



Facilitated Meetings



DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
RESEARCH & EXTENSION

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Test Your Ideas about Facilitation

This short quiz will help you think about some of your ideas about facilitation. Complete the questionnaire, then continue reading for a more thorough understanding of each issue.

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| 1. Facilitating a meeting is the same as chairing a meeting. | True/False |
| 2. If you don't like doing presentations, you can't facilitate. | True/False |
| 3. If meeting participants don't contribute, it's their own fault. | True/False |
| 4. People who don't contribute to a meeting should be asked direct questions to make them contribute. | True/False |
| 5. The facilitator's opinion isn't important. | True/False |
| 6. The looser the agenda, the better. | True/False |
| 7. The facilitator should make sure that the meeting runs on time. | True/False |
| 8. Subject experts should be given the most airtime during a meeting. | True/False |
| 9. The facilitator should make sure that when one person is talking everyone else is silent. | True/False |
| 10. Follow-up after a meeting has nothing to do with the facilitator. | True/False |
| 11. It's OK to give the agenda out at the meeting rather than before. | True/False |
| 12. A facilitator should be good at listening and questioning. | True/False |
| 13. A facilitator should be unbiased. | True/False |
| 14. It's OK for the facilitator to know very little about the subject area. | True/False |
| 15. Facilitated meetings are just talking shops which rarely add value to the business at hand. | True/False |

1. Facilitating a meeting is the same as chairing a meeting. -- **FALSE**

Chairing a meeting involves following a set agenda and ensuring that decisions are reached. Facilitation involves much more stimulation, involvement and flexibility. Whereas a chairperson is there to control and mediate, the facilitator is there to stimulate and direct. A facilitated meeting can be much more responsive to the group's idea about what is important and should be designed to have some flexibility within an overall structure.

2. If you don't like doing presentations, you can't facilitate. -- **FALSE**

People mistakenly believe that facilitation is the same as presenting. The best way to get people thinking and contributing at a meeting is to give them clear relevant problems to discuss. Presentations may be entertaining, but many times they allow the audience to be passive. The secret of good facilitation is to stimulate the group into constructive action, and this can be done with minimal presentation skills.

Of course, it helps if you feel comfortable up on your feet in front of a group, but this is only part of the battle.

3. If meeting participants don't contribute, it's their own fault. -- **FALSE**

If people don't contribute, it is for a specific reason. See the next point for some suggestions on this. Your job is to make sure that everyone contributes. Why invite them to the meeting if you do not want to hear what they have to say? Even though they may care very deeply about an issue, they may still not speak out because they've learned that it could be dangerous to stick their necks out. It's up to you to find ways of creating a more open environment, through better listening, or by finding ways for them to voice their opinions anonymously.

4. People who don't contribute to a meeting should be asked direct questions to make them contribute. -- **FALSE**

People who do not contribute hold back for a reason. This may be due to shyness, lack of knowledge of the topic, nervousness in front of those they consider to be senior to themselves, annoyance, anger or disinterest. It is not your job to decide whether or not that reason is legitimate; it is your job as a facilitator to get everyone to contribute. Shyness can be overcome by using smaller groups to discuss specific topics. Annoyance and anger should be addressed privately during a break. You can be sure that asking a direct question in front of a large group will only serve to magnify the original problem.

5. The facilitator's opinion isn't important. -- **TRUE**

The facilitator should question what is said, tackle inconsistencies and make sure that what is said is clear to everyone. You should resist giving your opinions on a topic for two reasons. The first is that facilitating is a hard enough job to do without having to take part in the discussion as well. The second is that the role of facilitator brings with it a measure of influence, so your views may carry undue weight and may skew the discussion in an unhelpful way. However, you can use your knowledge of relevant facts to provide stimulating challenges to what has been said.

6. The looser the agenda, the better. -- **Partly TRUE**

It is important that the agenda is neither too loose nor too tight. An agenda that is too loose may seem aimless and frustrating for participants, whereas an agenda that is too tight may not give the participants a chance to spend time discussing unforeseen important issues.

