

Transportation Outreach Planner

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Public Outreach Strategies

Meeting Facilitation

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Recommended Target Groups

Education

College Education
High School Diploma
No High School Diploma

Language

Creole
Other
Spanish

Disability

Hearing Impaired
Other
Physically Challenged
Sight Impaired

Income

Low Income
Middle to Affluent

Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner
Vehicle Owner

Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

Age

Seniors

Working Age Adults

Youth

Strategy Class

- General

Strategy Types

- Civic Engagement
- Educational

Description

The role of a meeting facilitator is to guide the meeting process in order to make the discussion more effective. Meeting facilitation can be used for problem-solving or to achieve consensus. The facilitator is responsible for designing and planning the group process, guiding group discussions, and ensuring that outcomes and next steps are recorded and properly assigned.

Special Uses

Meeting facilitation techniques can be used to: ²

- Keep meetings focused and within schedule
- Encourage discussion from different points of view
- Break a stalemate
- Build consensus or identify points of agreement
- Frame problems or issues

When to Use

Facilitation can be used to assist a group with decision-making or to assist a group with divergent views achieve consensus and collaboration. Although facilitation techniques can be used at any meeting or discussion, there are certain types of meetings that require a more structured facilitation process to be followed. This includes charettes, ³ focus groups, brainstorming and visioning sessions, small group techniques, negotiation, and mediation.

Cost

* Low (up to \$999)

The cost of meeting facilitation can be low, particularly if the facilitator is a staff member and the meeting space is donated or provided at a reasonable cost. However, it is preferable for the facilitator to be a neutral party. Agencies may be able to work with local colleges and universities, as well as other organizations, to find pro-bono facilitators. If it is necessary to hire an outside facilitator, the costs can be substantially higher. Other factors that can affect the expense of facilitation include facility and equipment rental, printing expenses, staff time, as well as the size and complexity of the event.

Low (up to \$999)

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Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)

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High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)

Very High (Above \$50,000)

Disclaimer: The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.

Time

* 1 to 3 months

The meeting facilitation process requires at least one to three months, depending on the scale of the event. Prior to the meeting time is needed to coordinate the event, set the agenda, invite participants, conduct analysis, and prepare necessary materials for participants. During the event the time taken to facilitate the process depends on the nature of

the event and the complexity of the issue. In addition to facilitation staff is needed to keep minutes and to provide logistical support. After the event sufficient time must be set aside to develop a meeting report and follow up action.

1 to 3 months
6 months to a year
Multiyear

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Disclaimer: The time estimates are approximations. The duration of a project may vary depending on various factors, including size and budget.

Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for meeting facilitation:

- **Develop a resource list of meeting facilitators that can be used for various types of meetings and events.** The resource list should include in-house staff and volunteers, as well as outside consultants. This will ensure that the agency has a core group of facilitators available to serve its needs. Care must be taken to ensure that all facilitators on the list have the necessary skills to be effective.
- **Ensure that all facilitators understand their role and responsibilities and have adequate training.** Agencies can provide training to staff and volunteers to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of their responsibilities as facilitators. The training should include group management, conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, and presentation skills. All facilitators must understand that their responsibility is to:⁴
 - Serve as neutral party
 - Keep the discussion focused and energized
 - Prevent dysfunctional or dominant behavior
 - Enable participants to express their opinion
 - Summarize discussions and recommendations
 - Bring closure to the meeting
- **If facilitating a meeting determine the meeting objective.** The meeting objective will help the facilitator to organize the meeting structure and the type of facilitation techniques that will yield the best results. Below is list of possible meeting objectives:⁵
 - Obtain feedback
 - Increase awareness or educate
 - Generate ideas
 - Problem solving, decision-making, or consensus building
- **Decide if an open discussion or a structured process will be used.** In an open format ideas are discussed as they arise. Although this process can lead to interesting ideas and findings, it is difficult to manage depending on the number of people that participate and the number of issues that are discussed. This approach is more appropriate for small groups. For larger groups and meetings where specific objectives must be met, a structured format is more suitable. Structured processes are used for focus groups, visioning, brainstorming, and charettes, where a specific meeting format or methodology is used in order to achieve the desired results.⁶
- **Set the meeting's agenda and schedule.** Setting the meeting agenda is a key step in designing the group process that will be used. The agenda will help facilitators to determine how much time is needed for discussion, and the various steps needed to achieve the meeting objective. The following are factors to be considered when creating an agenda:⁷
 - Order for presenting topics
 - Meeting Norms (process for conducting meeting, introducing discussion points and ideas, etc.)
 - Introduction of participants to each other
 - Overview of objectives
 - Time allotted to each discussion item
 - Sessions needed to complete the process
 - Use of "Parking Lot" (refers to list of issues/subjects that need to be tabled for another meeting or forwarded to others to resolve)
 - Use of break-out groups
 - Process for break-out groups to provide feedback to the bigger group
 - Review of outcomes
 - Next steps (to include assignments and timelines)
 - Closing of the event
- **Determine room set up.** The most conducive set up for group discussion is to arrange the seating in a U-shape.

