

People who attend meetings bring their skills, experience, wisdom, knowledge—and differences.

Differences may lead us down an unproductive path filled with assumptions and responses based on our past experiences and stories that we and others have created. Relationships and trust may build more slowly than in groups in which likeness was the selection criteria.

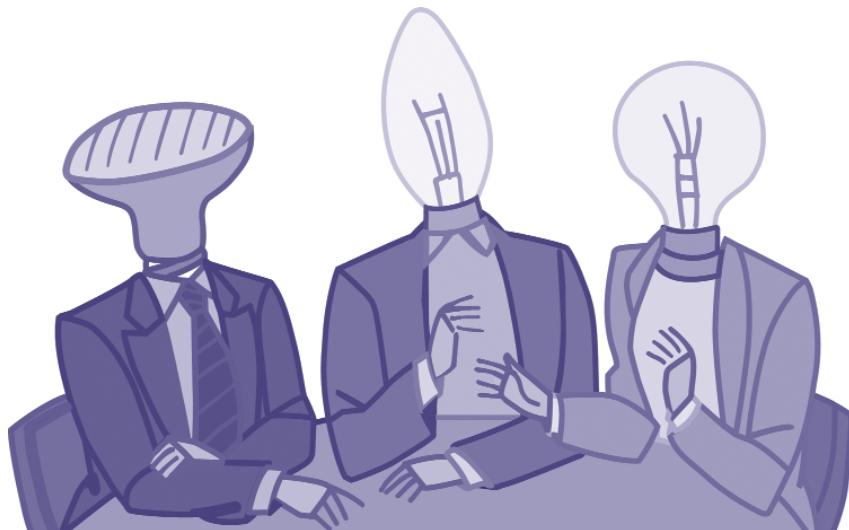
The facilitator's job is to provide a safe and inviting environment that acknowledges and respects differences, and helps participants discover and work with those differences. Facilitators can thus strengthen relationships and meeting outcomes while valuing the uniqueness of each person.

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you do, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

— Maya Angelou

Many leaders recognize that groups with high performance build on differences.<sup>1</sup> Differences can produce

# Appreciating Differences



- more complete results,
- more effective solutions, and
- greater satisfaction.

Groups that understand and embrace differences are often more solid and effective than those created without knowledge of the differences that exist in our communities.

## Four key tasks for facilitators

- Understand the needs of and differences within the group
- Select from a variety of tools, techniques and processes appropriate to the group
- Help the group think about the problem and, at the same time, help the group interact effectively
- Explain rules and procedures while being aware that she or he will be intervening in basic functions that are dearly valued, such as how individuals communicate,

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## What you will learn:

- How differences and disabilities benefit groups
- How to design a meeting or program that is available and accessible to diverse individuals
- How to establish inclusive working groups
- An understanding of *difference, disability and people first*
- People-first language and etiquette
- How each individual brings unique abilities to a situation or interaction distinct from their race, color, national origin, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or disability

<sup>1</sup> L. Bush, "BrainStyles™ for facilitators," *The Facilitator* 9, no. 4 (2002): 1.

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process, make sense of information and reach decisions<sup>2</sup>

Everyone should feel that their differences are appreciated and valued by the facilitator.

## Preparing to facilitate a group

One way to understand a group you will facilitate is to interview the person who invited you to conduct the meeting. You can then check out the information you've received by asking a cross section of members to help you clarify your assumptions, the group leader's and members'.<sup>3</sup>

By interviewing the group, not only can the facilitator better understand it, but the group can better assess and understand its differences and identify gaps in its diversity.

The group can, for example,

- design a grid to determine the group's mix;
- complete a conflict survey;
- complete a thinking- and learning-style tool; and
- design a dialogue that lets the group appreciate the full

range of insight it will have with its diversity.

Depending on the design of the assessment, it can reveal<sup>4</sup>

- the group's history and the familiarity of members with each other;
- the presence of goals, rules and norms, both stated and unstated;
- who participates—everyone or a few;
- communication patterns and whether they are open, honest and supportive;
- how decisions are made;
- conflict management styles;
- meeting structure—organized or freewheeling;
- whether the group is used to meeting and discussing ideas.

## Differences and disabilities

People with differences are people first. Differences are part of a person; they do not define the person. The language we use determines whether those around us feel respected as people.

