

Discussion Facilitation Cheat Sheet

Discussions typically have three basic parts: setting the context, main discussion, and closure. All three are important: It can be tempting to rush context and closure if time is short, but try to spend even just a couple of minutes on these.

Setting Context

Helps participants know what is expected of them: kind and level of participation, and what is expected of the leader and the whole group in terms of interaction/intervention; helps participants feel safe and willing to contribute. Aspects to include:

- **Norms for participation:** everyone should contribute, know that it is okay to disagree respectfully, and know what is the role of the discussion leader in terms of encouraging/discouraging participation.
- **Goals for Discussion:** participants should know the content goals and/or process goals. What the group going to discuss, and how will it be discussed (e.g., whole group, pairs)?
- **Time Management:** participants should know the length of the discussion and sometimes the length of discussion pieces
- Ask everyone their names and maybe brief backgrounds – write them down or use name tags

Set-up is important: Sitting in a circle allows people to have eye-contact with every group member and the leader. Feel free to move furniture if necessary in order to provide a good space.

Main Discussion

Can start with simple 5-minute **writing prompt** to help people get started in a discussion.

Body Language

- **Nodding** – show individual and group that idea is good, or to keep a participant elaborating
- Avoiding eye contact – **looking down/writing down ideas** – can facilitate more interaction *between* group members and reduce tendency for participants to speak only to the facilitator
- **Charting (write down ideas on whiteboard, poster paper)** can help move the conversation from facilitator to participants, can also provide ownership/acknowledgement of ideas to participants

To provide positive feedback

- Restating what someone said can be very affirming
- “Interesting”, “Important point”
- writing down ideas – gives value to ideas

To encourage others to speak:

- “What do others think about that?” “Has that been your experience?”
- “I would like to hear from someone new – Jim or Mary?”
- Draw upon/call on persons with particular experiences
- 5 seconds of silence
- Call on people by their expertise, for example, “You said you had an engineering background...what do you think about this?”

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To go deeper into content area:

- “Let’s expand on that idea?”
- “I would like to explore that some more”

To address a misconception

- “That has not been my experience...(explain your experience- the content goal)”
- “Is that what happened?”
- Parking lot/tabling – don’t be afraid to tell participants you want to “parking lot” or “table a topic,” if they go down a tangent or want to talk about content longer than you have time for

If a person is dominating a conversation, the leader *should* step in to include others.

Possible actions:

- look in eye and kindly state, “thank you, I would like to hear from others”
- avoid eye contact and look to others, call on others to speak
- “Thank you for your comments, ‘Jack.’ You’ve had a lot to contribute about this idea, so now I would like to hear if other people in the group would like to share anything.”
- “Thank you for your comments, ‘Jack.’ To make sure that everyone in the group has equal floor time, I’d like to see if anyone else has comments that add to ‘Jack’s’ or different ideas?”
- “I’m sorry, ‘Jack,’ but I’m going to have to move the group forward so we have ample time to discuss everything I’d like to cover. If we have some time at the end, we can return to this.”

“Parking Lot”

- If you feel the discussion is **starting to head off-track** or someone raises a point that you feel might pull the group off-track, don’t be afraid to put that topic in the “*parking lot*”:
- Acknowledge that the thought is good (if it is)
- Tell them that you’re placing it in the parking lot because you don’t feel like the group is quite ready to discuss that yet, or that you don’t have time to explore it
- Will come back to that topic at an appropriate point in the discussion or if time permits.

Closure

Take a few minutes (even 1-2 minutes) to summarize the main points of the discussion. Remind participants what they created in the discussion, what they have learned as a group, and even some points that have yet to be resolved. This is like the gold star at the end of the lesson.

Things to remember

- Remember that the **discussion is targeted at the group, not a single individual.**
- By specifying in the ground rules for the conversation that the leader wants to hear from everyone, the **leader is essentially making a contract with the group.** If one person dominates the conversation and is not controlled by the leader, the group will tend to blame the leader for not soliciting the group’s input based on their opening remarks. They may even assume that the domineering person was saying something important since the discussion leader “allowed” them to speak as much as they did.
- Keep in mind that facilitating discussions can be a difficult skill that improves with practice!