Choosing a Facilitator

The convening facilitator plays a critical role in ensuring that the group can achieve its full potential. Having the right facilitator can be crucial to reaching your goals.

General guidelines

- As early as you can in the design process, either choose to fill the role of facilitator yourself or identify someone else for the role, based on three core considerations:

  - **Relationship to the Group and the Topic**—For the topics being discussed, who will have strong rapport with the group, enough subject-matter depth to guide the conversation, and the ability to maintain neutrality even in heated moments? (In many cases, this will be the designer or sponsor, but power dynamics are a common reason for that person not to be at the front of the room.)

  - **Facilitation Expertise**—Of these people, who has the front-of-room skill and experience necessary to guide the group through this conversation? (See the next page for a list of qualities.)

  - **Availability**—Of these people, who has the time available for both facilitating on the day of and working with you ahead of time? If they’re external, who fits your budget?

- If you are not facilitating the event yourself, you will need high confidence in the person you choose. Whether you are looking internally or externally, you’ll be best served by recommendations from trusted colleagues, or by having personally seen that person in action.

- The facilitator needs to know the purpose, the specific process you’ve designed, who the participants are, their respective personalities and underlying agendas, and any history of events that this conversation is meant to build on. Hold nothing back—facilitation is an improvisational art, so the more that a facilitator is prepared, the better he or she can perform.

- A good facilitator can also help you a great deal in vetting your design ideas, based on his or her experience with many other events. It’s ideal to share your design ideas as soon as you have a solid first draft of your concept, and to use your facilitator as a thought-partner from that point forward.

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The International Association of Facilitators provides a directory of certified facilitators at [http://www.iaf-world.com](http://www.iaf-world.com). However, this and any other directory should be used as a last resort or a supplement to trusted recommendations.
In choosing a facilitator, or considering whether you are well positioned to play the role yourself, the following skills and competencies are worth seeking:

- Process experience and capabilities that specifically fit your convening’s purpose. For example, experience with futures thinking tools may be important when your purpose is developing foresight.
- Emotionally centered, confident, and humble, sure to recognize and acknowledge the needs of the group.

Conversant in the language and issues central to the convening topic, but without being wedded to a strong position on the issues being discussed.
- Flexible enough to adjust during the convening.
- Puts the group first, especially in challenging moments.
- Neutral in engaging diverse perspectives on the topic; has excellent listening skills and won’t push his/her own agenda.
- Balances control and emergence, and therefore able to facilitate focused dialogue and work while giving the group ample space to take the conversation where they want to.

Attuned to participants’ diverse cultural outlooks and perspectives.
- Capable of probing gently to encourage full participation, draw out underlying beliefs, and promote mutual understanding.
- A capable user of a wide range of process tools, both in the advance design and in the moment.
- Skilled at storytelling and real-time synthesis.
- Good at preparing the group for the upcoming stages of work so that they know what to expect.

“NO MATTER HOW MUCH PREP YOU DO, AND HOW MUCH YOU THINK YOU KNOW THE GROUP, GROUPS REACT IN UNPREDICTABLE WAYS. A FACILITATOR WHO CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING ON THE FLY, WITHOUT MAKING IT SEEM CHAOTIC AND DISORGANIZED, HAS REAL SKILL.”

—CONVENING DESIGNER

ALL QUOTES WERE TAKEN FROM IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS WITH THE EXPERT CONTRIBUTORS LISTED IN THE APPENDIX.
Facilitation

There are times when you as the lead designer will be the best positioned to lead the conversation, or must lead it if you lack the resources to bring in an outside facilitator. If you’re not completely comfortable wearing that hat, here are a few tips to get you started.

Start with goals and ground rules. Working in a collaborative group setting is very different from other modes of interaction, so it always helps to remind people why they’re there and how to engage productively. Get agreement at the very beginning about the goal of the gathering, share the agenda, clarify roles such as your own as the facilitator, explain how decisions will be made (if relevant), and request that they follow certain ground rules such as reserving judgment and speaking openly.

Build agreement along the way. Getting the group to stand behind the process is the foundation for strong participation. You can gather ideas by proposing, listing, brainstorming, or clarifying what’s been said. You can then combine any duplicates, prioritize the list, and ask for advocates. Then, to get agreement, you can ask for a show of hands, or give each person a certain number of votes to cast among the options.

Guide each discussion through an arc. Every discussion has a natural arc from opening, to narrowing, and finally to closing. Use your wording and questions to help the group stay aware of where they are, so that each segment of time can be used effectively.

Listen as an ally. One of the hardest things to do as a facilitator is to set aside your own opinions for the sake of helping the group as a whole. When you feel the need to advocate, set aside that need and focus on your curiosity about the speaker’s point of view. You might paraphrase the speaker’s words to confirm the meaning of what you heard, ask open-ended questions to probe for more information, or use your body language to show that you are at ease rather than in a confrontation.
USE CONFLICT AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPOSE UNDERLYING BELIEFS. When people express conflicting views, compromise is rarely found without establishing mutual understanding. One of the best ways to get there is to ask the people in conflict to explain why they believe what they do. What data, observations, or chain of reasoning led them to their perspective? In doing so you will often find the seeds of compromise.

STEP IN WHEN THE GROUP NEEDS HELP. Your goal as a facilitator is usually to melt into the background, keeping the focus on the group. But be alert to when the group needs help, and step in as necessary. Make process suggestions about how to proceed, educate the group about what steps you’ll be asking them to take, ask open-ended questions to encourage participation, and enforce agreements about what process should be followed.

GATHER ANY INFORMATION YOU CAN ABOUT HOW PARTICIPANTS ARE LIKELY TO ENGAGE. What are their learning styles, personalities, and cultural backgrounds? Try to find out what attitudes they are likely to share with others, where they are likely to diverge, and any points of existing tension. If you’re concerned about encountering a challenging situation, role-play different ways that the conversation could unfold and plan how to respond.

EXPECT A WIDE RANGE OF ATTITUDES. Participants will each have their own default habits in group discussion. For some, that will be creative contribution; for others, it might be playing devil’s advocate, being the pragmatist, or even trying to assert control. They may also arrive feeling anywhere from fresh and energetic to bone-tired and disengaged. Watch for these patterns in their behavior, adjust your approach if necessary, and work with them to drive the conversation in a productive direction.