# Handouts for Module 2 Lesson 3

## Characteristics of Effective Facilitators:

Multitasking in facilitation is parallel to juggling. Facilitation is complex and often tricky as it requires preparation, focus and observation, and a distinct balance between content and group dynamics. For example, this means keeping the group on task, making sure everyone gets heard, and coming to defined conclusions in a timely manner. Upcoming, facilitation will be discussed through the following critical characteristics and skills: communication, observation, encouraging participation, respect and fairness, consistency, flexibility, enthusiasm, and assertion.

1. Communication Skills: Effective communication is an imperative skill that facilitators will need to showcase. Communication is the exchange or transfer of signals, messages, and ideas between a sender and receiver. Whether electronically, on paper, or through behavior, communication is presented in a wide variety of forms and is recognized as a stimulus for feedback, decision making, or relationship building. Since our audiences are so incredibly diverse, it is important to communicate clearly and concisely so our messages are received in the intended form.

An effective facilitator is aware of body language and makes sure that one’s posture, stance and demeanor is approachable. Use eye contact to engage your audience and encourage them to be interested in your message. Finally, an effective facilitator is a good listener.

Active listening involves acknowledging a speaker’s thoughts and ideas, repeating in your own words what the speaker said, asking open‐ended questions, and summarizing the speaker’s thoughts. Be confident in your message by enunciating your words clearly and choosing words carefully for impact.

1. Along with these active listening skills, a facilitator also needs to be a good observer. It is important to analyze feedback from the group concerning their response, emotions, and feeling. Is it time to move on? Are people uneasy? Are people happy with what is going on? Is everyone getting a chance to speak? Observation is key.
2. Another important characteristic for a facilitator is the ability to encourage participation. Encouraging participation from the entire group will require individualized attention to motivate people to share their thoughts. This will include making people feel comfortable and interested in your topic. Be cognizant of participants who are more inclined to share, as their opinions can often drive meetings and decisions. Quiet participants can require motivation and reiteration of the notion that their input is valuable to the discussion. Sometimes, this is simply a matter of asking a quiet participant, “What are your thoughts? Would you like to add anything? We would like to hear how you feel about this.”
3. Effective facilitators treat people fairly and with respect. A facilitator needs to be honest and open. If they are part of the group, a facilitator needs to make sure their opinion or idea is viewed as any other participant in the group. Most often, however, it is best if the facilitator of a group remains neutral.
4. Facilitators also need to make people in the group comfortable. This means both physically—things like, is the room arrangement good? Is the temperature comfortable? Is the lighting adequate?—and also mentally and emotionally— does everyone feel welcome and valued as a part of the group? The facilitator needs to be aware of the undercurrents of class, race, gender, and other issues and keep these things out of the discussion.
5. An effective facilitator needs to be consistent and flexible. An effective facilitator is also enthusiastic. The person leading the group sets the tone. If the facilitator is tired, bored, or not interested, the entire group may reciprocate those same emotions and behavior. An effective facilitator needs to be assertive and demonstrate confidence and poise.

## Responsibilities of Facilitators:

1. Set Agenda. An important task when initiating a meeting is to set an agenda. This is important so you and everyone at the meeting know what the objective is and the plan for the meeting. It can also be helpful to allot time for each item of the agenda to help keep the meeting moving along. If possible, distribute the agenda prior to the meeting, which helps people know what to expect and how long it will take. This also gives participants an opportunity to add to the agenda and get their thoughts together before the meeting. If minutes were recorded for the previous meeting, send them out to the group prior to the meeting.
2. Be Prepared. This can make a facilitator’s job easier to manage. Preparing for a meeting is crucial. Meetings take a lot of planning and thought if you want the meeting to reach the desired outcome. First, you need to know why the meeting is being held. What is the purpose? What needs to happen? How long should the meeting be? Where and when should it be held? Who should be invited? Or who is invited? Do the participants know each other or do you need some sort of ice breaker?
3. Set ground rules. This can be done as part of the meeting, or you the facilitator can develop them and ask for input at the beginning of the meeting. Ground rules can be simple, or they can be extensive. They often include things like: everyone has an equal voice, stay on track, respect each other, cell phones off. One rule that must be decided is how decisions will be made. Will it be a consensus? Will it be a popular vote? Or will there be some other method to decide? Guide the group and keep the meeting on track. As a facilitator, you might assign a scribe, a timekeeper, or any other job that will keep the meeting fair and on time. But, even with others assuming these roles, the facilitator needs to keep the meeting moving and on track.
4. Leading a meeting is the ultimate job of the facilitator. Although meetings can take on differing approaches, there are some standard procedures that help make a meeting productive.

