

What makes a good facilitator?

Create an inclusive environment

Participation from all group members is essential for a well-facilitated meeting. One of the most important things you can do as a facilitator is to create an atmosphere that encourages participation. Ensure that the room's setting supports active contribution from people, if running a face-to-face session. Make sure everyone can see each other and remove barriers from the room. Group facilitation is hard if the group can't hear one another! On Zoom create a personal connection by welcoming people by name. Recognise everyone's contribution and if two people want to speak at once, ensure the person who has said the least has the chance to speak first. Refer to individuals throughout and if you are summarising their comments or making links to the next question.

Reading the group dynamics can be harder on Zoom but consider facial expressions and try to read when someone wants to speak but may be cautious and draw them in.

Communicate clear guidelines and instructions

Now that you are in the room with the group, you need to clearly explain what you are asking from them. Effective facilitation is predicated on clarity. Here are a few practical tips to help:

- Clearly and sequentially explain the steps participants will take.
- Be clear about time constraints. Remember you do need to move on through the questions.

Group dynamics and group management

Each group has its own dynamics, with specific and sophisticated interrelations between its members. As a facilitator, you want to create a participative atmosphere where everyone is involved. Paying attention to the dynamics of the group and how individuals participate is important to any group facilitation scenario. We suggest that 8 is maximum for a Plenty! online session so that everyone has opportunity to contribute significantly in the time given.

You will need practice to master the skills of picking up on the atmosphere, measuring the emotional temperature, and helping the group achieve its potential. For all of these, empathy is one of your most essential facilitation skills.

Empathy

Contentious topics will stir up emotions in participants, and arguments are a natural part of a discussion; however, not all people get heated equally. While guiding the group toward solutions for the issues they want to solve, it's important to pay attention to how individuals within the group may be feeling about the course of things.

A facilitator without empathy is unlikely to be an effective workshop facilitator. Make sure that people are not left behind or left out of the flow of the discussions. By definition, group facilitation means helping everyone in the group contribute in a healthy, productive way.

Active listening

A basic condition for an effective conversation is that people feel they are being heard and listened to. Active listening is one of your best group facilitation skills and it is often the foundation for a productive discussion.

Practise your active listening skills as a facilitator, and encourage all participants to do the same. Also, basic verbal tools, such as paraphrasing, referring back and summarising help a lot to show the group that their thoughts are being heard. It takes time and practice to remember who said what and to refer back to it at the appropriate time.

Verbal skills to facilitate conversations

Speaking of simple verbal tools, there are a number of basic techniques that a facilitator should be able to use confidently at meetings in order to facilitate discussions, engage participants and to make sure everyone is involved:

Verbal Facilitation Tools

Probing: Probing is used to determine the mood or general opinion of the group about a certain topic or point in the discussion. Just asking for a “thumbs up/thumbs down” survey can be enough to get an impression of the general opinion of the group.

Paraphrasing: Paraphrasing expresses the same content that was just stated but in your own words, in order to check that both you and others have the same understanding.

Redirecting questions or comments: Redirecting a question to the group helps get participants more involved in the discussion. In addition, it also encourages group reflection.

Bridging and referring back: This helps the group follow the discussion and to connect ideas by recalling earlier discussions or ideas. Bridging is particularly important when going from one question to the next. The facilitator notes help with this but if you can make a link between a comment someone has just given, knowing what the next question is and realising it would be a good time to move on, this will make for a seamless transition and avoid the rather awkward jolt of ‘now we’ll move to the next question.’

Shifting perspective: If the group gets stuck at some point in the discussion, try to shift the perspective and look at the problem from a different angle.

Summarizing: Repetition promotes understanding, and summarizing what has been discussed so far will help the group build upon the conclusions they have already made.

Giving positive reinforcement: It's important to encourage people, especially those who are less assertive, to state their opinions. Therefore, when someone brings up a good point, say so, thus showing his/her participation is appreciated, and later on he/she will feel confident enough again to bring up another idea.

Including quieter members: Encourage less talkative members to contribute to the discussion. Ask directly for their opinions and ask if they have any questions. At the same time, keep in mind that people do have different learning and thinking styles and may not feel comfortable if they are 'encouraged' too much. A facilitator needs to be alert to the needs of different participants and help the group move forward together.

Conflict management

The ability to handle and diffuse tension is a skill that sets expert facilitators apart from the others. Group facilitation is often exciting and productive, though differences of opinion can form in workshops or meetings you might be facilitating.

Remember, the group has a goal, and individual differences will need to be handled to achieve that. Given the time and scope of the session, not every interpersonal difference can or should be resolved; however, it is important that you know the right techniques and group processes for diffusing tension. Be assertive if there is heightened tension between people and it is getting in the way of the session progressing. You are not there to take sides but as you take control of the situation people will have to be quiet and calm down and the session should then continue. If you are meeting in person, the argument could be resolved with the people concerned after the session. On Zoom, you could summarise the positions people are taking and if it's not easy to resolve there and then you could ask that they stay on after the meeting to find resolution. It may then be best to move on to a new question and bring in other people.

Handling difficult situations

Dealing with conflict is one of the biggest challenges to effective facilitation. Often there are underlying conflicts behind disagreements taking place in a conversation.

