

# TIPS FOR FACILITATING DIFFICULT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

## FACILITATING DIFFICULT GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group leaders play an important role in managing conflicts that arise in any group of people, such as academic departments, labs, or staff units. This includes facilitating discussions and finding constructive ways to work through issues. Group discussions involving conflict can be challenging and erode trust, reveal differing and opposing opinions, and intensify emotions. To support effective facilitation of these discussions, the following general practices can be adapted to a wide variety of contexts with nuanced and deliberate consideration. Please contact the Ombuds Office for more detailed and tailored coaching on how to use these tips.

### Prepare an Effective Process

- Account for existing conflicts and power dynamics when deciding whether and how to convene a difficult group discussion
- Clarify the context, purpose, and goals for the discussion
- Set aside the appropriate amount of time for the discussion
- Create a comfortable and inclusive setting, considering factors like seating arrangements and accessibility
- Identify and clearly communicate to the group what type of decision-making approach the team will use. For example:
  - The group members will provide input and the leader will make the final decision
  - The group members will decide together by reaching a consensus, discussing the issues until every member of the group has a high level of buy-in
  - The group members will decide based on a majority opinion or vote

### Set the Tone and Course for the Discussion

- Deliberately set the tone, or intentions, for the discussion
- Clearly define the facilitator's role in the discussion
- Establish discussion ground rules or guidelines to keep the discussion respectful, inclusive, and productive. For example, engage supportively rather than judgmentally, listen to all ideas without interrupting, ask for breaks if needed, and refrain from personal attacks

### Guide the Process

- Consistently stay in the role of facilitator
  - If it's necessary to participate by providing context or sharing comments for parts of the discussion, identify a facilitator in advance for those discussion sections and make this plan explicit to the group
- Elicit and manage participation from all group members to ensure that everyone participates in a way that works for them individually. For example:
  - Ask the group what would support full participation
  - Provide information and/or assign preparation work before the discussion
  - Offer reflection time before, during, or between meetings
  - Invite participants to step forward or back depending on their preferences
  - Invite comments from those who have not yet been heard from
  - Engage in a variety of modes of interaction, paying close attention to engaging the most appropriate mode for the topic and group dynamic, for example:
    - Discussion in pairs or small groups
    - Anonymous written sharing
    - Anonymous voting

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Guide the Process (Continued)

- Avoid judgment
- Acknowledge and paraphrase ideas shared and check for understanding, for example: “What I’m hearing is... Did I get that right?”
- Check in periodically with the group about the process
- If appropriate, capture discussion notes in a visible way during the discussion and share the notes with the group afterwards
- Consider creating a “parking lot” where you can visually record and save tangential topics for later discussion (e.g. flip chart, virtual clipboard or shared Google Doc)
- Continuously assess how much and how people are engaging, and intervene as necessary to address any challenges
- Encourage adherence to the meeting ground rules or guidelines, and intervene promptly if meeting behavior begins to violate the guidelines or impede the process

Address Red Flags and Keep the Discussion on Track

RED FLAGS	APPROACHES FOR KEEPING THE DISCUSSION ON TRACK
Certain people do most of the talking – particularly, those with relative power in the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Use a round-robin approach, giving each person a turn to share their perspective</li><li>➤ Ask group members to share their input anonymously on notecards</li><li>➤ Solicit perspectives from those who have not yet spoken or spoken much</li><li>➤ Use partner or small-group discussion groups and invite them to share out afterwards</li></ul>
Someone, or multiple people, seem tuned out, agitated, or engaged in side conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Acknowledge the observable behavior and check in with the group</li><li>➤ Invite members to share their perspective on what is happening for them in the conversation</li><li>➤ Acknowledge, paraphrase, and check in about what would help to move forward</li></ul>
Personal attacks erupting between certain individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Reframe the key issues being raised in neutral, non-judgmental terms</li><li>➤ Refer participants back to the ground rules</li><li>➤ Ask that participants paraphrase what the previous speaker said before moving on to sharing their own point of view</li><li>➤ Call a time-out or break</li></ul>
Significant sidetrack from the subject(s) up for discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Check in with the group on the relative importance of the new subject, e.g. how does this discussion fit with our main priority?</li><li>➤ Summarize the topic raised, identify options or next steps for addressing that topic (e.g. add to parking lot or discuss at a separate meeting), and redirect to the main topic</li></ul>
Prolonged discussion without closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Summarize the key points, then invite ideas for ways to move forward, beginning with those points that participants agree upon most</li><li>➤ Consider an alternative decision-making approach or process that might better fit the topic</li></ul>

Provide Closure:

- Summarize and highlight the outcomes of the group’s process
- Clarify next steps and action items, including who is accountable for what and by when

Adapted from Bens, Ingrid. (2018). *Facilitating with Ease: Core Skills for Facilitators, Team Leaders and Members, Managers, Consultants, and Trainers*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

