Managing Time

One of the central challenges of facilitation is making sure that all the discussion topics are addressed while also making sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. These strategies can help you manage time:

1. If there are many topics that need to be covered, it can help to put time stamps on each item in the agenda; that way, you know when it is time to move on. Review the agenda in advance so that people know how much time is available for each topic.

2. Establish one person as a timekeeper and have them use a timer so that an alarm will sound when it is time to move to the next topic.

3. Let attendees know how much time there is for each section. Warn them in advance that when the timer sounds, you will ask them to move on so that nothing will be missed.

4. If the meeting will go on for more than a few hours, build in short breaks so people can recharge.

Moving the Conversation Forward If It Stalls

One fear that facilitators often have is that they will ask a question or introduce a topic and be met with awkward silence. Here are some strategies to get people talking:

1. Restate the question or rephrase it. Give some background or context to explain why you are asking this question.

2. Allow for wait time and silence. Especially when talking about difficult subjects, people often need time to gather their thoughts. Notice the body language of people around you. If they look like they are thinking, then they may be about to say something.

3. Invite participants to talk in groups of two, then share the highlights of their conversation.

Addressing Side Conversations

When two participants break off to have a side conversation, it can be distracting or feel exclusive. Here are some ways to address this:

1. Say, “We don’t want to miss anything, so let’s stay together.” Indicate what the two people are saying is important to the whole group, and that everyone wants to hear their thoughts.

2. Let them know there may be time later to talk informally or in small groups.

3. Observe the group. If several people are having side conversations, it may be a symptom that the group is impatient or bored with the topic. They may need a quick stretch break, a shift in topic or location, or a chance to talk in pairs.
How to Maintain Grace and Calm

Conflict during a discussion can be stressful; however, it can be managed in such a way that participants move towards deeper understanding of one another:

1. Focus on your breath to help yourself stay calm. Keep your breathing slow and even. The people around you will unconsciously feel more calm when you are calm.

2. Listen carefully to others and focus on what people are saying, rather than your own thoughts.

3. Repeat back to people what you heard them say; this way, you can make sure that you (and the others in the group) are understanding correctly.

4. Remember that your primary goal is to help people listen to and hear one another. Even if they do not end up completely agreeing, if people can hear one another then some movement may be possible. If appropriate, share with participants that one of the primary goals of community conversations is to listen to one another in order to better understand our perspectives and experiences.

Raising Marginalized Voices and Challenging Imbalances of Power

True community conversations will bring together people from all walks of life. One of the challenges of being a facilitator is to create a space where every person is heard:

1. When having people introduce themselves, do not ask them to state their role or job, as this will begin your conversation with a reminder of the differences in power between people. Instead, have people introduce themselves by sharing their name and something they are feeling grateful for, or their favorite food—anything that will emphasize connections among them.

2. Set norms or agreements for the discussion and give people a chance to amend them, and to verbally agree. Refer back to these agreements frequently while also giving people chances to reflect on how the group is doing at keeping them. Make it clear that everyone in the group, regardless of their role or title, must honor the same agreements.

3. If you notice that someone has not spoken, you may invite them to speak. Make it a choice by saying something like, “Is there anything you’d like to share?” If someone has been very quiet, you can also honor them as a listener and ask, “What are you hearing in this conversation?” This can be tremendously helpful for the group.

4. If a few voices are dominating the conversation, you can ask those who have already shared to step back so that others have the opportunity to speak.

5. In advance of the meeting, make sure that translators will be present and that all materials will be available in the languages spoken by those in the community.

6. Remind everyone in the group that each person is an expert in their own experience.

7. When rephrasing or repeating what people say, make sure that you are uplifting the points that people make, even if you don’t agree.

8. Check in on the notes that are being taken. At regular intervals, ask, “Do these notes capture what you meant?”

9. Remind the group that one of the most important goals of the community meeting is to listen to one another in order to better understand our perspectives and experiences.
Additional Considerations for Facilitating Virtual Meetings

The availability of technology platforms has opened up opportunities for engaging communities in even more ways. Here are a few more strategies for facilitators to consider when hosting virtual community meetings:

1. Set up your virtual meeting with features such as a password and waiting room.

2. Email participants the link to the virtual meeting along with instructions for installing the software necessary to join.

3. Include instructions at the beginning of the virtual meeting for how participants can rename themselves, mute their microphone when not speaking, and add comments in the chat feature.

4. Be sure to acknowledge the presence of all participants, including those who cannot be seen on the computer screen. Understand that for some participants, being visible on the screen is either not possible (they may have joined by phone) or something they are not comfortable doing.

5. Leverage available technology to facilitate participation. For example, if a participant is having audio issues, encourage them to use the chat to share their ideas.

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