You might also encounter 'difficult participants'. People have reasons for behaving as they do, and if you don't make an effort to understand their stance, they might keep playing hardball in the session. However, you still need to keep in mind that the group has its own goals, and one person hijacking all the attention is a dangerous track. Monopolising can lead to resentment from others in the group who feel they do not have opportunity to express their own opinions. You will need to intervene and possibly interrupt. If it happens regularly, in situations that cannot be resolved in a group situation, the best strategy may be to discuss the problem with the individual concerned, in a way that is sensitive and positive and does not dampen their spirits and future contributions altogether.

Manage time

Meetings have time limits. This is especially true in effective and productive organizational cultures. A carefully crafted agenda must take into account how much time can be allocated for each activity during a session. Group facilitation with large or complicated groups especially ask for good time management skills.

Part of the facilitator's role is to guide the group in timely conversations and decisions. It is important that you are aware of the passing time during a meeting and that you let participants know when time is running short for an activity.

In general, effective facilitation assumes efficient timekeeping, with only well-grounded exceptions for going overtime in discussions. Remember, if something takes more time than planned, it usually comes at the expense of some other item on the agenda or in this case, topic for discussion.

Gauge the energy and interest levels in the room

As a facilitator, you should have a good eye for spotting when the group's attention level as a whole is getting low. If that's the case and a question doesn't spark much discussion, can you come up with another based on previous more energised conversations? If not, go onto the next question. You should have plenty of material with four questions in addition to the discussion of the film to start and the wrap up question to finish. If you did find yourself short of material, you could always refer to the Bible passages and the questions asked there in preparation for the session.

Flexibility

Planning a good process for an event will help you immensely. Being prepared means you will confidently be able to handle unforeseen situations and adjust the pre-planned process more easily as necessary. Usually, activities and discussions end up taking more time than initially planned.

As a facilitator, being able to adapt on the fly is an essential skill, and it is also necessary to communicate and confirm the potential changes to the discussion with the group.

Staying neutral

"Staying neutral on content while being an expert on process."

This is the natural credo for a facilitator. It's not about your ideas. It's about supporting the group to have a good discussion with specific outcomes for everyone. You do not need to be a subject expert to be a good facilitator but clearly knowing a bit about the subject will give you confidence for your role.

As a facilitator for Plenty!, you will likely have a natural interest in the content. If you do express your own opinions at any point, you should be clear about this with the group. Try to make explicit when you are wearing your 'facilitator hat' and when you are using your 'participant/content-expert hat'.

Record outcomes

Recording key takeaways of a conversation is essential for keeping group progress on track and avoiding circling back to the same topics. As a competent facilitator, you should make sure to capture and highlight the key messages. You could summarise these at the end either with the group or afterwards in writing so you can refer back to them before the next session. You will also be asked to fill out a feedback form at the end of the six weeks so some notes will help when it comes to the time.

We'd like to know of any particular actions or changes in perspectives and if there's a great quote, ask if you can quote the participant on that please so we can use it in publicity.

Thank you.

For more, see <https://www.sessionlab.com/blog/facilitation-skills/>

Joy in Enough Team's facilitator tips for Plenty!

- Ensure no one feels guilty. The focus is to be practical and positive. Everyone is at a different place in their spiritual journey and a comment from someone may indirectly challenge another. Each individual is asked at the end to say what has made the most impact on them and what they will do about it. It's important everyone answers this.
- Let people engage at the level they wish to. Make sure no one feels pressured – either to speak or to emulate the actions of another participant.
- What can be done? What does the least harm? Are good questions instead of what is the good/bad thing? If it seems appropriate and timely to bring in extra questions.
- Make friends with silence! Some of the questions are demanding and if you have given context and examples but you are faced with silence, sit with it for a while and don't be afraid of it. People need time to think and take themselves off mute.
- Be assertive if that which someone is starting to share is not appropriate for the group, acknowledge and thank and ask them to speak with you after the session.
- Deal with exceptional heroic actions and don't just leave 'wow' comments hanging*.
- Be one step ahead so you have the next question in my mind and can be on the look out for an appropriate point in the conversation to move on.
- Be sure to have examples to share if people are finding the question difficult. We have given pointers on the slides which you can refer to briefly and put in the chat but have others of your own.
- Arrange your notes for the session under the question and highlight the commentary.
- Set up the expectation that people will do the preparation material beforehand so you can refer to it and know they have read it.

* the facilitator has to create a non-judgemental space where heroic actions can be celebrated but not taken as normative. The process can be unpacked as to how – for example - someone got to the point of giving all his pension away. Psychologically, what was the process he went through? What are the obstacles for others replicating that behaviour? What traps us? Reality gets in the way for most of us. We can't all do that and certainly shouldn't be made to feel it's expected of us as Christians but our ideas as to what is possible will change as we go on.

With support from the community in a safe space we can open up possibilities for our own transformation and that of others. In line with our beliefs and values we push the boundaries and obstacles. Jesus' teaching was in the context of community where the right relationships mean that his teaching is easier. As Christians we are not alone but part of the Christian community and ideally will have what we need at the time we need it. The fear is there that we may not be alright at some point or the community will let us down. The fear is not necessarily economic but just as much psychological. People will be at different points with their expectations of the Christian community and levels of trust. The sessions are designed to take people a step further along which also is being true to themselves and the reality of the situations they are in.