Words matter. They reflect and influence our attitude. Standard words and phrases not only

indicate how we feel and think, they also perpetuate belief systems.

Some areas of differences are more easily discovered than others: gender, skin color, work or residence location. Other differences are not as easily known to group members or to an outside facilitator and include the following:

- Thinking and learning styles
- Learning disabilities
- Personal agendas
- Conflict management styles and past experiences with conflict
- Amount and quality of experience in team or group work
- Public, private or non-private sectors affiliation
- Various organizational memberships, affiliations or walks of life

Since legislation has mandated inclusion of people with certain differences, we have become more accustomed to some integrated situations. The inclusion of people with other types of differences, however, such as disabilities and differences in thinking and learning, is still new. As more people with differences become active participants in community life, our shared experiences and vocabulary will continue to change.

A *disability* is the inability to perform one or more major life activities because of an impairment.<sup>5</sup> These life activities

## Tools to help the facilitator assess the group

- *One-on-one interviews* allow you to question people about the group and member interactions. This is the best way to get people to open up and be candid when there are sensitive issues in the group.
- *Surveys* allow you to gather anonymous information on the same question from all members.
- *Group interviews* are a good strategy when the subject isn't overly sensitive and there are too many people to interview independently; they let you observe the group's dynamics.
- *Observations* help you understand the interpersonal dynamics within a group. Sit on the sidelines during a meeting to sense who plays which roles and how people relate to each other.

Source: Bens, 33.

<sup>2</sup> S. P. Schuman, *What to look for in a group facilitator* (International Association of Facilitators, 1999), <http://www.iaf-world.org/about/facil/SchumanLookFor.cfm> (accessed 3/26/04).

<sup>3</sup> Ingrid Bens, *Facilitation at a Glance!* (Participative Dynamics, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> T. Justice, and D. W. Jamieson, *The Facilitator's Fieldbook* (New York: HRD Press, Inc., 1999).  
Bens.

<sup>5</sup> An impairment is a missing, damaged, deficient or weakened body part or function.

include communicating, learning, having intact senses and working. A *handicap* is an obstacle that reduces a person's chance of success. It is anything that makes a person's progress difficult or prevents her or him from doing something. These obstacles may be social, personal, resource-based or physical.<sup>6</sup> The words "handicapped" and "disabled" generate negative feelings (sadness, pity, fear) and create a stereotypical perception that people with disabilities are all alike.<sup>7</sup>

*If I don't walk this year, then I will resolve to do so again next January.*

*That's my New Year's resolution just as it has been every year since I suffered my spinal cord injury.*

— Christopher Reeves

There are many kinds of learning disabilities that affect a person's ability in a number of areas including listening, reading and writing, as well as coordination and sequential thinking. When a person has a learning disability, his or her brain is "wired" a little differently from the average person, which can affect the way he or she reads, writes or speaks. Most people with learning disabilities have at least average intelligence and many are far above average. In fact, many people with learning disabilities are great problem

**In a bowl of five apples, one is green. One American in five is a person with a disability. A green apple is more like red apples than different. An individual with a disability is more like people without disabilities than different.**

Source: *Disability is Natural* (Woodland Park, CO: Braveheart Press), [www.disabilityisnatural.com/index.htm](http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/index.htm) (accessed 3/26/04).

solvers and abstract thinkers. Regardless, for some people, these difficulties can be lifelong.<sup>8</sup>

### Thinking and learning styles

Your thinking and learning style represents the most natural, efficient way for your brain to process information. Over time, this establishes a lifetime pattern of strengths. Each of us processes new information differently. Each of us is unique.<sup>9</sup>

Facilitators can observe group members' thinking and learning styles as they unfold into strengths and differences. Within a group,<sup>10</sup>

- one member may focus on the big picture;
- another zeroes in on the details;
- a third focuses on implementation;
- a fourth keeps reminding the group of how it is working as a group.

Group members who know their thinking and learning styles can better influence and contribute to goals, processes and relationships. Members can then trust others to deliver in their areas of strength, while offering to support them in other areas, building a genuine environment of trust and a new definition of teamwork. Facilitators can use group process skills to build on the strengths within the group, facilitating openness to differences and encouraging

responsible, genuine collaboration.

