

# FACILITATION RESOURCES

ASK **BIG**  
QUESTIONS

## WHAT DOES A FACILITATOR DO (AND NOT DO)?

Most conversations we have on a regular basis don't involve a facilitator. Usually they are private conversations, just with family or friends. Sometimes they are semi-public conversations, led by a teacher in a class or an employer at our job. Occasionally, they are public conversations. These are often led by a moderator, who is typically considered an expert on the subject at hand.

A facilitator is not an expert on the subject nor are they a teacher. They are there to help as many participants as possible feel welcome, included, and engaged in the discussion. How do they make that happen? Facilitators use a *structure* (in this case our Ask Big Questions Conversation Guides) to create a transparent flow to the conversation that all participants can be aware of, and then they infuse it with their own *style*.

Your style will grow and shift as you find your feet as a facilitator; it is a reflection of your unique personality, strengths and abilities. Are you comfortable talking in front of a crowd? Do you always know the perfect joke to put the whole room at ease? That's a great way to facilitate. Are you a little more quiet and an excellent, deep listener? That's also a great way to facilitate. Who you are as a facilitator will reflect who you are as a person.

### **Read, Respond, Reflect: The Three Core Actions of Facilitation\***

There's no one way to facilitate a conversation, but there are a few core moves, or actions, that all facilitators hold as they do their work. These core moves are: reading, responding, and reflecting.

#### *Reading (What's going on in this conversation and with this group?)*

Just as a quarterback on a football field or a conductor in an orchestra must "read" what's happening on the field or stage, a facilitator needs to be in tune with what's happening in their group. This helps the facilitator to make decisions about what to do next (which sometimes is to do nothing at all!). Reading a room requires the facilitator to focus on listening to and observing what the group is communicating both verbally and nonverbally. Often this means the facilitator talks less than they might as a participant.

#### *Responding (or not!)*

Reading a room primes a facilitator to respond to both problems and opportunities. Facilitators are constantly making decisions during a conversation, including the decision not to do anything. Facilitators must strike a balance between intervening so that the group stays on track, doesn't spend too much time in one section of the conversation, and isn't dominated by a select few, and letting a conversation have a natural flow so that participants don't feel overly managed by the facilitator. Just being aware of striking this balance can help a facilitator when weighing whether or not to jump in.

#### *Reflecting (What did you learn?)*

Facilitation takes practice. People become better facilitators by having multiple opportunities to lead and adjusting based on what they learn. After each conversation, good facilitators reflect (sometimes with their group or their campus advisor) on what went well and what they could improve next time. Remember to trust your group, and then don't be afraid to try new styles and approaches, or name what's happening to the room (e.g. "Last week we ran way over, so this week I am going to try a new strategy to help manage our time").

## **A Quick Word on What Facilitation *Isn't***

While there are countless styles of facilitating, it's worth mentioning what the job is *not*. Facilitating is not about imparting a specific idea or lesson to the group. Facilitating is also not about avoiding conflict; it's about creating the kind of place where people who disagree can talk to each other productively—in a way that helps them appreciate and learn from each other, rather than disengaging or getting into a fight. Finally, facilitating is not therapy. As facilitators, we don't have the necessary training to help others in this way. We can support them in seeking the help they need, but it's actually our job to make sure the focus isn't on just one person's story. We want each person to feel comfortable contributing their unique experience and viewpoint.

*\*This framework for facilitating is based from the concept of the facilitators' "thinking dispositions" as described in book The Facilitator's Book of Questions (Allen, Blythe, Teachers College Press, 2004), which we at Ask Big Questions love and highly recommend*

## **MINDSETS FOR FACILITATORS**

Leading a conversation can be a nerve-wracking experience. As facilitators, we put ourselves in charge of the group's experience and so we are invested not only in the quality of the conversation but in each participant's feeling of inclusion. We would like for every person in the conversation to feel that their thoughts, ideas, and identity are valued.