7. The facilitator should make sure that the meeting runs on time. -- **TRUE**

Running over time at the end of a meeting really is unforgivable, and it is insulting to participants who have other commitments. It is a common error made by facilitators who believe that whatever the group wants to discuss is OK by them. At the other end of the spectrum, some find it tempting to over control the discussion; however, a more directive approach is needed, one that sets out a broad-brush structure with a timescale to match.

8. Subject experts should be given the most airtime during a meeting. --
FALSE

It may be useful to have subject experts present, but it may be necessary to control them if they are very vocal. The object of the meeting is to get views from everyone rather than to let any one person dominate discussion. Subject experts should be recognized for their special knowledge, and can be usefully included by being asked to verify facts, or to add their comments once everyone else has had a chance to speak.

9. The facilitator should make sure that when one person is talking everyone else is silent. -- **TRUE**

Group discussions fall apart when splinter groups start to have their own private conversations. Although this may be a good sign, indicating that people are interested in the topic, the facilitator needs to make sure that participants listen to each other. This means being quiet while others speak. Groups of five and over can only function well if there is a strong facilitator ensuring both participation and listening. However, the facilitator should steer clear of “shushing” people like naughty school children. This will only encourage more naughty behavior. Try to treat the participants in an adult fashion by pre-empting this problem with a clear set of discussion ground rules agreed on by the group at the start of the meeting.

10. Follow-up after the meeting has nothing to do with the facilitator. -- **FALSE**

Many meetings are part of a larger process, and the facilitator should be aware if this is the case. This larger process should involve telling participants what will happen after the meeting, and giving them a short report. Any actions resulting from the meeting should be communicated to the participants, together with clear reasons for any decisions that called for not taking action. If this is NOT done, people will probably assume that the meeting did not result in any action and was therefore of little use. This will make future meetings less popular and may result in high levels of cynicism. As the facilitator, you may not be specifically charged with this responsibility; however, you should treat it as part of what it takes to make the meeting work. You should also advise whoever asked you to facilitate, of the importance of thorough follow-up.

11. It's OK to give the agenda out at the meeting rather than before. -- **FALSE**

Avoid this by preparing in advance. If you decide to run a meeting, this implies that you need constructive contributions from the participants, which will often require some research or general thought before the meeting. If participants receive a clear agenda, they can be thinking about topics beforehand, otherwise they arrive cold.

12. A facilitator should be good at listening and questioning. -- **TRUE**

Listening and questioning skills are much more important for facilitation than presentation skills. The facilitator needs to be both stimulating and challenging so that the best ideas are captured, and the best solutions sought. This can only be done through keen questioning and avid listening.

13. A facilitator should be unbiased. -- **TRUE**

The facilitator is there to gather the views of the group and encourage discussion. An unbiased approach is essential. Any bias will be picked up on by the group, and may skew their responses or may cause them to withhold contributions because they think the decision has already been made. If you do hold strong views, you may wish to put them on the table first, backing them up with facts. Then you must open these views up for discussion in an unbiased way: *Do not enter a meeting as a facilitator with your mind made up.* This will be a pointless exercise for you and a frustrating one for the participants.

14. It is OK for the facilitator to know very little about the subject. -- **FALSE**

No, it is not OK. Facilitators who are asked in to simply arbitrate and then write up decisions on a flipchart do not add value. The facilitator should be familiar with at least some aspects of the area under discussion. This enables the facilitator to understand the language used, and to question what is being said.

15. Facilitated meetings are just talking shops which rarely add value to the business at hand. -- **TRUE & FALSE**

This is definitely sometimes true, although it shouldn't be. The usual problems are: bad planning; lack of open discussion; poor decision making; poor meeting reporting; poor follow-up; and an inability to take the views of those lower down the "food-chain" seriously. Because of these problems, meetings have gained a bad reputation, but with your help, they can be positive experiences that add value to group decisions.

References:

Cameron, E. (2005). *Facilitation made easy. Practical tips to improve meetings and workshops* (3rd Ed), United Kingdom, London.