### People first

*People-first* language emphasizes putting the person before the disability or difference. *People-first* language is an objective way of acknowledging, communicating with and supporting people with disabilities. Using *people-first* language is more respectful, helps halt damaging stereotypes, and creates a climate or environment that is inclusive and welcoming. Positive everyday communication can become one of the most powerful ways to bring about the full acceptance of people with disabilities.

The following suggestions represent general etiquette for interacting with a person who has a disability:

- Speak directly to the person with a disability, not just to those accompanying him or her. If the person has an interpreter, talk to the person with the disability, not the interpreter.
- Most people with disabilities

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<sup>6</sup> M. Stumpf, *How to Catch "Fish": Fresh Ideas Start Here* (Presentation at Galaxy II Conference, Salt Lake City, UT, September 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Kathie Snow, *People First Language* (Quakertown, PA: Kids Together, Inc.), [www.kidstogether.org/pep-1st02.htm](http://www.kidstogether.org/pep-1st02.htm) (accessed 3/26/04).

<sup>8</sup> S. McCormick, *Shine Up and Step Out, Helper's Guide* (North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Bush, 6-8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

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shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb do shake hands. You can ask, "Shall we shake?" upon greeting the person.

- Don't mention the person's disability unless he or she talks about it or it is relevant to the conversation.
- Treat adults as adults. Don't talk down to people with disabilities.
- Be patient and give your undivided attention, especially

with someone who speaks slowly or with great effort.

- Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase, or offer him or her a pen and paper to write comments.
- It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon" or "I'd better be running along," even if they seem related to the person's disability.
- Offer assistance to a person with a disability if you feel

like it, but wait until your offer is accepted before you help. Listen to any instructions the person may want to give.

## Summary: facilitators build on differences

Skilled facilitators help differences within a group work to the group's advantage. Facilitators must ensure that all group members are understood and treated fairly and equitably, with dignity and respect, and at the same time acknowledge that differences exist and are welcomed. Differences not only increase the learning opportunities for the group, but create the potential for the group effectiveness to increase as well. In the process, our lives are enriched, and we build healthier communities.

## Additional resources

*Appreciating Differences: A Useful Resource for Educators.* New York: Forward Face, <http://www.forwardface.org/misctext/education/appreciate.htm> (accessed 3/26/04).

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*This fact sheet was developed by Jane Haskell, Extension educator.  
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Graphic designer: Cindy Eves-Thomas*

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In choosing words about people with differences, the guiding principle is to refer to the person first, not the disability. The disability, then, no longer is the primary, defining characteristic of an individual but one of several aspects of the whole person. People-first language describes what the person has, not what the person is. Labels for differences often have negative connotations, are misleading or can contribute to negative stereotypes.

Labels to avoid	People-first language
The handicapped or disabled; crippled	People with a disability
The mentally retarded; he is mentally defective	People with mental retardation; he has a cognitive impairment; person with a developmental disability
She's a Down's; she's mongoloid	She has Down's syndrome
Birth defect	Has a congenital disability
Epileptic	Person with epilepsy
Wheelchair-bound; confined or restricted to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair; uses a mobility chair; is a wheelchair user
She is developmentally delayed	She has a developmental delay
He's crippled; lame	He has an orthopedic delay
Mute; deaf; blind; suffers a hearing or sight loss	Is nonverbal; has hearing or sight loss; person who is deaf; person with a hearing impairment; he wears glasses
Is learning disabled or LD	Has a learning disability
Afflicted with; suffers from; victim of	Person who has
She is emotionally disturbed; she's crazy; lunatic; psycho	She has an emotional disability; person with a mental illness
Normal and/or healthy	A person without a disability
Quadriplegic; paraplegic	Has quadriplegia; has paraplegia
She's in Special Ed	She receives special education services
Handicapped parking	Accessible parking
Special-needs people	People with a significant disability

Sources: *Disability Awareness Guide.* Washington, DC: VSA Arts, [www.vsarts.org/bestpractices](http://www.vsarts.org/bestpractices) (accessed 3/26/04).

Kathie Snow. *People First Language.* Quakertown, PA: Kids Together, Inc., [www.kidstogether.org/pep-1st02.htm](http://www.kidstogether.org/pep-1st02.htm) (accessed 3/26/04).

*People First Language.* North Carolina 4-H Youth Development Program. McCormick, S.

*Shine Up and Step Out, Helper's Guide.* North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, 1999.