There's a lot we can do to help each participant feel welcome and to help the conversation be rich, engaging, and structured. What we can't do is avoid all disagreements and conflict—after all, when humans interact and communicate, there are always going to be differences of opinion and there may sometimes be tensions and flared tempers.

As facilitators, our aim is to steer sources of tension and disagreement so that they lead to powerful moments of connection and conversation—even if they are difficult or tense—in which participants feel supported and welcome, and talk and listen across their lines of difference. In this section we'll share some key mindsets to approaching conflict and then some common problems and techniques for deploying them.

### **Mindset #1: Disagreement is not a bad thing.**

While it's tempting to hope for a conversation that doesn't have any disagreement—those conversations can be the least impactful—without room for growth and change and, frankly, sometimes boring to those participating. That's not to say that the goal of a conversation is disagreement, but it's important to remember that when participants disagree with each other in a respectful and engaged way, that indicates that people are invested in the conversation. Sometimes broad agreement in a group isn't about everyone actually agreeing but about a lack of dissent—that people don't feel comfortable speaking up with an opinion or are disengaging from the conversation.

### **Mindset #2: When in doubt, name the moment (but not the person).**

This is one of the most important rules of facilitation: When you are leading a conversation and things feel wonky or tense, name it to the group ("It feels like we are uncovering places where our group disagrees with one another. Can we think about how we can best listen to one another's experiences even if they are different from

our own?”). Naming what is happening in the room—rather than sidestepping it and hoping it dissolves naturally—is key to helping everyone recognize the dynamics of the conversation, which they may not be fully aware of, especially if the tension is not overt. It also surfaces the conflict so that it can be processed and directed in a way that makes all parties feel heard and respected even if it can’t be fully resolved. By naming the moment (“It seems like there a number of side conversations happening right now. Let’s bring everyone back into the group so that we can all hear each other’s opinions, even if they are in conflict with some of what has already been said”) the conversation can deepen and grow, rather than become splintered or fractured.

But remember, the trick is to name the moment that is happening, not the person who might be at the center of the moment for better or worse. (You don’t want to say, “I feel like Antonio is really dominating the conversation,” or “I am noticing that Emma is attacking Josh for using sexist language,” or even statements that might seem positive like, “Can we all try to make ‘I’ statements like Crystal is doing?”) Naming people instead of behaviors puts people on the defensive, which makes it harder for them to recognize and correct their behavior.

### **Mindset #3: Trust the group, trust the process, trust the object**

As facilitators, we fundamentally believe that people can learn the most from one another, and that groups of people can have powerful conversations that can change the world. This means that we have to trust that the group—any group!—will have fulfilling conversations and not over-manage them. We also have to trust that the structure we’re using is a good one and that sticking to it will help us have richer, deeper conversations. And finally, we have to trust that the interpretive object chosen for the conversation guide will be a catalyst for thoughtful conversation. We need to trust these things not because the goal is to mindlessly follow a particular program, but because having trust in others and in the materials we are using means that we can let go of some of our worry and not feel responsible for every second of a conversation. It also lets us sit comfortably in silence without panicking, and trust that the group is thinking.

## **TROUBLESHOOTING**

### **What do I do if someone is dominating the conversation?**

In this scenario, someone, or perhaps a few people, are dominating the conversation. It’s not so much that what they are saying is problematic as how often they are talking. By jumping in with comments at every turn, quieter participants aren’t joining in the conversation.

What to do?

- *Create a speaking order and stick to it.* If multiple people raise their hands, create a short speaking order (“From left to right, let’s hear from Jordan, Malik, and Sarah”). The important part is to stick to it even if someone tries to jump in to respond.
- *Invite others to speak.* Saying, “I’d love to invite anyone who hasn’t had a chance to speak yet to share your thoughts,” is a neutral way of inviting in more voices without putting the focus on any individual participant.
- *Ask the person to hold off.* Often participants who dominate conversations are aware that they talk a lot. Sometimes saying, “I’d love to hear your comment but first I want to make sure anyone who hasn’t had a chance to speak yet gets a chance,” can be an easy way to open up the conversation and gently remind the person to allow others to speak.

