



Facilitation: The Secret to Smooth, Synchronized Conference Calls (Adapted from Student Environmental Action Coalition)

The word "facilitate" doesn't mean to lead, control, or direct. Facilitate simply means to make easier. In a practical sense, the job of a facilitator is to help create a space that is comfortable and productive for a group of people. Facilitation is like slicking the wheels of a rusty caboose. Facilitators make meetings, discussions, and events of all sorts run smoothly.

The facilitator should be someone who doesn't have a strong opinion to express on the meeting's topics. As a facilitator, if you want to say something, call on yourself in turn, but make sure you don't use your role to dominate the discussion. Furthermore, you should not allow people with race, class, gender, or other subtle or non-subtle privilege to dominate a meeting. As a facilitator, you should encourage everyone to participate while moving the meeting along to meet time limits.

The Secrets

In addition to having savvy and well-prepared facilitator(s), smooth facilitation requires a group in which everyone:

1. Understands the goals of the meeting and the organization
2. Sticks to the agenda and moving forward towards the goals, refrain from making off-topic comments
3. Respects everyone in the meeting and to create a space where shy people are comfortable enough to speak.
4. Makes sure decisions are made democratically, with input from many different voices

What Good Meetings are Made of: To Do Before The Meeting: Bring the MAP!

Materials - Send relevant handouts and any documents being discussed a few days before the conference call, make sure people have enough time to review them. If a vote is to be taken on the document, make sure the version you send out is the final one to avoid additional changes that can derail the call. Get help from other folks in your preparation.

Agenda - Preparation is KEY; especially for conference calls - At the very least, have a set agenda with time limits on each item and one or two goals for the call.

Without an agenda and goals, calls can drag on forever due to endless tangents. Be sure to send out the agenda and goals for the call two or more days before the call to give people a chance to respond and suggest revisions. The agenda should include a variety of perspectives. If nobody responds by email, make a couple calls. The more people who take responsibility for the agenda the better.

People - Get the right people on the call. Remind everyone who needs to be there more than once, including once the day before the meeting. Ask a different person to be responsible for preparing and introducing each agenda item. Having multiple voices leading the meeting will make everyone feel more welcome.

Starting The Meeting

Remember, meetings should be enjoyable, efficient, and build organizational morale.

1. Assign a note-taker. The note-taker should be someone other than the facilitator without an excessive amount to say. Send the notes out to everyone as soon as possible after the call. Short, summarizing notes are best.
2. Assign a timekeeper. The timekeeper's job is to let you know when the pre-set time limit for each topic is close to or completely exhausted. You may want her to tell you when you have 5 minutes left to make sure you're prepared to end each topic.
3. Start on time whenever possible to encourage good habits. If you must wait for latecomers, thank people for arriving on time.
4. Welcome/introduce everyone present.
5. Quickly review the agenda at the start of the meeting and ask if there are any items to add (this is a good way to keep other topics from sidetracking the discussion, set aside time at the end of the call for announcements or other discussions.)
6. Explain the ground rules. Ask people to mute their lines if there is loud background noise. Two additional good ground rules are: A) if you tend to talk often in group settings make an effort to speak less, trusting that your point will be made by someone else, and B) if you tend to talk little in group settings make an effort to speak more often, helping others who are shy or hesitant to feel more comfortable.

During The Meeting

1. Stick to your agenda whenever possible. It's there to keep the group on track to achieve your goals. If you have to depart from the agenda, ask for the group's consent. If you run out of time, suggest to the group that we add a few minutes (5-30 depending on where you're at in the discussion) to that topic. Be realistic about the time limits when you set them and don't be afraid to table certain topics until the next conference call or onto an

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- email listserv discussion. The world doesn't end after your conference call, although it may seem like it during a poorly facilitated call.
2. Use appropriate facilitation tools - Since you don't have the luxury of seeing people in person on a conference call, it's crucial for the facilitator to have a list of everybody's name in front of them. This is especially important for doing a go-around.
 3. You should use go-around more often on a call than in face-to-face meetings because people can't see when someone is about to speak. When doing a go-around, the facilitator should call on each person by name because there's no circle or order for people to follow.
 4. Calling on a couple of people directly and asking for their input at the start of an agenda item, then moving into free-flow discussion, can help jump start discussion.
 5. Try to keep the conversation flowing and summarize fairly often. Elicit responses from each member when addressing a key topic. Consensus does not mean that each person gets to say the same thing five times. If people seem to be saying the same thing in different ways, try to summarize and move forward. [Example: "So what I'm hearing people say is that we're not quite prepared to rally outside the president's office but that there is interest in putting increased pressure on him within the next week. Do people have other ideas for a more strategic next step?"]
 6. Before ending an agenda item, recap by summarizing what actions the group has suggested be taken and asking people to take responsibility for those actions (make sure these commitments are in the notes!).

Closing The Meeting

1. Spend a few short minutes recapping your plan of action at the end of the meeting. Did you meet your goals? What are the next steps? Who's doing what? Ask the note-taker to quickly go through the list of who has agreed to take on what responsibilities so people leave the call with their commitments fresh in their heads.
2. Always leave on a positive note.

In A Nutshell: Remember, to have a good meeting, you need good product and good process. Good facilitation makes the process run smoother. To have a good product, everyone should be geared towards achieving the goals set out by the group. Don't start a meeting without goals and an agenda for meeting those goals and don't let a meeting stray too far from those goals once you've begun. And of course, the best way to make your meetings and your organization run smooth like butter over and over again, is to create a respectful space where everyone is engaged in making decisions democratically with input from many different voices.