This allows all participants to see each other, and enables the facilitator to walk inside the "U-shape" and interact with participants. If the group is too large, a face-to-face arrangement may be difficult. However, the facilitator should ensure that "participants have easy visual and spatial access to speakers, facilitators, or the area of the room where most focus is directed."⁸ If participants are going to be divided into small groups, the areas should be pre-arranged (if possible), so that participants do not have the distraction of rearranging furniture.

- **When facilitating the meeting, review the ground rules with all participants prior to starting the meeting.** Below are standard points to include in ground rules.⁹
 - The purpose of the meetings
 - Meeting schedule and timelines
 - Facilitator and participant roles
 - Attendance commitment
 - Decision-making process (consensus or voting)
 - Way of disagreeing without being disagreeable
- **Keep the discussion flowing and energized.** In order to encourage involvement, maintain participant interest, and avoid disruption facilitators should:¹⁰
 - Ask probing questions to stimulate discussion
 - Balance the need for discussion with the need to keep the meeting on schedule
 - Enable the group to "Table" topics that cannot be concluded for later discussion
 - Identify people who are not participating fully and determine how best to draw them into the discussion
 - Discourage side conversations
 - Observe verbal and non-verbal group behavior
 - Prevent personal attacks and negative behavior immediately (the least intrusive and most effective intervention method is to remind everyone of the ground rules)
- **If trying to achieve consensus the following techniques should be used:**¹¹
 - Frame the issue so participants can see how their interests are interconnected
 - Make sure all participants have access to the same information
 - Seek to establish incremental agreements throughout the process
 - Ask questions to reveal concerns and encourage creativity
 - Allow for "long pregnant pauses"
 - Let silence stimulate responses
 - Refer to the objective of the group for guidance
 - Ask participants to consider the consequences of not achieving an agreement
- **If group conflict is encountered facilitators can use the following problem solving techniques to mitigate the issue:**¹²
 - Establish commitment from all participants to address the conflict
 - Help participants clarify the issue of the conflict and agree on the scope of what needs to be solved
 - Ask participants to identify their interests with respect to the issue
 - Frame the discussion in terms of solving the problem
 - Identify areas where interests are similar and where they differ
 - Develop options to address the problem based on the areas of mutual interest
 - Negotiate the options and fine tune the details
 - Affirm the validity of everyone's input and enable participants to save face
 - Ask participants to determine if they can proceed with the areas of agreement and accept the areas where no agreement was reached
 - Have the group decide on whether to accept the final recommendations and make sure the agreement is in writing
- **Ensure major points of discussion are recorded through minutes or other form of note taking.** In many cases, someone will need to be assigned to take meeting notes. This person needs to work closely with the facilitator to ensure the notes accurately reflect the meeting discussion. The notes can be recorded on flip charts for all to see or made part of formal minutes. Participants should be able to check the notes to ensure they are a fair and accurate reflection of the discussion. After the event participants should receive a summary of the meeting decisions in order to maintain momentum and ensure that actions are implemented.¹³

Recommended Target Demographics

Meeting facilitation is a general public involvement technique that can be used to encourage participation among all demographic groups. Depending on who the target audience is and the objective of the meeting, anyone can be part of a facilitated process including community representatives, stakeholders, and the general public. However, it is important to have as much diversity as possible in order to ensure the representation of different points of views.

Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when applying meeting facilitation techniques:

- **Facilitation should be done by a neutral third party.** If the group perceives bias, participants may be resistant to engage in the process. It is possible to use agency staff, if the agency is viewed as impartial. ¹⁴
- **Meeting facilitation has limitations.** Even with a trained facilitator, participants may be unwilling to consider other ideas or points of view. ¹⁵
- **Care should be taken to provide sufficient time for discussion.** If the meeting is too short, participants may not get the opportunity to fully discuss the issue and may feel frustrated and upset. It is particularly important to allocate sufficient time for the discussion of controversial issues. ¹⁶
- **The ability to recognize, understand, and modify group behavior will help facilitators to maximize group development and performance.** The following is a list of constructive behavior that should be encouraged and negative behavior that should be stopped immediately: ¹⁷
 - Constructive Team Behaviors:
 - Cooperative - interested in the other's views and willing to adapt
 - Clarifying - seeks to define issues for the group by listening, summarizing, and focusing discussions
 - Inspiring - encourages participation and progress
 - Harmonizing - encourages group cohesion and teamwork
 - Risk Taking - willing to risk possible loss for the success of the group or project
 - Process Checking - questions the group on process issues such as agenda, time frames, decision methods, etc.
 - Destructive Team Behaviors:
 - Dominating - takes much time to express views and opinions
 - Rushing - encourages the group to move forward before discussion is complete
 - Withdrawing - removes self from discussions or refuses to participate
 - Discounting - disregards or minimizes ideas or suggestions (can be through jokes or insults)
 - Digressing - rambles, tells stories, and takes group away from primary purpose
 - Blocking - obstructs ideas and suggestions, "That will never work, because..."

Case Studies

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers facilitated a water resources collaboration effort that included multiple water agencies, stakeholders, and interest. They facilitated three regional and one national conference and had representation from federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, universities and other interested stakeholders. They used a variety of facilitation techniques to gather and prioritize information on improving collaboration and promoting a sustainable water future (<http://www.iaf-world.org/index/ToolsResources/IAFJournal/journal-abstracts.aspx>). ¹⁸

The Sacramento Area Council of Governments used a consensus-building process to address the issue of traffic congestion and land use development issues resulting from large-lot home construction. Through the process Sacramento area residents were able to assess the issue and provide recommendations for future housing types and area development (<http://www.huduser.org/portal/periodicals/em/summer11/highlight3.html>). ¹⁹

For Further Information

The following provide additional information, as well as useful articles and tips on meeting facilitation techniques:

- Facilitation: Guiding an Event Through to a Successful Conclusion: Serves as a toolbox for facilitators (<http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/RoleofAFacilitator.htm>). ²⁰
- Group Facilitation Primer: Provides guiding principles, methods, and other useful information on facilitation (<http://www.mrsc.org/artdocmisc/groupfacprimer.pdf>). ²¹
- Effective Meeting Facilitation: The Sine Qua Non of Planning: Provides a step-by-step guide to meeting facilitation(<http://arts.endow.gov/resources/Lessons/DUNCAN1.HTML>). ²²

Sources

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- 4 Office of Quality Improvement: University of Wisconsin-Madison, "Facilitator Tool Kit: A Guide for Helping Groups Get Results," December 2007, Municipal Research Services Center (MRSC) of Washington, 3 February 2012, (<http://www.mrsc.org/artdocmisc/factoolkit.pdf>).
- 5 Duncan, Miranda, "Effective Meeting Facilitation: The Sine Qua Non of Planning," National Endowments for the Arts: Art Works, 3 February 2012, (<http://arts.endow.gov/resources/Lessons/DUNCAN1.HTML>).
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- 17 Office of Quality Improvement: University of Wisconsin-Madison, "Facilitator Tool Kit: A Guide for Helping Groups Get Results."
- 19 Marcy, Julie B., Ada Benavides, Dale Brown, "Collaborating for a Sustainable Water Future: A Case Study," 2011: Issue 11, International Association of Facilitators Journal, 29 January 2012, (<http://www.iaf-world.org/index/ToolsResources/IAFJournal/journal-abstracts.aspx>).
- 20 US Department of Housing and Urban Development (US HUD), "Confronting the Future: Case Studies in Regional Planning and Consensus-Building," Summer 2011, US HUD Evidence Matters, 3 February 2012, (<http://www.huduser.org/portal/periodicals/em/summer11/highlight3.html>).
- 21 "Facilitation: Guiding an Event Through to a Successful Conclusion," MindTools, 3 February 2012, (<http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/RoleofAFacilitator.htm>).
- 22 Bressen, Tree, "Group Facilitation Primer," Municipal Research Services Center (MRSC) of Washington, 3 February 2012, (<http://www.mrsc.org/artdocmisc/groupfacprimer.pdf>).
- 23 Duncan, Miranda, "Effective Meeting Facilitation: The Sine Qua Non of Planning," National Endowments for the Arts: Art Works.