### **What if there's resistance to the activity?**

Sometimes participants can be resistant to a particular section of a structured conversation. Or sometimes simply the *idea* that others may not go along with the structure of the conversation guide is enough to make a facilitator nervous. An important thing to remember is that resistance is often about other people's fears of being vulnerable in front of a group or looking stupid. (That can be true for you too.)

What to do?

- *Explain the purpose.* The structure isn't arbitrary, rather it's designed to build a space where many different kinds of thinkers and talkers can participate.
- *Don't panic.* Resistance never fully goes away. It's important to know that if it springs up (in you or in the group) it's not a sign that you are doing something wrong; rather, it is a sign that something—the setting, the material, the activity—is making people react. This can be a great and powerful thing.
- *Stay strong.* Many times a resistant person will back down if you calmly and clearly ask them to try.

### **What do I do if someone is offensive?**

It can be tricky if a participant is speaking in a way that is offensive or is clearly offending others in the group. As a facilitator, it's important that you don't ignore the moment. The goal is to address the participant's behavior or speech in a way that allows him or her to grow from the experience and to adjust without feeling shamed.

What to do:

- *Correct offensive language.* Speak up if someone is using an inappropriate or pejorative term. It's important that others in the room see that it won't go unnoticed. You can ask for them to restate what they are saying in a more appropriate way.
- *Refer to the agreements set at the start of the conversation.* This can help point to the kind of behavior you expect without singling out a specific person.
- *Speak from individual experience.* If participants are extrapolating about groups of people, ask them to speak from their first-person experience in a specific, story-based way.
- *Ask for help.* It's hard to cover all the ways you should address offensive behavior in a short document like this. Bring the problem up with your campus advisor or other campus resources. If the conversation goes badly one week, be open about trying something new the next week. By being committed to creating intentional spaces for conversation and working through problems, we can model to others how to do this in their own lives and in other communities.

### **What if I feel strongly about the subject?**

Sometimes the hardest conversations to facilitate are the ones dealing with topics that we are most passionate about. The key is to remember the role of the facilitator in the conversation and create the space for others to benefit from thinking, talking and listening together.

What to do:

- *Resist being the expert.* Big Questions are intentionally designed so that everyone can have an opinion about them, without extensive background knowledge.
- *Ask yourself if you are contributing to the content or the process.* As a facilitator, your responsibility is to the process. Check in with yourself about how the comment will help shape the full group's experience.

### **What do I do if I start to run out of time?**

What to do:

- *Pay attention to the clock!* It's better to have a wristwatch or stopwatch than a cell phone (so you won't get distracted by texts or notifications), but check in during the conversation to make sure you are staying on track.
- *Practice "time-telling" with the group.* It's perfectly appropriate to let the group know how much time is left ("We have 3-4 minutes left for this section of the conversation) so that they can understand where they are in the conversation.
- *Segue when possible.* Seize the opportunity when a comment is made that leads perfectly to the next portion of the conversation. When that doesn't happen naturally, just name the transition and move the group forward.

### **How do I get better at facilitating?**

Most facilitators get better simply by getting a lot of practice. Getting yourself into (and out of) tricky moments in group conversations is what helps build your skillset and your confidence.

What to do:

- *Identify your strengths and weaknesses.* Take some time to think about what you excel at and where you could use some extra practice. Think about how you behave in formal and informal conversations, both individual and group.
- *Reflect.* Take a few minutes after a conversation to think about what went well and what was rocky (or felt rocky to you, even if the group didn't seem to notice). Try to be specific about the moment and about your role in it.
- *Get feedback (but not from everyone).* Unstructured feedback isn't the most helpful so avoid asking the full participant group about how you are doing. But feedback from a few people (or from a campus advisor) can help illuminate what you are doing well and where you might want to try new strategies. Good feedback is descriptive rather than evaluative, specific, and focused on what you can try next time.
- *Experiment.* Try new things. Watch other facilitators in action and copy the things they do that you like best. If it doesn't go perfectly that's more than fine, but you become a better facilitator by having the courage to experiment and explore.