



## How to Lead a Facilitated Discussion

### **What exactly is a facilitated discussion?**

Unlike a more formally structured session, facilitated discussions explore current and critical issues within a particular subject area, but they are more than just an open forum. These sessions are designed to tap into the knowledge and expertise of the people in the room. It recognizes that the collective wisdom of the group is far greater than what any one individual possesses, and it provides a place where those with considerable experience in a subject area can take the conversation to a more advanced level. The audience is asked to talk about the things that are on their minds, and the facilitator then guides the discussion to make it more meaningful and valuable for the participants.

### **What makes a great facilitated session?**

Facilitator preparation is essential. There are many variables that can affect your session—the time of day, the mix of people who choose to attend, whether they've gotten their jolt of morning caffeine or just had a heavy lunch. You want to be ready for any circumstance so you can steer them away from the edge of boredom and back to into engaging and relevant dialogue. The discussion sessions that are most highly rated by attendees are those where the facilitators did an exceptional job of focusing the discussion and keeping it moving.

### **What makes someone a good facilitator?**

A facilitator role is much different from a lecturer. While a thorough understanding of the subject matter is essential, the primary role is to generate discussion. You may need to ask a question at the right time in order to dig deeper into the subject, while at another time you might highlight a key point or call attention to something critically important that has someone has said.

A good facilitator pays attention to the flow of the conversation and notices what is missing. Is too much time being spent talking about one person's unique situation? Have we only talked about one industry and are we neglecting others? Are one or two people dominating the conversation and do some of the quieter people need to be encouraged to join in? Keeping things balanced is very important because you always run the risk of letting one issue or one perspective take up the majority of the time, causing others to feel left out or unheard.

When conversation around an issue starts to wane, you also need to sense that it's time to move on to the next topic. However, the best facilitators are very skilled at summarizing, so before changing subjects they take a moment to briefly highlight what has just been discussed. They mention important points that were made, identify unresolved questions, and note if anyone has suggested a particularly good resource that will help others learn more about the topic. By doing so, the facilitator is also helping people remember and recognize the value of the conversation that has just taken place.

### **How should I prepare?**

Start by thinking about the flow of the session—how you want it to start, where you would like it to go, and how you will wrap it up at the end. Then, taking each section separately, anticipate what might or might not happen.

For example, let's say you want to lead off with a little information about your own background followed by some brief observations on the hot button issues of the day. Maybe you want to do a short presentation about recent happenings or changes in the field, or perhaps share a story or two about something in the news. Whatever it might be, the idea is to help stimulate the thinking in the room. Then, once you have the audience starting to warm up to the subject, you might ask them to identify what aspects of the topic they want to talk about and write them down.

Here is where your preparation will help. If the audience doesn't come up with many suggestions, you should have a few of your own to offer. If the discussion moves along quickly, you should have a few additional topics that you could introduce if things slow down or if you need to change the direction of conversation. Or, pose a question or a challenge to the group as a means of getting them to think and respond.

### **Engage Ahead of Time**

The conversation doesn't have to begin when everyone enters the room. You might think about using the social space to start asking people about what's on their mind before you get to the meeting in order to help you generate a list of topics or to get the discussion going ahead of time. With some preliminary online interaction, you could potentially start off the live session at a more advanced level than if you were starting from scratch. Think about posing a question or two to get people thinking about the session and how valuable it would be to have the opportunity to discuss their topmost challenges with others who might be dealing with the same issues.

### **Have a Game Plan**

No matter how you decide to structure your session, it's important to have it sketched out beforehand. Even if your plan goes out the window in the first five minutes because the group is really engaged, you'll still have something to fall back on if the energy starts to wane before the time is up. Remember, the best sessions are the ones where the facilitator knows the topic, has a plan for the discussion, and is prepared to adapt to the audience and its energy.

Good luck with your preparation—you'll be great!