## Quick Outline of a Typical Meeting:

* First, welcome everyone.
* Perform facilitator and participant introductions to allow people the chance to get to know each other.
* Implement ice‐breaker if participants do not know each other.
* Next, the meeting content should follow.
* Lastly, use status checks and debrief periods to recap the discussion during a meeting and to make sure that your group members are on one accord.

## Be sure to:

* Assign a recorder or a scribe.
* Review or develop ground rules.
* Review the agenda and objectives for the meeting, and allow time for changes or additions.
* Review minutes, if applicable.
* Conduct business.
* Restate the issues to be addressed.
* Be sure to record data using flip charts, a white board, or someway for participants to visually capture the information.

Be sure that you start and end the meeting on time. Review the meeting decisions that were made and conclusions that were decided. Talk about any assignments or action items as a follow‐up to the meeting. Decide or announce the time and location for the next meeting, if applicable.

## Possible Challenges:

Let’s look at several of the most common problems facilitators face.

1. First, side conversations during a meeting are very distracting. How to handle this situation depends on several things. You might want to try one of the following: maybe a friendly reminder that we agreed to only one conversation at a time or we can only hear one conversation at a time, or you could ask the person if they need a clarification or something. If side conversations continue, you may need to acknowledge that side conversations distract from the meeting. For example, “Team, let’s be respectful and pay attention to Lee and his comments at this time.” On the other hand, if many people are interrupting, you might just ask the whole group, “Do we need to take a break?” Also, you can wait until a break and friendly remind people that side conversations are disrupting.
2. A second possible problem is never ending discussion. This can happen with the whole group being unable to bring the discussion to an end, or it can be one or two people that insist on continuing the discussion. If the entire group cannot find closure, it is likely because there is not enough information available to make an informed decision. In this case, it may be best to schedule another meeting and ask participants to bring whatever information is needed to find a solution. If the discussion is never‐ending because of one member of the group, there are several suggestions you might try. Ask the person to explain how this fits with the discussion, or how this information is different than what has already been said. You might tell them others are waiting to speak; you might also remind him or her of the time constraints for the meeting and to summarize the critical points. Also, you could speak to the person privately and share how he or she is impeding progress.
3. Another challenge is conflict that can exist within the group or one member personally attacking another. One way to address this problem is to make the statement that everyone’s comments about the subject are welcome, but please keep the comments constructive. Or you might try asking the person who is attacking another, how would he or she change the idea? If the problem continues, you might have to talk to the individual privately. You might ask if he or she can continue in the meeting without conflict or is there another issue that needs to be resolved first. Regardless of the situation, it is a good guideline to start with the lowest level or least obvious or threatening technique for dealing with a difficult person or situation. This will hopefully solve the problem, while keeping participants actively involved and on track to reach an effective outcome.
4. A fourth challenge facilitators often face is participants returning late from breaks. For this challenge, you might remind the group before a break when the meeting is set to reconvene. If this behavior continues, you might ask if the timing of the agenda needs to be changed so people have time to take care of their needs during the break. Sometimes just a simple reminder of the ground rules will resolve the problem. Remember, do not wait for the masses to return if they are late; restart the meeting at the appointed time.
5. Another challenge that happens less often is complete silence within a group. Simply asking individuals their opinions or how they feel is often a solution to get people involved. You also might try having everyone state their idea or opinion by simply going around the room. Sometimes, if you pose a question and ask for a show of hands, this will be enough to get people talking. However, be comfortable with a little silence. In some cultures, this is a sign of respect and displaying attention.

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