in detail in a related document, Cooperative Starter Series #5, "Committee Charters."

### **Some Techniques to Focus the Discussion**

Sometimes you may find it helpful to mix things up a bit, and get out of the same circle of people in a circular discussion. In such cases you may wish to try the following techniques.

- **Small Groups:** Everyone breaks up into groups of 3-6 for a while, then reports back to the whole about what they discussed. This can encourage participation by those who are less inclined to speak in large groups, but is time consuming and can result in loss of focus.
- **Fishbowl:** A small group, chosen at random or by other methods, sits in the center and discusses the issue. This can allow people outside the fishbowl to relax and listen better, because they are not busy formulating what they want to say in response.
- **Aggregate Rating:** This is a form of straw polling. When trying to reach consensus on several options, each person rates the options, and the ratings are then added up. Whichever gets the best aggregate rating is the first option considered as the discussion continues. If no consensus can be reached, move on to the next best option.
- **Ad-hoc Representation:** If no consensus is possible, the conversation can be delegated to a small group that represents the various positions or perspectives expressed in the discussion so far. This group generally won't be empowered to decide; rather, they will do research and further discuss the issue until they reach agreement. They will then bring a recommendation back to the whole group. In some cases this may not be possible within the current meeting, and you will have to table the discussion until next time.